

The level of integration of the Gagauz community from the Republic of Moldova. Public Perceptions and External Influences

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Abstract

The Gagauz community is one of the most significant expressions of ethnocultural diversity in the Republic of Moldova, benefiting from a special status of autonomy. The level of integration of this community is shaped by the interaction between its cultural identity, linguistic particularities, collective perceptions of the Moldovan state, and external influences. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the level of integration of the Gagauz community from the Republic of Moldova by referring to the official documents regulating the status of this community and to public perceptions of the various dimensions of societal integration. Methodologically, the research is based on an integrated qualitative approach that combines documentary analysis, interpretation of public discourse, and assessment of collective perceptions.

The analysis of external influences aims to identify the mechanisms through which foreign actors, especially Russia and Turkey, exert an impact on the Gagauz community. The primary identity of the residents of ATU Gagauzia is uncertain, three primary identities are taking shape at the same time - civic, regional and local community, none of which is dominant. Despite a fragmented identity and the lack of a dominant civic identity, civic duties are mostly accepted, however, the obligation to know the state language by the residents of ATU Gagauzia is a less accepted civic duty.

Keywords

Republic of Moldova, integration, ethnicity, EU, ATU Gagauzia

1. Introduction and methodology

Facing a complex international context characterized by external pressures, the Republic of Moldova, as a candidate country for European Union membership, is undergoing a continuous process of political, economic, and institutional reforms aimed at aligning domestic standards

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with European ones (Brie, 2025; Brie, 2017b). At the same time, the Russian Federation's strategic influence in the post-Soviet region continues to be a crucial factor in ensuring domestic security and stability. This duality requires the development of a balanced foreign policy that reconciles European commitments with the geopolitical and economic realities imposed by Russia's proximity and influence, given the hybrid war at the borders.

Moldova's efforts towards European integration, while maintaining its historical and cultural ties with Russia, place the Autonomous Territorial Unit (ATU) of Gagauzia in an increasingly precarious situation, thus acquiring particular strategic importance. Gagauzia, as an autonomous region with a distinct ethnic and cultural identity, is a relevant vector of Moldova's internal dynamics, influencing both social cohesion and political stability. The level of community integration, public perceptions, and external ties, especially historical and economic ones with the Russian Federation, are factors that can shape the process of state consolidation and its European orientation. Thus, the analysis of the autonomy of Gagauzia in the context of external pressures and the internal politics of the Republic of Moldova is justified by its direct relevance to national security, social cohesion, and the country's ability to navigate effectively in a multipolar international environment.

The Gagauz community is one of the most significant expressions of ethnocultural diversity in the Republic of Moldova, benefiting from a special status of autonomy, which gives it both political visibility and a decisive role in the dynamics of relations between state and regional authorities. The level of integration of this community is shaped by the interaction between its cultural identity, linguistic particularities, collective perceptions of the Moldovan state, and external influences that shape the social and political behaviors of its members. In a context marked by prolonged political transitions, internal polarization, and geopolitical pressures, ATU Gagauzia is emerging as a space that reflects tensions between traditionally pro-Russian orientations and those oriented toward other external centers of influence, particularly Turkey.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the level of integration of the Gagauz community from the Republic of Moldova by referring to the official documents regulating the status of this community and to public perceptions of the various dimensions of societal integration. Our *specific objectives* are: a. to analyze the balance that defines the existence of ATU Gagauzia, located at the intersection between the European aspirations of the Republic of Moldova and its cultural relations with Turkey; b. to analyze the complex dynamics of the perceptions of the Gagauzian population and authorities regarding the region's position within the Moldovan state; c. to

analyze the level of integration of the Gagauz community in the Moldovan society.

In relation to these objectives, we have also established the *levels of analysis* for this research:

1. The level of analysis of the institutional and regulatory framework of the status of ATU Gagauzia, as well as political dynamics. Thus, this research highlights the challenges of regional autonomy, minority rights, and how international political processes influence local realities.

2. The analysis of the level of integration of the Gagauz community is essential for understanding societal cohesion in the Republic of Moldova, given that collective perceptions and external influences can strengthen or weaken the links between the region and state authorities. From an identity perspective, the Gagauz community is defined by a combination of ethnic, linguistic, and religious characteristics that give it distinct visibility within the ethnic multiculturalism of the Republic of Moldova. These features determine both how community members perceive the state and how they relate to state values and institutions.

3. Analysis of external factors and influences that play a decisive role in shaping public perceptions, geopolitical orientations, and local political decisions, thus influencing the community's level of integration. The Russian Federation exerts a strong influence through cultural, political, and media channels, maintaining historical and linguistic ties with the Gagauz population, while Turkey intervenes mainly through cultural, educational, and economic programs, strengthening the ethnic and cultural dimension of community identity.

Understanding the level of integration of ATU Gagauzia requires a *multidimensional approach* that correlates the analysis of public perceptions with the assessment of the impact of external influences and the examination of the internal socio-political context. This approach allows for the identification of mechanisms through which the community's identity interacts with the authorities in Chişinău, as well as how these mechanisms can generate both cohesion and distancing from the central authorities. It is important to note that the level of integration is not a static indicator, but a dynamic one, continuously influenced by political, economic, and social developments in the Republic of Moldova, community perceptions, and interactions with external actors.

Methodologically, the research is based on an integrated qualitative approach that combines documentary analysis, interpretation of public discourse, and assessment of collective perceptions. Documentary analysis involves examining the literature, institutional reports, legislative

documents, and sociological studies to build the institutional and historical framework necessary for understanding the integration processes and relations between the authorities in Chisinau and Comrat. At the same time, the analysis of public discourse provides insights into how community leaders, local authorities, and regional media construct and convey messages about identity, geopolitical orientation, and the relationship with the state, highlighting the mechanisms through which collective perceptions are formed and propagated.

Public perceptions are assessed by interpreting data from opinion polls, social barometers, and sociological studies, which allow us to capture community members' attitudes toward central authorities, trust in public institutions, and willingness to participate in civic life. At the same time, the analysis of external influences aims to identify the mechanisms through which foreign actors, especially Russia and Turkey, exert an impact on the Gagauz community, including through the media, cultural and educational programs, economic relations, and political ties. This methodological approach allows us to capture the interaction between public perceptions and external influences, providing a comprehensive picture of the factors that determine the community's level of integration.

Through this *integrated approach*, the study offers a coherent and contextualized perspective on how public perceptions and external influences interact with the process of integration into Moldovan society (see contextually for more details, including methodological and conceptual aspects: Brie, Costea, and Toderaş, 2025; Brie, 2025). The analysis combines historical, socio-political, and cultural perspectives to highlight the complexity of the phenomenon and to emphasize the significant role that both internal and external factors play in strengthening or diminishing the social cohesion and identity of the Gagauz community.

2. Literature review

The analysis of the level of integration of the Gagauz community in the Republic of Moldova is addressed in the specialized literature within the broader framework of studies on identity, societal security, and the relationship between the state and ethno-cultural minorities. Authors analyzing this area emphasize the distinct character of the Gagauz community in the post-Soviet context, determined by the combination of territorial autonomy, a pronounced ethno-linguistic identity, and geopolitical orientations that often diverge from those of the majority population of the state.

