

The Ethnopolitical Identity of the Gagauz: Between the Russian World and European Integration

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Abstract

The ethnopolitical identity of the Gagauz community represents a relevant example of the interaction between culture, memory, and geopolitics in the post-Soviet space. The study examines, from a constructivist perspective, how Orthodoxy, linguistic Russification, and media narratives contribute to maintaining the symbolic attachment to the “Russian World,” while also fostering the emergence of new hybrid identities within the process of European integration. The analysis reveals that Europeanization in Gagauzia does not entail the replacement of traditional identity, but rather a gradual negotiation between cultural continuity and adaptation to European civic values.

Keywords

Ethnopolitical identity, Gagauzia, European integration, geopolitics, Europeanization, Orthodoxy.

1. Introduction.

The ethnopolitical identity of the Gagauz represents one of the most complex and enduring topics in post-Soviet research concerning the Republic of Moldova. A Turkic-speaking community of Orthodox faith, the Gagauz have asserted themselves throughout the twentieth century as a distinct ethnic group with a dual symbolic loyalty: cultural allegiance to Russia and territorial affiliation with the Republic of Moldova. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Gagauzia became a unique case of ethno-territorial autonomy in Eastern Europe, reflecting the tension between national identity-building and competing geopolitical projects in the region. In the 1990s, the adoption of the Law on the Special Legal Status of Gagauzia (Gagauz-Yeri) (1994) represented a political compromise between Chişinău and Comrat, designed to prevent the escalation of ethnic conflict and to provide a framework for peaceful coexistence. However, over the past three decades, the Gagauz identity has evolved in a context marked by the rivalry between the “Russian World” and the European vector, by successive

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identity crises, and by a slow adaptation to Moldova's political and economic transformations. The scientific relevance of this research stems from the need to understand the mechanisms of formation, preservation, and political instrumentalization of the Gagauz identity within the contemporary context of European integration and the information warfare waged by the Russian Federation in the post-Soviet space. The analysis contributes to the broader study of peripheral identities and center-region relations, offering an explanatory framework useful for social cohesion and cultural security policies in the Republic of Moldova.

1.1. Purpose and Objectives of the Research

The general purpose of the research is to examine the identity configurations of the Gagauz community and to identify how these influence geopolitical orientations and social cohesion in the Republic of Moldova.

In this regard, the study aims to achieve the following specific objectives:

- To analyze the genesis and historical evolution of Gagauz identity in relation to the process of Moldovan statehood;
- To investigate the linguistic, religious, and civic dimensions of collective identity;
- To assess the role of the Russian Federation in maintaining an East-oriented geopolitical identity;
- To examine the perceptions of the Gagauz community regarding the European Union and Romania;
- To determine the correlation between ethnic identity and electoral behavior;
- To anticipate possible scenarios for identity reconciliation and European integration of Gagauzia.

By achieving these objectives, the research contributes to understanding how a minority community negotiates its identity within a polarized geopolitical environment and within a state situated at the crossroads of civilizations.

1.2. Working Hypotheses

The study is based on three major hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The Gagauz identity is hybrid and adaptive in nature, shaped by Soviet heritage, Orthodoxy, and informational dependence on Russia.

Hypothesis 2: The pro-Russian geopolitical orientation of Gagauzia results primarily from the politicization of identity rather than genuine opposition to the European model.

Hypothesis 3: The growth of intercultural contacts and exposure to the European informational space may foster the emergence of an inclusive civic identity compatible with Moldova's European integration.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

2.1. The Theory of Ethnopolitical Identity

The concept of ethnopolitical identity lies at the intersection of political science, sociology, and anthropology, providing an analytical framework for understanding the collective behavior of ethnic minorities. As formulated by Anthony D. Smith (1991), ethnic identity represents a “community of myth, memory, and solidarity,” in which shared symbols and historical experiences ensure transgenerational cohesion. This ethno-symbolist perspective explains how founding myths and collective traditions guarantee group continuity amid historical transformations and external pressures.

In the case of Gagauzia, these elements are reflected in the preservation of Soviet memory, the role of Orthodoxy as a pillar of stability, and the persistence of the “Russian protection” myth as a guarantor of local identity. After 1991, these reference points were politically reinterpreted, becoming instruments for legitimizing both the autonomous status of the region and its Eastern geopolitical orientation.