The integration of minority communities is conceptualized in the literature on societal security both from the perspective of social cohesion

and from that of the state's ability to manage identity pluralism without generating insecurity or polarization. In the case of the Republic of Moldova, this issue is accentuated by persistent identity fragmentation and the existence of regions with special status, of which ATU Gagauzia is a relevant example (Brie, 2016).

In the Republic of Moldova, as in other countries of the former Soviet Union, the post-communist period has been marked by a process of national-ethnic and national-civic identity construction, which has encountered resistance shaped by distinct identity-based particularities (Brie and Solcan, 2025: 159). This resistance has been expressed in various identity cleavages, which we have called identity frontiers (Brie and Horga, 2014: 202-216), as well as tensions or even identity conflicts. These may range from ordinary differences of opinion within society, including civil society, to more profound identity-based conflicts—whether inter-ethnic, inter-religious, or between distinct linguistic communities. The role of civil society (Brie and Putină, 2023; Costea and Brie, 2025), as well as European conflict management and negotiation instruments, proved useful in this process of mediating particular identity disputes and conflicts (Brie and Solcan, 2025: 159). In this regard, important steps have been taken towards resolving identity conflicts in the Western Balkans (see Brie; Jusufi and Polgar, 2023 or Brie; Jusufi and Polgar, 2022). Despite shared traits and challenges, the former Soviet space has demonstrated distinct approaches to managing identity tensions and conflicts (Brie; Costea and Petrila, 2023; Brie, 2017a). Distinctive features include the articulation of identity-based cleavages and boundaries (Brie, 2016; Brie, 2021; Brie, 2023), the role played by civil society, the involvement of civil society in the democratization process (Putină and Brie, 2023; Poiană and Petrila, 2023) and the need to stimulate cooperation (Brie; Mărcuț and Polgar, 2022).

Gagauz identity is predominantly defined by ethnic, linguistic, and religious criteria, supported by a specific historical memory formed during the Russian imperial period and consolidated during the Soviet regime. The literature highlights that the process of identity construction of the Gagauz community took place in a tense relationship with the national identity project of the Moldovan state, often being articulated in opposition to it. This dynamic contributed to the formation and maintenance of an identity divided between the central authorities and the Gagauz autonomy (Brie, 2021).

The status of ATU Gagauzia within the Republic of Moldova is analyzed in the specialized literature through the prism of the normative framework governing relations between the central and autonomous authorities. The Constitution of the Republic of Moldova enshrines the principles of unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of the state, while also allowing for

special forms of territorial autonomy. Law No. 344/1994 on the special legal status of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia (Gagauz-Yeri) is the main legal instrument defining the institutional framework of autonomy and the powers of regional authorities and is frequently cited in studies analyzing the relationship between the center and the periphery in the Republic of Moldova. Gagauzia, autonomous since 1994, is inhabited mainly by a community of Turkic origin, speaking a Turkic language and practicing the Christian Orthodox religion. These characteristics place it in a distinct identity space, located at the intersection of the influences of the Russian Federation, Turkey, and the European Union (Brie, 2022). The literature frequently correlates the analysis of ATU Gagauzia with the role of external actors, emphasizing their impact on identity and political discourse and on the functioning of local civil society (Nantoi et al., 2016).

The Russian Federation is identified as the main external actor exerting influence in the region through soft power instruments such as the media, economic support, identity discourse, and memory policies. These mechanisms contribute to the consolidation of a distinct political identity among the Gagauz population, characterized by a predominantly Eurosceptic attitude and a critical stance towards the integration policies promoted by the central authorities (Nantoi et al., 2016).

At the same time, Turkey exerts a different type of influence, focused mainly on the cultural and economic dimensions. Turkish support manifests itself through educational projects, academic exchanges, and investments in infrastructure, capitalizing on the linguistic and historical affinities between Turks and Gagauz. According to the studies analyzed, these policies contribute to strengthening the cultural identity of the community and maintaining transnational links, without directly challenging the sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova. At the same time, the literature highlights the ambivalent nature of this influence, as it can accentuate the perception of distinct autonomy from the central authorities (Komm, Terzi, and Zamejc 2021).

The role of civil society in Gagauzia has been discussed critically in literature. Although civil society organizations are considered, in theory, to be essential actors in integration and interethnic dialogue, numerous studies indicate that they are underdeveloped, dependent on external funding, and, in certain contexts, vulnerable to political instrumentalization. As a result, local civil society often reflects existing regional identity and geopolitical divisions, limiting its ability to function as a mediator between Gagauz autonomy and central authorities (Brie and Putină, 2023).

Public perceptions of the level of integration of the Gagauz community indicate structural ambivalence. Sociological data provided by the Institute

for Public Policy reveal a low level of mutual trust between the majority population and the Gagauz community, influenced by language barriers, divergent geopolitical orientations, and competing narratives regarding state identity (IPP, 2019; IPP, 2021; IPP, 2023). In public discourse, Gagauzia is perceived either as a vulnerability for state security or as an example of institutional management of ethnic diversity, this polarization reflecting the lack of societal consensus on the role of autonomy in the architecture of the Moldovan state.

From an institutional perspective, Gagauz autonomy is described as a political compromise that helped prevent the escalation of conflict in the 1990s, but which was not followed by a coherent and sustainable long-term integration strategy (Marzac, Sandu, 2021). The absence of consistent public inclusion policies, together with the political use of identity, has led to the perpetuation of a limited, predominantly functional form of integration, without deep societal integration (Brie, 2021).

Recent literature emphasizes that the level of integration of the Gagauz community is decisively influenced by public perceptions of the state, national identity, and the geopolitical orientation of the Republic of Moldova. Integration is often perceived not as a two-way process based on recognition and participation, but as pressure to assimilate or as a potential threat to local identity. These perceptions are amplified by internal and external political actors, contributing to the maintenance of societal fragmentation.

3. The Gagauz community: identity, history, administrative and political organization

ATU Gagauzia is an area of convergence between the ethno-confessional particularities of the Turkic population and the dynamics of regional power relations. Its position at the intersection of the spheres of influence of the European Union and the Russian Federation amplifies the socio-political complexity of this autonomous territory (Goreainov and Brie, 2018). Inhabited by the Gagauz population, a Turkic-speaking and Orthodox Christian minority, ATU Gagauzia is a space where distinct cultural identity, political autonomy, and external pressures intersect.

The Republic of Moldova's drive towards European integration, while maintaining its historical and cultural ties with Russia, places Gagauzia in an increasingly fragile situation. The autonomy granted in 1994 to respond to its distinct ethnic and cultural identity has turned the region into a point of contention in the Moldovan political landscape. Gagauzia's orientation towards Russia – particularly evident in economic partnerships – often conflicts with Moldova's European aspirations, intensifying debates on the limits of autonomy in a unitary state.

3.1. Overview of ATU Gagauzia

Located in the south of the Republic of Moldova, ATU Gagauzia covers an area of approximately 1,832 square kilometers. Its landscape is largely rural, with agriculture forming the backbone of its economy (Bulut, 2016: 60-71). The geographical location of ATU Gagauzia in the immediate vicinity of Ukraine facilitates complex interactions at the regional level. At the same time, its location near the Moldovan-Romanian border connects the autonomy to the dynamics of the European space. These strategic proximities reinforce Gagauzia's role as a node of geopolitical and commercial interest in southeastern Europe.

Estimates of the population of ATU Gagauzia vary between 124,000 and nearly 173,000, depending on the source. According to TURKSOY, the International Organization of Turkic Culture, Gagauzia has a population of 172,500 (TURKSOY, 2025). However, significant emigration, driven by economic and social factors, is believed to have reduced this number, with current estimates suggesting a population closer to 100,000. This demographic shift poses challenges for the preservation of the region's cultural and linguistic identity.

The ethno-linguistic configuration of Gagauz autonomy reveals an intersection between linguistic pragmatism and identity preservation. The predominance of Russian in public spaces is complemented by policies aimed at revitalizing the Gagauz dialect and linguistic integration into the national system through the study of Romanian. However, Eastern Orthodox Christianity remains the central pillar of social unity. Eastern Orthodox Christianity is central to the identity of ATU Gagauzia, influencing traditions and community cohesion. The institution of the church and the calendar of religious holidays act as factors of cohesion, underpinning the moral values and social structure of the community.

ATU Gagauzia enjoys a certain degree of autonomy within the Republic of Moldova, being governed by the People's Assembly and an executive leader known as the Bashkan (Gagauzia Dialogue, 2025). This framework gives the region authority over key areas such as education, culture, and local governance, while maintaining its integration into the Moldovan state. This balance has underscored its efforts to manage internal affairs while defining its role in the broader national context. However, in recent years, Gagauz politicians have claimed that this autonomy is seriously threatened by the government in Chisinau. The economic profile of Gagauz people sought to assert their cultural and political identity in the context of Moldova's post-Soviet transition. The potential for separatist movements prompted the authorities in Chisinau to negotiate a framework that would integrate ATU Gagauzia while respecting its specific characteristics. The 1994 autonomy agreement,

which established the self-government of ATU Gagauzia within the Republic of Moldova, was not only an internal achievement, but also the result of Turkey's influence, led by then-President Süleyman Demirel (Socor, 2013). Turkey's involvement in this process was deeply rooted in historical and cultural ties, as the Gagauz people, a Turkic ethnic group, share linguistic and cultural ties with the Turkish nation.

The aspirations for independence of the region's population generated an imminent risk of conflict, in which context Turkey intervened diplomatically, advocating for a peaceful resolution. Ankara's objective was to preserve the territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova, conditioned, however, on the official recognition of the distinct rights and identity of the Gagauz ethnic group. The resulting legal framework established ATU Gagauzia, granting the authorities in Comrat powers to manage internal affairs, with a focus on education, culture, and administration. A central element of this agreement was the self-determination clause, which allows for the separation of the region in the event of Moldova's loss of independence — a strategic provision designed to alleviate local concerns about a potential unification with Romania.

Under the auspices of President Süleyman Demirel, Turkey acted as a mediator, promoting dialogue and compromise as fundamental mechanisms for resolving the crisis. Turkey's diplomatic engagement with both Chisinau and Comrat facilitated the climate of trust necessary to harmonize the divergent positions of the central government and the leaders of the autonomy, culminating in the signing of the historic agreement. Beyond diplomacy, Turkey has provided significant cultural and educational support to the Gagauz Autonomous Territorial Unit, strengthening its unique identity within the autonomous region. Scholarships, cultural exchange programs, and economic aid have become essential tools in strengthening the bond between Turkey and the Gagauz people. These initiatives have contributed to the preservation of the region's cultural heritage, while promoting development and integration into the broader structure of the Republic of Moldova. This is why the Gagauz people still refer to Süleyman Demirel as their "father" (Akin, 2022).

Throughout its existence, ATU Gagauzia has consolidated its autonomous status by using legal levers to preserve its cultural and linguistic heritage while maintaining a distinct political identity. The self-government structure is based on two key institutions: the People's Assembly (the legislative body) and the Bashkan (the executive leader).

The implementation of autonomy has not been without friction. Tensions with the central authorities in Chisinau are recurrent,

manifesting themselves primarily in disputes over the allocation of economic resources, political representation, and differences in foreign policy orientation. A telling example is the persistent inclination of ATU Gagauzia towards the Russian Federation, especially in the commercial and cultural spheres, which contrasts sharply with the pro-European strategic vector of the Republic of Moldova. Despite these challenges, the autonomous framework has functioned as an effective *conflict management* mechanism, preventing disputes from escalating into violent conflicts observed in other post-Soviet spaces. The political evolution of the region illustrates the precarious balance between exercising local self-government within a unitary state and managing external geopolitical pressures. Currently, ATU Gagauzia is a relevant case study in the analysis of mechanisms for managing ethnic and cultural diversity through negotiated autonomy.

3.2. The role of the ATU Gagauzia in the context of Moldova's accession to the EU

Gagauzia is a strategic segment in the equation of the geopolitical competition between the Russian Federation and the European Union. Due to economic interdependencies and deep cultural affinities with Russia, the region is a key point in Moscow's strategy to limit the expansion of Western influence in Eastern Europe. In this context, the Russian Federation is implementing various *soft power* mechanisms—including asymmetric trade facilities, cultural policies, and logistical support for local political elites—with the aim of preserving its regional hegemony and questioning the viability of Moldova's strategic pro-European path.

Evghenia Guțul's visit to Moscow in March 2024 clearly illustrated this perspective. She stated: "I told Putin about the illegal actions of the Moldovan authorities, who are taking revenge on us for our civic positions and for defending our national interests" (Tanas, 2024).

This alignment with Russia frequently generates conflicts between Gagauzia and the Moldovan government, especially in the context of Chisinau seeking closer relations with the EU. Gagauzia's consistent support for Russian-led initiatives, such as favoring the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) over European integration, complicates Moldova's foreign policy and highlights the broader geopolitical competition in the region. As a culturally distinct autonomous entity, Gagauzia exemplifies the challenges of balancing historical affiliations with Russia and aspirations for European integration. Its geopolitical importance lies in its potential to influence the direction of Moldova, making it a critical factor in the broader struggle for influence in the post-Soviet space.

In ATU Gagauzia, certain policies promoted at the central level are perceived, especially in the discourse of regional leaders, as having potential implications for the degree of autonomy, through their emphasis on strengthening central government, limiting external influence, and economic reorientation. Although there are no official statements explicitly targeting the restriction of Gagauz autonomy, differences in perception persist between the authorities in Comrat and those in Chisinau. Referendums held in the region indicate a distinct orientation of a significant part of local public opinion, while the positions expressed by the central leadership reflect other strategic priorities.