In contrast to ethnic essentialism, constructivist theories (Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 1983; Brubaker, 2004) assert that identities are social and discursive constructions shaped by political context. Benedict Anderson defines the nation as an “imagined community” sustained through language and mass communication, while Rogers Brubaker argues that ethnicity functions as a “cognitive frame” strategically used for mobilizing solidarity. Applied to Gagauzia, this perspective explains the post-1991 reactivation of ethnic identity as a reaction to the state-building process in Moldova.

Within a state promoting civic Moldovan identity and the Romanian language as central pillars of cohesion, Gagauz elites transformed ethnic belonging into a political bargaining tool. According to Fredrik Barth (1969), ethnic identity persists due to social boundaries separating “us” from “others.” In Gagauzia, these boundaries are both linguistic (Russian in public life, Gagauz in private) and territorial (the Gagauz-Yeri autonomy).

From a postcolonial standpoint, Homi K. Bhabha (1994) describes hybrid identity as a product of interaction between distinct cultural worlds. The Gagauz identity fits this pattern—Turkic by origin, Orthodox by faith, and Russified by language. This hybridity provides adaptability but also geopolitical vulnerability, turning identity into a field of contestation between Russian and European discourses. As Pål Kolstø (2016) observes, post-Soviet minorities such as the Gagauz, Abkhazians, or Ossetians use ethnicity not merely as a cultural expression but as a political survival strategy.

Hence, the theory of ethnopolitical identity offers a coherent framework for understanding Gagauzia as a space where historical memory (the USSR),

religious loyalty (Russian Orthodoxy), and geopolitical pressure (European integration) intersect in a continuous process of identity redefinition.

2.2. The Relationship between Identity, Power, and Space

In contemporary geopolitical thought, identity, power, and space form an inseparable conceptual triad. John Agnew (1998) emphasizes that space is not merely geographical but also a political and symbolic dimension where collective identities are constructed and instrumentalized. In this regard, Gagauzia functions as a micro-geography of power, where cultural belonging is converted into political capital.

Gearóid Ó Tuathail (Toal, 1996) argues that geopolitics not only describes the distribution of power but also the discursive production of space — the process through which territory acquires meaning via narratives and representations. In Gagauzia, narratives about language, religion, and tradition serve as symbolic tools delineating boundaries between “us” and “others.”

Michel Foucault (1980) provides an explanatory framework through the notion of “technologies of power”: authority is exercised through discourse, education, and institutions. In Gagauzia, Russian media, the Orthodox Church, and Soviet memory operate as such mechanisms of identity reproduction. Pierre Bourdieu (1991) complements this view with the concept of “collective habitus” — a set of cultural predispositions structuring political perception. Among the Gagauz, a habitus shaped by the Russian language and Orthodox values fosters a paternalistic view of the state and skepticism toward Western modernity.

From the perspective of cultural security theory (Wæver, 1995; Buzan, 1998), Russia has succeeded in securitizing Gagauzia’s cultural identity, transforming it into both a geopolitical subject and an instrument of regional influence. The relationship between identity, power, and space thus illustrates how Russia and the West compete to define Gagauzia symbolically, each projecting its own civilizational model and vision of belonging.

2.3. The Geopolitical Dimension of Identity

The Gagauz identity cannot be separated from the post-Soviet geopolitical context, in which the Russian Federation employs culture, religion, and language as tools of influence. Igor Zevelev (2016) notes that Moscow has evolved from the paradigm of “Russian compatriots” to that of the “Russian World” (Russkiy Mir), which legitimizes the protection of Orthodox and Russophone minorities abroad.

In Gagauzia, this discourse manifests through information warfare: Russian media, the Church, and local elites reproduce narratives portraying

Russia as a guarantor of stability and the European Union as a moral threat. In Bourdieusian terms, this represents a struggle for symbolic capital — control over meaning and legitimacy.

Conversely, the European Union promotes a civic and pluralist identity, yet the communication of these values is often perceived as distant and technocratic. This narrative asymmetry explains why a significant portion of the Gagauz population continues to identify with the East, even while materially benefiting from cooperation with the West.