The evolution of the situation in the ATU Gagauzia is also complicated, especially at the political and identity levels (in this section we use some parts of Brie, 2025). The Gagauz community has always been a border community. This reality is precisely due to the positioning, often controversial, between the Bulgarian, Turkish and more recently Russian identity of the members of this community. Apart from their controversial origin, their identity carries significant nuances along some historical stages that marked their existence. More and more, this community transformed its identity towards what today is a Russophile community, systematically supported by Moscow. Without being very numerous (according to the 2004 census, it counted 147,500 members, of which 127,835 lived in the ATU Gagauzia), this community stands out for the importance it had in the history of Bessarabia (The National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, 2024a). According to the 2014 census data, 134,535 inhabitants lived in the ATU Gagauzia, of which 112,387 were Gagauz (National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, 2024b).

ATU Gagauzia is perhaps the most Russophile region of the Republic of Moldova. A separatist entity in the early 1990s, ATU Gagauzia eventually accepted Chisinau's sovereignty, but claims the right to secede in the event of a union with Romania or even European integration. Moreover, the approaching to Russia, the visits made to Moscow and the pro-Russian policies of the bashkan woman Evghenia Guțul made her being included on the sanctions lists of the West. *„The USA imposed sanctions against Evghenia Guțul for involvement in hybrid actions against the state of the Republic of Moldova and its citizens, actions financed with money from criminal sources. The decision comes as a result of effective collaboration with our external partners and we will continue to take decisive measures to counter corruption and threats to national security”*, Dorin Recean, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Moldova wrote in June 2024. Later on, on October 9th, 2024, the European Union also included in the list of those sanctioned for attempts to destabilize the

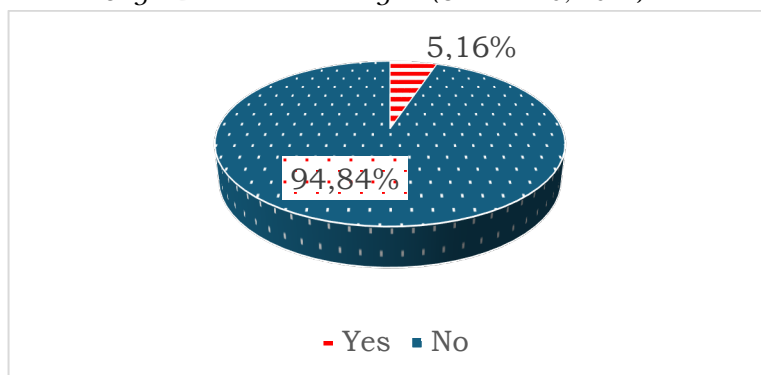
Republic of Moldova five more people, among whom Evghenia Guțul is, the current bashkan of ATU Gagauzia, affiliated with the fugitive named Ilan Șor (HotNews.ro, 2024).

The perception of public opinion in ATU Gagauzia regarding the EU and the European integration of the Republic of Moldova was captured by the Public Policy Institute, which has been conducting opinion polls focused on the residents of ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia district since 2011. The most recent one was published in 2022 and includes analyzes of some data collected in September-October 2021 (thus before the Russian invasion of Ukraine and during the period when Irina Vlah was still the bashkan of ATU Gagauzia). We mention the fact that on July 19, 2023, the new Governor (*Bashkan*) is Evghenia Guțul, *whose positions proved to be even more radical regarding the rapprochement with the Russian Federation and the opposition to the rapprochement of the Republic of Moldova with the EU. However, the public perception towards EU rapprochement has improved in the post-2015 period in this region as well. In 2021, 17.6% would vote for joining the European Union (compared to only 3.6% in 2015) and 58% against joining (compared to 80% in 2015). If they were to choose between joining the European Union and joining the Eurasian Economic Union, then 44.1% would vote for joining the Eurasian Economic Union (86.9% in 2015) and 19% for joining the European Union (2.6 % in 2015) (IPP, 2021, p. 34).*

The political messages were very radicalized in favor of a pro-Russian position in the context of the war in Ukraine, especially after the election of the new bashkan Evghenia Guțul (July 2023). The political evolution and the messages of the leaders of ATU Gagauzia in 2024 seem to lead to a scenario reminiscent of the situation in Transnistrian region in the early '90s. There is a visible attempt to link the region economically and politically to Russia. The agreement signed between Bashkan Guțul and Promsvyazbank, along with adherence to the Russian alternative financial infrastructure to SWIFT, called „Mir”, indicates an even deeper anchorage in the Russian sphere of influence. „These actions not only strengthen financial and economic ties, but create a structural dependency that can be difficult to reverse in the medium and long term. This, of course, if it materialized. „Mir” cards would rather be used to pay SHOR protesters and voters, to vote against the referendum on EU” accession, held on October 20th, 2024 (Pleșca, 2024).

During the referendum on accession to the European Union, only 5.16% of the citizens of the ATU Gagauzia answered yes. Thus, almost 95% of the Gagauzians present at the polls voted against the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union (Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Moldova, 2024).

Figure 1: Vote in the referendum to amend the Constitution in view of EU accession in the Gagauz Autonomous Region (October 20, 2024)



(Source: own drawing with information from the Central Electoral Commission, 2024)

In the case of this region, inhabited mainly by Gagauz, 57,847 people voted in this referendum, and only 2,985 were in favor of amending the Constitution in order to join the EU, while 54,862 people voted against. We can conclude that the Gagauz people almost completely reject the idea of joining the EU, while at the same time preferring a geopolitical rapprochement with the Russian Federation (Brie, 2025).

3.3. The autonomy of ATU Gagauzia in the geopolitical context. External relations and influences

From a geographical and political point of view, ATU Gagauzia is a key point in the regional geopolitical context. Moldova's steady progress towards European integration places it firmly under the influence of the European Union, while Gagauzia's deep cultural and economic ties with Russia generate internal conflict. This duality reflects the post-Soviet region's ongoing "struggle" for identity, balance, and progress in the context of competing forces from the East and West.

Within the state architecture of the Republic of Moldova, the autonomous status of Gagauzia fulfills a dual function: it acts as a protective mechanism for the preservation of Turkic ethno-cultural identity and, at the same time, constitutes a constraint on the authority of the unitary state. The vector of European integration assumed by Chisinau frequently collides with the geopolitical orientations of the autonomous region, which shows a predilection for strengthening relations with the Russian Federation. The results of local elections and referendums consistently confirm broad support for pro-Russian policies, a phenomenon determined by economic dependence on Eastern markets and historical cultural affinity. This asymmetry of views highlights the difficulty of developing a coherent national strategy capable of harmonizing the state's European ambitions with the specific priorities of Gagauz autonomy. From Moscow's perspective,

Gagauzia is a strategic vector of influence, used to counterbalance the increasingly active presence of Western actors in the Republic of Moldova. Through soft power instruments—such as economic incentives, cultural programs, and direct political support—the Russian Federation seeks to strengthen the region's loyalty. Consequently, ATU Gagauzia transcends its strictly cultural significance, becoming a focal point of geopolitical competition between East and West in a regional context marked by strategic reconfigurations (Brie, Costea, and Toderaş, 2025).