Thus, the identity conflict in Gagauzia is symbolic and informational rather than military, reflecting a confrontation between two civilizational models: one rooted in Orthodoxy and Soviet memory, and the other grounded in European values of pluralism and democratic governance.

3. Research Methodology

The research is based on a qualitative-comparative design aimed at analyzing how the ethnopolitical identity of the Gagauz is constructed, reproduced, and instrumentalized within public and geopolitical discourses. The approach follows the constructivist paradigm, which views identity as a product of social, institutional, and symbolic interactions.

The analysis operates on three levels:

1. **Structural** – the legal and institutional framework of the Gagauz-Yeri autonomy;
2. **Discursive** – identity and geopolitical representations in mass media, education, and political discourse;
3. **Perceptual** – public attitudes and values, assessed through recent surveys (IPP, IRI, IMAS, 2022–2024)

The methods applied include documentary analysis, content analysis, and source triangulation, combining academic, legislative, and sociological data. The study's limitations stem from the absence of in-depth qualitative research specifically focused on Gagauz communities and from the volatility of the geopolitical environment, which may rapidly alter perceptions. Nevertheless, triangulation ensures the robustness of conclusions and the interpretative relevance of the results.

4. Identity Dynamics of the Gagauz Community: Between Cultural Continuity and Geopolitical Polarization

4.1. Linguistic Identity and Processes of Russification

From a demographic perspective, the Gagauz community remains one of the most stable ethnic components of the Republic of Moldova. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), the Gagauz population decreased

from 148,000 in 2004 to 112,000 in 2014 and approximately 97,000 in 2024 (preliminary data), maintaining a steady share of around 4% of the total population. Over the same period, the proportion of Slavic-origin groups (Ukrainians and Russians) declined, while the share of those identifying as Romanians gradually increased. This relative stability reflects the internal cohesion of the Gagauz community and its capacity to preserve cultural and religious identity despite broader demographic and migratory changes.

Language constitutes the central marker of collective identity and the main channel for transmitting cultural values. Among the Gagauz, linguistic evolution follows a broader Eastern European trend, where traditional minority languages are gradually replaced in public life by dominant communication languages. According to the 2014 census, the Gagauz language was declared as a mother tongue by roughly 85,000 individuals, but only 51,000 reported using it daily (NBS, 2014). This discrepancy reveals an ongoing process of linguistic assimilation and the consolidation of Russian as the primary medium of communication in education, media, and administration.

During the Soviet era, Russian was associated with modernity and social prestige — a perception that persisted after the USSR's collapse. Today, educational institutions in Gagauzia still operate primarily in Russian, while Romanian-language proficiency remains limited, particularly among older generations. From a sociological perspective, the dominance of Russian sustains cultural autonomy but simultaneously reinforces informational dependence on the Russian media space.

Linguistic Russification in Gagauzia is therefore not merely a historical legacy but a continuing geopolitical mechanism that maintains the region's cultural orientation within Russia's informational orbit. Language functions here as a form of symbolic power through which geopolitical belonging becomes internalized as identity. However, younger Gagauz — especially urban and university-educated individuals — display growing openness to multilingualism and a pragmatic interest in Romanian and English, seen as tools of social mobility. The UNICEF Moldova – Index Youth Report (2019) confirms a steady increase in youth participation in multilingual education and international exchange programs, suggesting a gradual transition toward a more open and adaptable identity compatible with European integration.

4.2. Religion and Orthodoxy as a Vector of Influence

Religion plays a central role in shaping Gagauz identity, serving both as an expression of faith and as a geopolitical marker. As a Turkic-speaking but Orthodox Christian population, the Gagauz represent a unique synthesis in the Eurasian context — combining Eastern cultural heritage with Byzantine spirituality.

Historically, this dual identity translated into a dual loyalty: spiritual allegiance to the Russian Orthodox Church and political affinity with the Russian state, perceived as the protector of Orthodoxy. During the Soviet period, religion was tolerated and reinterpreted within a national framework; Orthodoxy survived as a form of cultural continuity rather than opposition to the regime.

After 1991, the collapse of communist ideology restored Orthodoxy to its central symbolic role. The Church in Gagauzia, canonically subordinated to the Metropolis of Moldova under the Moscow Patriarchate, became an influential actor in shaping public opinion on social and political matters. Locally, Orthodoxy is associated with family, tradition, and order — contrasted with Western liberalism, often perceived as morally and culturally alien.

This dichotomy has been amplified by Russian propaganda portraying Russia as the “defender of true Christianity” and the European Union as the “promoter of moral decay.” As a result, religion has become a geopolitical identity marker, and the Church — a channel of external influence (Shishkin, 2022). However, religiosity is not uniform: surveys show that younger Gagauz are less engaged in religious practice but continue to identify culturally as Orthodox. This supports Grace Davie’s (2000) concept of “*believing without belonging*” — a cultural, rather than institutional, religiosity. Hence, Orthodoxy functions primarily as a communal boundary and as a legitimizing symbol of belonging to the “Russian World.”

4.3. Civic Identity and the Relationship with the Moldovan State

Civic identity — the relationship between regional and national belonging — remains one of the most complex aspects of Gagauz identity. Although Gagauzia is an integral part of the Republic of Moldova, sociological studies reveal a relatively low level of identification with the Moldovan state.

According to the Public Opinion Barometer (IPP, 2023), only 35% of Gagauz identify primarily as citizens of the Republic of Moldova, while over 50% identify first with the region or the “Gagauz people.” This regionalist orientation indicates a fragmented civic identity, where loyalty to the state depends on perceived governmental performance and respect for local autonomy. Perceptions of the Moldovan state remain ambivalent: it is viewed as a source of financial stability and subsidies, yet simultaneously as distant, bureaucratic, and sometimes dismissive of minority interests. Conversely, Russia is seen as a protective and traditional ally, despite limited direct economic interaction. This pattern reflects Pål Kolstø’s (2016) observation that “*weakly institutionalized national identities leave space for stronger proximate identities.*”

The information sphere reinforces this imbalance. In the absence of an effective communication strategy, Gagauzia remains dominated by Russian-language media, which depicts Moldova as “Western-controlled” and under threat of losing its traditional values. This narrative undermines trust in national institutions and reinforces defensive belonging based on fear and nostalgia. Meanwhile, the increasing participation of Gagauz youth in European educational programs (Erasmus+, Romanian scholarships) contributes to the emergence of a more open, civically oriented generation less ideologically polarized than its predecessors.

4.4. The Influence of the Russian Federation in the Autonomous Region

The influence of the Russian Federation on Gagauzia is structural, multidimensional, and enduring. It operates through symbolic, informational, religious, economic, and political mechanisms that together sustain a coherent system of identity-based dependence. As Andrey Goltsov (2020) notes, “*Russia exerts power not through occupation but through memory. Post-Soviet spaces are not lost territories, but enclaves of Russian identity.*”

This influence aligns with the concept of *Russkiy Mir* (“The Russian World”), officially articulated by Moscow since 2007 and described by Igor Zevelev (2016) as a civilizational project intended to preserve loyalty among Russophone and Orthodox communities across former Soviet territories.

Indicator (2020–2024)	Gagauzia	National Average	Source
Support for EU integration	9%	63%	IPP, 2024
Preference for alliance with Russia	82%	29%	IRI, 2023
Association of EU with loss of traditions	63%	28%	IPP, 2024
Trust in the Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate)	88%	61%	Freedom House, 2023
Nostalgia for the USSR	73%	36%	Magenta Consulting, 2023

These indicators reveal the persistence of pro-Russian orientations and the symbolic consolidation of Gagauzia within the “Russian World.”

4.5. The Image of the European Union and Romania in Local Discourse

Perceptions of the European Union and Romania serve as key indicators of Europeanization and of the effectiveness of Moldova’s external communication strategy. Nationally, support for EU integration rose from 52% in 2022 to 63% in 2024 (IPP). In contrast, in Gagauzia, only 9% of

respondents support EU membership, while 78–82% favor a strategic alliance with Russia (IRI, 2023).