It is therefore visible the preference of the population of ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia District for integration into the Eurasian Economic Union compared to the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU. And the vote against is relevant to be analyzed, 58.4% would vote against joining the European Union (IPP, 2021: 34).

A. The relationship between ATU Gagauzia and the Russian Federation

Rising tensions between the Republic of Moldova, ATU Gagauzia, and the Shor Party have placed the region at the intersection of domestic governance and foreign geopolitics. Recent sanctions imposed by the Moldovan government and the EU reflect a concerted effort to counter what are perceived as threats to the sovereignty and constitutional integrity of the Republic of Moldova.

The region overwhelmingly supported closer ties with the Russian-led Customs Union, while also asserting its right to declare independence if the Republic of Moldova were to lose its sovereignty. The February 2014 referendum invited the population of ATU Gagauzia to express their position on two key options: rapprochement with Europe or strengthening relations with Russia. A third, much more controversial question concerned the possibility of Gagauzia seeking independence if Moldova were to lose its sovereignty, for example through a possible unification with Romania (Minzarari, 2014). Although declared unconstitutional by the Moldovan authorities, this referendum highlighted the distinct political determination of the Gagauzian Autonomous Territorial Unit and its commitment to reflecting the will of the population.

Another event in 2023 amplified opposition to Gagauzia from both the central government and the EU: the election of Evghenia Guţul as Bashkan. Backed by the Shor Party, her agenda was labeled pro-Russian and clashed with the central government's pro-European policies, becoming a point of political conflict. The Shor Party, led by oligarch Ilan Shor, has long been considered a destabilizing force in Moldovan politics. With a platform often described as Eurosceptic and pro-Russian, the party has gained support among the rural and pro-Russian population.

However, Guțul rejected these accusations, stating that the government's priority should be the welfare of the population and declaring that, despite promises to promote European values over the past four years, Moldova has experienced both economic and social decline. According to her, relations with strategic partners, such as the Russian Federation and other post-Soviet states, have deteriorated. She stressed that, according to the Constitution, the Republic of Moldova is a neutral and sovereign state, and this neutrality should be maintained without taking any geopolitical positions. In her opinion, the country's president is currently acting in line with Western guidelines (Karahindiba, 2024). According to Guțul, the agricultural economy of ATU Gagauzia has suffered significant losses, mainly due to the loss of access to the Russian market, which traditionally absorbed its abundant production of fruit, vegetables, and wine. She believes that the Republic of Moldova and ATU Gagauzia should cooperate and maintain friendly relations with all states, for the benefit of their citizens. In June 2023, the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Moldova declared the Shor Party unconstitutional, citing illegal financing and attempts to destabilize the constitutional order. The party was dissolved, causing a severe blow to its political activity in the Republic of Moldova (BBC, 2023). The Gagauz ethnic population maintains intrinsic socio-cultural ties with the Russian Federation, a phenomenon reflected in the prevalence of the Russian language in everyday interactions. This cultural convergence is particularly reflected in media consumption choices and in the structures of the local education system, which tend to gravitate towards Russian norms and standards, distancing themselves from Moldovan or European national paradigms.

From a macroeconomic perspective, ATU Gagauzia has a structural dependence on the Russian Federation, both in terms of trade and financial assistance. Exports of value-added agri-food products, such as wine and oilseeds, are primarily directed towards Russian markets. Furthermore, remittances from migrant workers in the Russian Federation are an essential component of regional disposable income, reinforcing economic interdependence. A key factor in this equation is the supply of natural gas, a vital energy resource whose direct supply is becoming a strategically important tool in the relationship between Moscow and the autonomous region.

In April 2024, the Bashkan of the Gagauz autonomy in the Republic of Moldova, Evghenia Guțul, who met with Russian President Vladimir Putin, said: "First, we asked the Russian leadership to provide facilities to our Gagauz exporters for the delivery of goods to Russia. Secondly, to provide the residents of our autonomy with a gas discount. Thirdly, to grant us access to Russia's payment infrastructure" (TASS, 2024). After the

meeting, a cooperation agreement in the banking and financial sector was signed between Russia and ATU Gagauzia with Promsvyazbank (PSB), which allowed 25,000 people to use the Russian MIR payment system.

The coercive measures imposed by the central authorities in Chisinau and the European Union escalated, resulting in the adoption of sanctions regimes. In October 2024, the EU Council implemented restrictive measures against high-ranking officials in the Comrat administration, including Governor (Bashkan) Evghenia Guțul. These decisions were based on accusations of inciting separatism and actions aimed at destabilizing the constitutional order of the Republic of Moldova. The sanctions imposed restrict freedom of movement within the EU and freeze financial assets. At the same time, a group of sixteen regional officials, including the governor (Bashkan), were subject to similar restrictions on access to economic resources and funds. This diplomatic and economic pressure has led to a strategic reorientation, propelling the ATU Gagauzia towards closer cooperation with the Russian Federation and the Republic of Turkey. At the same time, there has been a severe contraction in the volume of regional exports to the Russian market, a phenomenon caused by a convergence of factors: intensified geopolitical tensions, the application of international sanctions, and the proliferation of tariff and administrative trade barriers.

The Russia-Ukraine conflict led to extensive Western sanctions against Russia, disrupting trade flows and diminishing Russia's ability to engage economically. Moldova's increased alignment with EU policies under the EU Association Agreement further shifted the trade focus away from Russia (Ibrahimova, 2024). Russia has imposed import restrictions on Moldovan products, including those from ATU Gagauzia, due to ongoing political tensions. At the same time, Russia has prioritized imports from other CIS states, marginalizing Moldovan exporters. Logistical barriers have further exacerbated the difficulties of Gagauzia, particularly in terms of its ability to export goods to Russia. The war in Ukraine has disrupted key land trade routes traditionally used by Moldova and ATU Gagauzia to access Russian markets. This disruption has increased logistical difficulties, forcing exporters to resort to less efficient and more costly routes (Kunde, 2025).

B. The relationship between ATU Gagauzia and Turkey

The relationship between Turkey and ATU Gagauzia is proof of Turkey's commitment to supporting Turkic and culturally related communities around the world. Turkey is a key player in promoting cultural preservation and economic development in ATU Gagauzia, while respecting the sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova.

Through the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), Turkey has supported numerous cultural and educational initiatives aimed at preserving and promoting the Gagauz identity. TİKA has contributed to the establishment and maintenance of cultural institutions in ATU Gagauzia, such as the Dimitriy Kara Çöban Museum in Beşalma. Scholarships and exchange programs have also enabled Gagauz students to study in Turkey, strengthening people-to-people ties. Economic cooperation is another pillar of support. It has invested in infrastructure and development projects designed to stimulate the regional economy, including the construction and renovation of roads, schools, and medical facilities. Turkey has actively encouraged Turkish companies to invest in ATU Gagauzia with a view to creating jobs and stimulating economic growth. In November 2019, a delegation from the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) participated in the 5th International Investment Forum "Invest Gagauzia," held in Comrat, with over 400 participants, including ambassadors, diplomats, and businesspeople from Turkey. Discussions focused on the region's investment potential (The Organization of Turkic States, 2019).

In terms of foreign policy, Turkey's approach to ATU Gagauzia is one of balanced diplomacy. Firmly supporting the territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova, the Ankara government has acted to respect the autonomy of ATU Gagauzia and to meet its development needs. The leadership of ATU Gagauzia, including Bashkan Evghenia Guțul, has consistently emphasized the cordial nature of relations with Turkey, describing them as a partnership based on "brotherhood."

4. Analysis of public perceptions regarding the integration of Gagauz people and external influence

In the process of European integration of the Republic of Moldova, public perceptions in ATU Gagauzia are an important element for understanding internal political and social dynamics. The region has distinct identity, linguistic, and cultural characteristics that influence how the population relates to both the central authorities and the European Union. An analysis of these perceptions is necessary to understand why attitudes towards European integration differ significantly from those in other regions of the country.

This chapter analyzes the main perceptions of the Gagauz population regarding European integration and the role of external actors in shaping these opinions. It examines issues such as identity, geopolitical orientation, media influence, relations with the Russian Federation, and the level of trust in the European Union. The analysis is based on opinion poll data collected in ATU Gagauzia and highlights how external influence

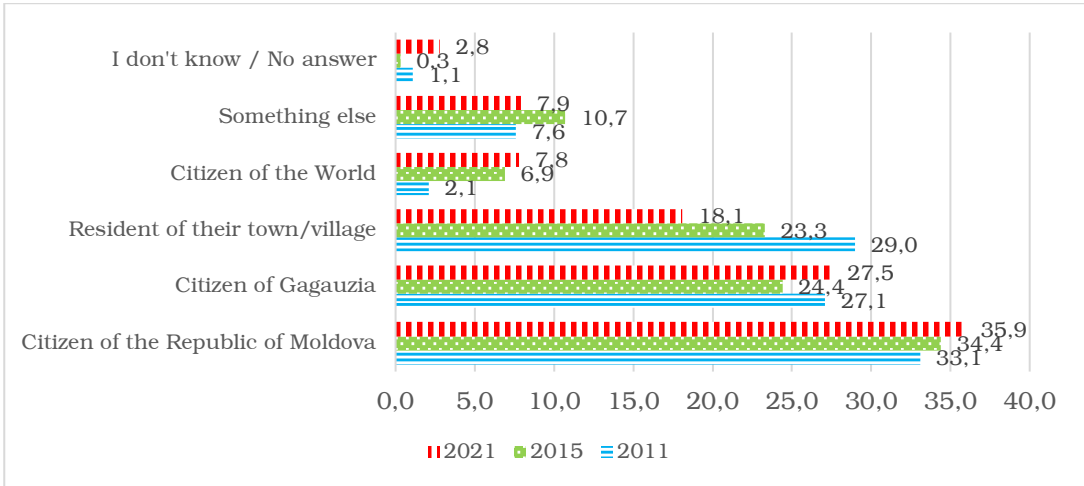
contributes to maintaining a predominantly skeptical attitude towards the European project.

Starting from the premise that the Gagauz people have almost unanimously rejected the idea of joining the EU (expressing a preference for geopolitical rapprochement with the Russian Federation), we propose to conduct an analysis using the database of the Institute for Public Policy (IPP), which has carried out complex surveys in ATU Gagauzia (inhabited mainly by Gagauz people) and Taraclia (a district inhabited mainly by Bulgarians and Gagauz people). The IPP has conducted three surveys on this topic (2011, 2015, and 2021).

Based on the complexity of the analysis conducted by the IPP as part of the project “Moldova between East and West: views from ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia,” we would like to analyze the options for internal and external integration, as well as their attitude towards various international partners.

According to the results (2015), 77.3% of the respondents from ATU Gagauzia and 69.7% from the Taraclia district perceive themselves as part of the society of the Republic of Moldova, and 71.4% of the respondents from both territorial formations consider themselves integrated into the society of Republic of Moldova (Nantoi et al., 2016: 16). At the same time, 64.6% of respondents consider that the Republic of Moldova is part of the Russian world, for 15.4% of respondents, Moldovan culture is closer, and for 36.1% - Russian culture (Nantoi et al., 2016: 18, 24). We find that although the vast majority of respondents identify themselves as part of the society from the Republic of Moldova, a good part considers the Republic of Moldova as part of the Russian world, almost all those questioned declared that they know the Russian language and only less than 17% know the state language. Although more than 2/3 consider interethnic relations to be friendly and peaceful, about the same percentage of respondents would prefer to live in the Eurasian Union, and 78.2% of those surveyed would prefer their children to emigrate to Russia (Brie and Solcan, 2025: 169-170).

In ATU Gagauzia, the primary identity reflects a balance between civic belonging to the Republic of Moldova and connection to the Gagauz regional identity. The latter often plays a more active and visible role in social and political life. The region's autonomous status and local political discourse, emphasizing differences from central authorities, reinforce a sense of belonging to the regional community, making citizens more receptive to identifying with the ATU Gagauzia.

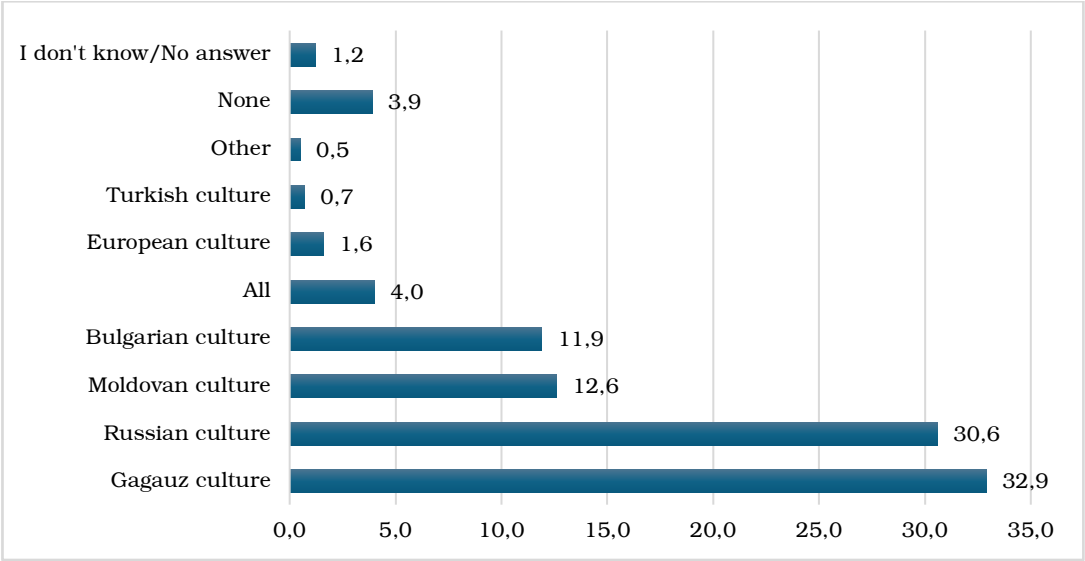
Figure 2: Primary identity in ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia district (%)

(Source: own drawing with information from the IPP, 2021: 9)

In 2021, 35.9% of residents identified themselves primarily as citizens of the Republic of Moldova, and 27.5% as citizens of ATU Gagauzia. This difference shows that civic belonging is formally recognized, but regional identity has a stronger impact on how people relate to their community, influenced by administrative autonomy and the messages of local leaders. Thus, regional identity becomes a clear benchmark for belonging, community solidarity, and distinct political choices, including skepticism towards European integration (IPP, 2021). Russian culture thus functions as a stable frame of reference, associated with continuity and security, while European culture appears more distant and inaccessible in the daily experiences of residents. This cultural configuration reinforces regional identity and encourages a reserved attitude towards European integration, while paving the way for the reception of political and media messages from the Russian Federation (Brie, 2025).