This divergence reflects not only economic considerations but also cultural and symbolic differences. In local discourse, the EU is associated with modernization and prosperity, yet also with the erosion of traditional values. By contrast, Russia is portrayed as the guarantor of moral stability and Christian heritage. According to the *Study on Perceptions of Equality in the Republic of Moldova* (IPP, 2024), 63% of Gagauz believe that European values contradict Orthodoxy.

Geopolitical Indicator (2023–2024)	Gagauzia	National Average	Source
Support for Russia as main ally	82%	29%	IRI, 2023
Support for EU integration	9%	63%	IPP, 2024
Trust in Moldovan Government	27%	48%	Freedom House, 2024
Direct contact with EU-funded projects	26%	58%	EU Neighbours East, 2023
Daily consumption of Russian media	82%	43%	WatchDog.md, 2023

Romania is perceived ambivalently: 49% of Gagauz believe that Romania supports Moldova but “has hidden interests,” while only 14% consider it the country’s main European ally (IRI, 2023). Nevertheless, more than 1,200 Gagauz students benefited from scholarships in Romania between 2010 and 2024, gradually fostering a more positive perception among younger generations.

4.6. The Politicization of Identity in the Current Geopolitical Context

The politicization of Gagauz identity represents a deliberate strategy of cultural and religious instrumentalization for geopolitical purposes. Following Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, pro-Russian local elites — notably Irina Vlah and Evghenia Guțul — intensified anti-Western narratives portraying Gagauzia as a “bastion of Orthodox values” and a “fortress of the Russian World.”

According to IPP (2024), 62% of Gagauz believe that European values are incompatible with Orthodoxy, while 73% express nostalgia for the Soviet Union. These perceptions are actively exploited by pro-Russian parties (PSRM, Șor Party), which frame European integration as a form of “spiritual colonization.”

As highlighted by the *Hybrid CoE* (2023), Gagauzia illustrates a contemporary case of information warfare with identity-based instruments, where religious, historical, and linguistic symbols are transformed into tools of political mobilization and societal polarization. This makes the region not only a field of cultural competition but also a critical test for Moldova's capacity to balance autonomy, diversity, and European integration.

5. Electoral Behaviour and the Impact of Europeanization (2014–2024)

5.1. Electoral Profile and Geopolitical Determinants

The electoral behaviour of the Gagauz community reflects the interaction between geopolitical identity, collective memory, and the informational environment, producing a consistent pro-Russian vote. Over the past two decades, Gagauzia has overwhelmingly supported parties and leaders advocating close ties with the Russian Federation, the preservation of the Russian language, and the protection of Orthodoxy. This continuity expresses a defensive identity rooted in the Soviet experience and reinterpreted in the post-1991 political context.

According to the Central Electoral Commission, during the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, Igor Dodon received more than 90% of votes in Gagauzia, while nationally he was defeated by the pro-European candidate Maia Sandu. In the 2019 and 2021 parliamentary elections, the Socialist Party (PSRM) and the Şor Party together obtained over 80% of the regional vote, and in the 2023 local elections these parties secured most mayoral positions in Comrat, Ceadâr-Lunga, and Vulcăneşti.

This trend supports Vladimir Kolstø's (2016) observation that *"in regions dominated by external cultural identities, voting becomes an act of geopolitical belonging rather than ideological choice."*

The determinants of this behaviour are multifaceted:

- Identity and linguistic factors – Russophone and Gagauz-speaking voters tend to support left-wing, pro-Russian parties (IPP, 2024). Following Rogers Brubaker's (2004) framework, in post-imperial spaces language operates as a political instrument and a vector of geopolitical loyalty.

- Informational environment – According to Freedom House (2024) and WatchDog.md (2023), over 70% of daily media content consumed in Gagauzia originates from Russian sources. The lack of media pluralism perpetuates the image of Russia as a protector and of the European Union as morally "decadent."

- Economic factor – GDP per capita in Gagauzia remains 35–40% below the national average (NBS, 2024), and over 40% of the population works in agriculture. This structural vulnerability amplifies receptiveness to Russian

economic narratives, consistent with Cardoso and Faletto's (1979) *dependency theory*.