Cultural belonging in ATU Gagauzia reflects the tension between local values and external influences. Gagauz and Russian cultures are perceived as being similar by the population: 32.9% of respondents identify primarily with Gagauz culture, and 30.6% with Russian culture, while the connection with European culture remains weak. Affinity for Russian culture is not strictly determined by ethnic origin. Rather, it results from a long process of socialization and media coverage, which has integrated Russian values and symbols into the daily lives of its people.

Figure 3: *Belonging to the felt culture (2021)*

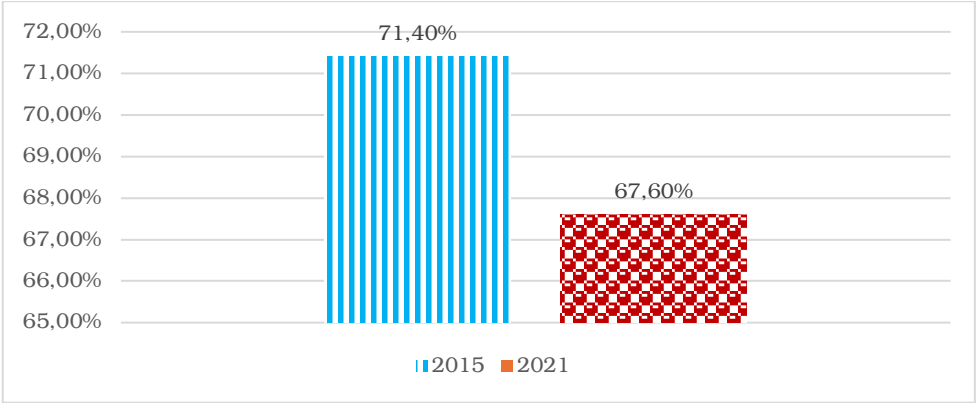


(Source: own drawing with information from the IPP, 2021: 10)

Attitudes toward the autonomous status of ATU Gagauzia show strong support for expanding local powers. In 2021, 56.9% of respondents believed that autonomy should be strengthened, while only 4% supported reducing it. The difference highlights a persistent distrust in the central authorities' ability to defend the region's interests.

For residents, autonomy is not just an administrative arrangement, but a mechanism for protecting local identity and political interests. In the context of external influences and strong regional political discourse, this perception can be used to challenge Moldova's European path and reaffirm the connection with local cultural values and symbols (Pleşca, 2024).

Figure 4: *Perception of integration into the society of the Republic of Moldova*

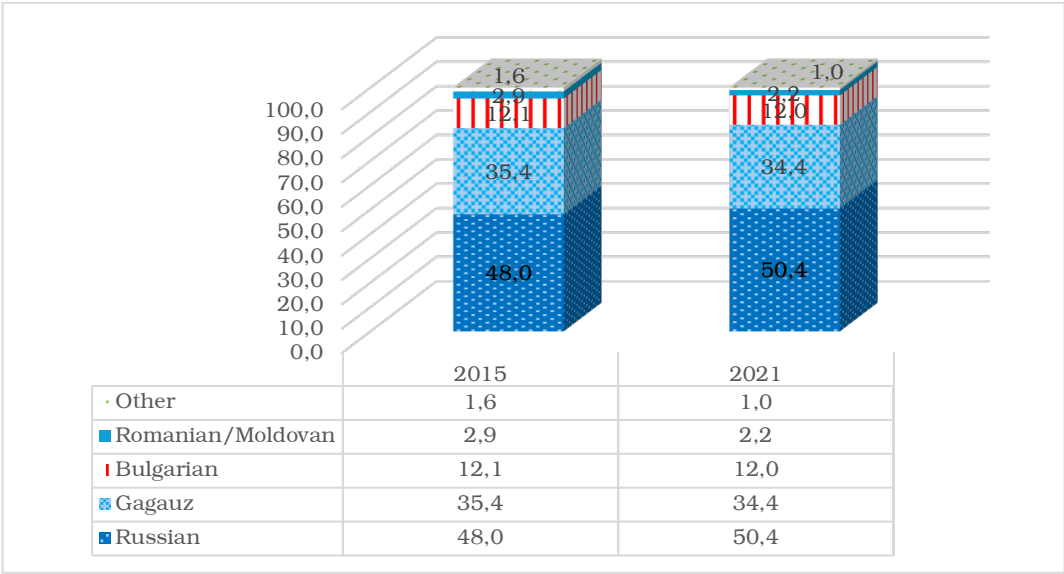


(Source: Source: own drawing with information from the IPP, 2021: 12)

Linguistic practices in ATU Gagauzia are directly integrated into the dynamics of regional and cultural identity. Just as cultural belonging and autonomy emphasize the community's connection to local values and external influences, the Russian language dominates the private sphere, reinforcing these connections. In 2021, 50.4% of respondents communicated predominantly in Russian at home, while only 2.2% used Romanian/Moldovan, highlighting the symbolic distance from the state's linguistic space and emphasizing the region's cultural autonomy.

The predominance of Russian facilitates access to Russian information and culture and limits direct contact with the public discourse of the central authorities and the European Union. As a result, language becomes not only an instrument of community cohesion, but also an indirect factor of geopolitical orientation, strengthening regional identity and maintaining cultural autonomy in relation to the state and the European path (IPP, 2021).