- Religious factor – The Metropolis of Moldova, under the Moscow Patriarchate, acts as a key vector of influence. Clerical messages about “defending Orthodoxy” and the “moral dangers of Western liberalism” reinforce pro-Russian political choices.

5.2. Dynamics of Geopolitical Orientations and Generational Differences

At the national level, support for European integration has steadily increased — from 60% in 2022 to 67% in 2024 (EU Neighbours East; IRI Moldova). In sharp contrast, only 9% of Gagauz respondents support EU accession, while 82% favour a strategic alliance with Russia (IRI, 2023; IPP, 2024).

However, since 2022, generational differences have become increasingly visible. According to IRI (2025), among young Gagauz (aged 18–29), 33% support “pragmatic integration with the EU while preserving local traditions,” and 29% believe that “economic modernization should come from the West.” This trend confirms Ronald Inglehart's (1997) theory of *intergenerational value shift* — the transition from survival values to self-expression and modernization.

5.3. Europeanization as an Identity Process

European integration in Moldova represents more than a technical process of legal harmonization; it is also an identity reconfiguration. In Gagauzia, Europeanization generates tension between institutional modernization and cultural resistance. As Radaelli (2003) defines it, “*Europeanization beyond compliance*” implies a confrontation between state-driven pro-European discourse and traditional attachments to Russia, religion, and the Soviet legacy. In the regional context, European values are often perceived as “foreign,” while disinformation campaigns associate them with secularism, gender equality, and LGBT rights — topics framed as “threats to Orthodoxy” (Freedom House, 2024; EUvsDisinfo, 2024). Yet direct contact with European-funded programs has produced tangible effects.

Between 2020 and 2025, more than 40 EU-funded projects were implemented in Gagauzia (*EU4Moldova: Key Regions, EU4Education, EU4Business*), focusing on infrastructure, civic education, and SME support. According to *EU Neighbours East* (2024), 60% of direct beneficiaries perceive the EU as a “development partner,” although only 25% can name a specific project. This discrepancy between real impact and symbolic visibility remains one of the main challenges of Europeanization in the region.

5.4. Politicization of Identity and Democratic Risks

Identity politics remains the most effective tool of electoral mobilization in Gagauzia. Since 2022, pro-Russian parties (PSRM, Șor) and local leaders (Irina Vlah, Evghenia Guțul) have strategically used narratives of “defending traditions” and “resisting Western colonization” to convert cultural identity into electoral capital.

Local media campaigns have portrayed Russia as the “defender of Christianity,” while framing the EU and Romania as “moral threats” — narratives confirmed by *Hybrid CoE* (2023) and Freedom House (2024). This rhetoric has produced what Toal (2017) describes as a “borderland identity”, where symbolic loyalty to Russia coexists with administrative adaptation to the Moldovan state.

Nonetheless, Europeanization through education and mobility has begun to partially reverse this trend. Over 1,200 Gagauz students received scholarships in Romania between 2010 and 2024, and Erasmus+ programs introduced civic participation and local governance concepts into the region. These experiences form the nucleus of an emerging civic identity — less ideological, more pragmatic, and increasingly compatible with European values.

5.5. East–West Identity Scenarios

Based on the empirical data and theoretical analysis, three potential scenarios emerge for the evolution of Gagauz identity:

1. Conservative scenario (status quo): preservation of the pro-Russian orientation and traditionalist discourse, with resistance to value-based European integration.
2. Pragmatic scenario (dual cohesion): consolidation of local identity alongside active participation in European programs and institutional adaptation.
3. Transformative scenario (symbolic integration): emergence of an inclusive civic identity compatible with European belonging while maintaining Gagauz cultural distinctiveness.

Although the third scenario is the most challenging, it represents the only path capable of ensuring national cohesion without eroding local diversity. As Thomas Risse (2010) argues, “*multiple identities can coexist as long as they provide meaning and recognition within the same political community.*”

6. The Impact of European Integration on Identity Cohesion

European integration in the Republic of Moldova represents both a transformative political project and a social experiment in reconciling divergent identity narratives. In the context of Gagauzia, this process

operates at the intersection of external geopolitical pressures and internal societal fragmentation. The region's experience demonstrates that Europeanization cannot succeed solely through administrative or economic reforms; it requires a parallel process of symbolic inclusion and communicative engagement that addresses collective memory, cultural security, and local autonomy.

As Risse (2010) and Checkel & Katzenstein (2009) emphasize, Europeanization functions not only through institutional alignment but also through the socialization of norms — a gradual internalization of democratic and pluralistic values. In Moldova, this mechanism remains uneven: while the central state has adopted much of the EU's legislative framework, the peripheral regions such as Gagauzia exhibit low identification with the European project due to competing narratives of belonging.

6.1. Europeanization as a Multilevel Process

Europeanization in Moldova unfolds simultaneously across three dimensions — institutional, cognitive, and symbolic.

- At the institutional level, the government has harmonized key sectors (justice, trade, public administration) with EU standards under the Association Agreement (2014) and the Candidate Status (2022). However, these reforms have had limited visibility in Gagauzia, where the perception of the EU remains abstract. Only 26% of residents report any direct interaction with EU-funded initiatives (EU Neighbours East, 2024).

- At the cognitive level, Europeanization challenges the Soviet-era “mental maps” that structure perceptions of order, authority, and morality. The contrast between the EU's liberal pluralism and Russia's traditionalist narrative creates identity dissonance. According to the IPP (2024), 58% of Gagauz respondents associate the EU with “economic opportunity,” but 63% simultaneously believe it threatens Orthodox values.

- At the symbolic level, Europeanization remains hindered by the absence of a compelling narrative of inclusion. While official discourse emphasizes modernization, it rarely addresses the cultural and emotional dimensions of belonging. Delanty (2003) argues that successful European identity construction requires *dialogic recognition* — the capacity of institutions to engage with diversity rather than merely regulate it.

6.2. Identity Negotiation and Hybrid Belonging

The case of Gagauzia exemplifies what Diez (2012) describes as “*hybrid Europeanization*” — a process in which local communities selectively adopt European norms while preserving alternative sources of legitimacy. This hybrid identity emerges through negotiation rather than replacement. Field research and opinion data suggest that Gagauz citizens increasingly differentiate between Europe as a value system and the European Union as

a political actor. While skepticism toward Brussels persists, many perceive individual mobility, education, and visa liberalization as concrete benefits. For instance, participation in Erasmus+ and Romanian scholarship programs has doubled since 2018, with more than 1,200 students from Gagauzia studying in EU countries by 2024. These micro-level interactions contribute to a gradual redefinition of Europe from an external model to an experiential reality.

Moreover, civic initiatives funded through *EU4Moldova: Key Regions* and *Local Democracy Facility* have created new spaces for participatory governance, involving youth councils and women's associations in decision-making. Although limited in scope, such initiatives embody the "everyday Europeanization" that scholars such as Börzel and Schimmelfennig (2020) identify as essential for embedding democratic norms.

The Europeanization process exposes the tension between modernization and cohesion. In Moldova, modernization tends to be associated with urban elites, while cohesion depends on rural and traditional networks. In Gagauzia, this gap is particularly visible: while urban youth in Comrat show increasing openness toward Europe, rural communities remain anchored in conservative and pro-Russian narratives. This cleavage illustrates what social identity theorists (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) describe as the dynamic between *ingroup solidarity* and *outgroup threat*. The more integration is framed as a challenge to tradition, the stronger the defensive identity becomes. Thus, communication failures — not ideological differences — often reinforce polarization.

The government's European communication strategy has improved since 2023, but its focus on technical achievements (infrastructure, digitalization, legal reforms) rarely resonates with communities that prioritize moral and existential dimensions of belonging. As Freedom House (2024) observes, "in Moldova's regions, Europe is understood less as an institution and more as a metaphor — one that must align with lived identity." The experience of Gagauzia reveals that Europeanization must move beyond conditionality toward cultural co-creation. Inclusive identity policies require three interdependent strategies:

1. Narrative inclusion – integrating local heritage, Orthodoxy, and linguistic diversity into the broader story of Europe, rather than positioning them as opposites.

2. Participatory communication – empowering regional actors, youth, and local media to co-produce messages about what Europe means in their daily context.