Figure 5: Language spoken at home (%)



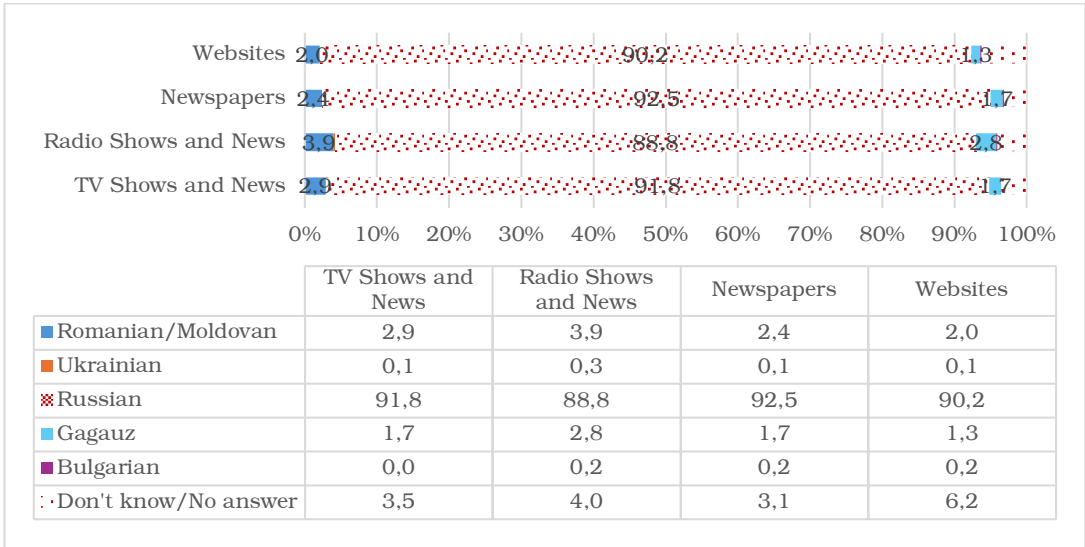
(Source: own drawing with information from the IPP, 2021: 13)

The predominant use of Russian in private life is also reflected in the way residents obtain information. In 2021, over 91% of respondents said they mainly access Russian-language media, while Romanian-language sources are used only marginally (IPP, 2021). Thus, the region is situated in an information space distinct from the national one, where narratives favorable to the Russian Federation become dominant.

Dependence on Russian-language media amplifies the community's informational vulnerability and contributes to maintaining Euroscepticism, especially in the context of the war in Ukraine. The lack of credible

alternatives in Russian or Gagauz limits access to pro-European perspectives and strengthens external influence on public opinion.

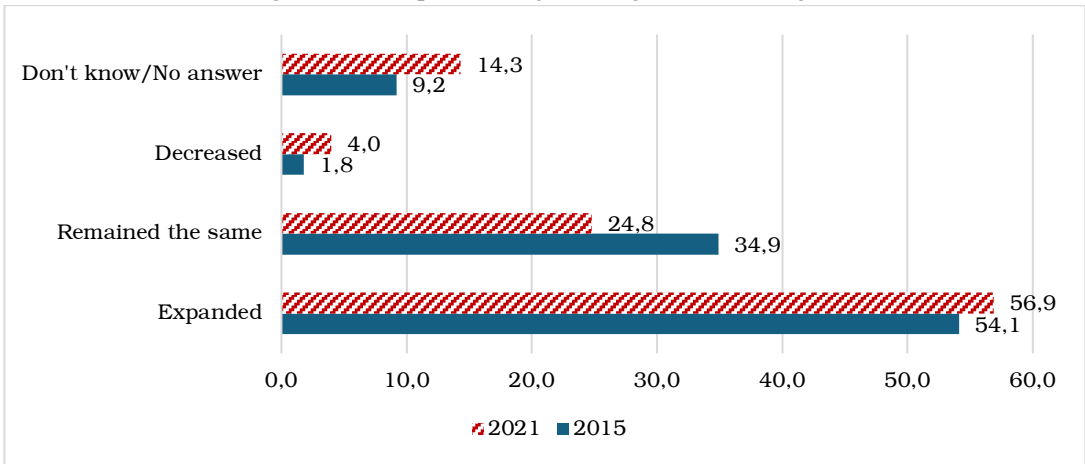
Figure 6: Language of information sources



(Source: own drawing with information from the IPP, 2021: 21)

In a space where Gagauz and Russian cultures predominate, the Russian language governs everyday life, and Russian-language media control the flow of information, autonomy becomes a tool through which the community retains control over its own destiny. In this way, the perception of autonomy can be used to challenge Moldova's European path and reaffirm its connection to regional values and symbols. For residents, autonomy is not just an administrative arrangement, but a mechanism for protecting local identity and political interests.

Figure 7: Competences of the Gagauz Autonomy



(Source: own drawing with information from the IPP, 2021: 24)

In this context, support for the autonomy of Gagauzia is easier to understand. In 2021, 56.9% of respondents believed that the powers of autonomy should be expanded, while only 4% supported their reduction. This preference reflects a structural distrust of the central authorities' ability to represent the region's interests and continues the logic of strengthening regional identity, visible in cultural affiliation, language, and media consumption.

Processing of data from the 2021 IPP survey within the project "*Moldova between East and West: Visions from Gagauzia and Taraclia*," funded by the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation, a project of the German Marshall Fund (USA), enabled the development of a comparative analysis of data from research conducted by IPP in 2011, 2015, and 2021.

Some conclusions reached by the authors after processing the obtained data: the primary identity of the residents of ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia district is uncertain, three primary identities are taking shape at the same time - civic, regional and local community, none of which is dominant; cultural identity in the researched regions is diffuse, bidirectional, respondents feeling belonging both to the culture of their own ethnicity and to Russian culture. Despite a fragmented identity and the lack of a dominant civic identity, civic duties are mostly accepted, however, the obligation to know the state language by the residents of ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia district is a less accepted civic duty (IPP, 2021). In comparison with the surveys carried out in 2011 and 2015, the authors note the following: since the 2011 survey, the share of those who know the state language has increased. Thus, the share of those who say they speak fluent Moldovan/Romanian has doubled (from 11.6%, in the 2011 survey, to 23.4% in 2021), and the share of those who say they speak Romanian fluently has increased from 9.7% in 2011 to 16.8% in 2021; linguistic realities also determine the consumption of media products in the researched regions, dominated by media production from the Russian Federation, and the specifics of the informational space, in turn, determine the political and geopolitical perceptions in ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia district (Brie and Solcan, 2025: 170).

Conclusion

ATU Gagauzia is a sensitive element in the political and institutional architecture of the Republic of Moldova, having a direct impact on social cohesion and state stability. The autonomous status has helped to avoid violent conflict, but has not led to deep societal integration of the Gagauz

community. The persistence of identity, linguistic, and geopolitical differences indicates a limited level of integration.

In this context, the relationship between the central and autonomous authorities is still defined by institutional and identity differences. These differences influence the extent to which the two levels of government cooperate. Meanwhile, the geopolitical orientations of the Gagauz community continue to diverge from those assumed at the national level. This discrepancy is reflected in the results of popular polls conducted in the region.

External factors exert a constant influence on local dynamics. The Russian Federation plays a significant role in the autonomous region's information space. At the same time, Turkey is present through cultural and economic initiatives. These influences contribute to maintaining a distinct regional profile. As a result, public integration policies have had a limited impact. Institutional dialogue between Chisinau and Comrat varies in intensity. The involvement of local civil society in integration processes remains low. The level of integration of the Gagauz community is influenced by political, cultural, and external factors.

Strengthening the relationship between Chisinau and Comrat requires functional cooperation mechanisms, respect for autonomy, and the promotion of inclusion. The integration of the Gagauz community is an essential condition for national security and the sustainability of Moldova's European path.

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