3. Educational bridging – expanding multilingual education and exchange programs that transform Europe from a geopolitical abstraction into a lived experience.

If successfully implemented, these measures could transform Gagauzia from a peripheral region of resistance into a model of plural integration — a laboratory for reconciling East and West within a shared civic framework. As Risse (2010) concludes, “*Europe’s identity project succeeds not when diversity disappears, but when it is institutionalized as part of belonging.*” Gagauzia’s trajectory may thus foreshadow Moldova’s broader challenge: to build a European future that respects cultural differences while strengthening political unity.

General Conclusions

The present analysis demonstrates that the Gagauz identity represents one of the most intricate and multidimensional identity constructions in the post-Soviet space, where cultural, religious, and linguistic traditions intersect with geopolitical determinants.

Although numerically small, the Gagauz community holds major strategic importance, as it reflects the civilizational tensions defining the Republic of Moldova itself — positioned between Eastern heritage and Western aspiration. Based on the empirical and theoretical findings, several key conclusions can be formulated:

1. Gagauz identity is hybrid and adaptive. It combines elements of Orthodox tradition and the Russian language with a strong sense of local belonging and a predominantly Eastern geopolitical orientation. This hybridism does not indicate a lack of authentic identity but rather the community’s capacity to negotiate its symbolic survival within a fluid political and cultural environment.

2. Linguistic and religious Russification has been reinforced by informational dependence. The Russian language, the Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate, and Russian-controlled media operate as complementary mechanisms of enduring cultural influence. In this context, the *Russkiy Mir* (“Russian World”) functions not merely as a geopolitical doctrine but as an identity infrastructure sustained through symbols, rituals, and narratives.

3. The pro-Russian orientation of Gagauzia stems not solely from propaganda but also from the absence of effective strategic communication by the Moldovan state and the European Union. While European initiatives provide tangible economic benefits, their communication remains largely technocratic and disconnected from local symbolism. Without culturally translated and emotionally resonant narratives, Europe continues to be perceived as distant and abstract.

4. The politicization of identity has transformed autonomy from a mechanism of cultural recognition into an instrument of internal geopolitical competition. Local elites, notably Irina Vlah and Evghenia Guțul, have converted religious symbols and Soviet memory into political

capital, consolidating a defensive and Eurosceptic identity. Consequently, autonomy risks functioning as a channel of external influence rather than as a laboratory of internal pluralism.

5. The younger generation represents the main vector of change.

Gagauz youth educated in Romania and across the European Union are developing a pragmatic and civic identity less shaped by ideology and more by experience. Direct exposure to European societies fosters what may be termed “*Europeanization through experience*,” gradually reducing geopolitical polarization.

6. The Europeanization of Gagauzia depends on the capacity of both the European Union and the Moldovan state to transform integration into a process of cultural inclusion rather than identity substitution. European values must be communicated through respect for tradition, religion, and local autonomy in order to become attractive rather than imposed. As Joseph Nye (2004) observes, “*soft power is effective only when values are desired, not merely admired.*”

In summary, the research confirms that Gagauz identity is not a relic of the past but an evolving field of negotiation between East and West. It can serve either as a source of division or as a bridge of cohesion — depending on how the state and European actors succeed in transforming autonomy from a geopolitical buffer zone into a partner of modernization. Reconciliation between local and European identity cannot be achieved through coercion but through symbolic cohesion — by valuing difference within a shared political community. Within such a framework, Gagauzia may become not an obstacle, but an example of autonomy compatible with Europeanization, contributing to the consolidation of Moldova’s civic identity as a plural and modern European state.

Recommendations

The research findings underline the need for multidimensional policies aimed at strengthening social cohesion and improving the communication of European integration in culturally diverse regions such as Gagauzia. The following recommendations are proposed for both national and European actors:

1. Adapt communication strategies on European integration to the cultural and linguistic specificities of Gagauzia.
2. Complement disinformation countermeasures with local media literacy initiatives.
3. Reduce Russian influence and increase the political engagement of pro-European actors in the Gagauz Autonomous Region.
4. Increase the visibility of the European Union and Romania in Gagauzia through tangible educational and social projects.

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