

Geopolitical Choice in Relation to Ethnic Identity. The Case of the Gagauz and Bulgarian Communities in the Republic of Moldova

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Abstract

The deliberate choice regarding the Republic of Moldova's strategic orientation toward future European integration has been neither a straightforward process nor one that achieved irreversibility during the subsequent decades. Republic of Moldova is situated on the border periphery of both the EU and NATO, while simultaneously remaining within a contested space of persistent Russian influence. The purpose of the research is to analyze a possible connection between the antagonistic dimension (East-West) of geopolitical options and public perceptions related to the identity dimension. This leads to a dimension of the evolution of public perception, seen both antagonistically by positioning itself in the proximity of a geopolitical fault that runs through Moldovan society and the diametrically opposite geopolitical positioning in relation to identity. In particular, through the specific objective we aim to verify whether the Gagauz and Bulgarian communities manifest distinct geopolitical preferences that diverge from the state's dominant external orientation. Furthermore, we investigate the potential development of discernible patterns in the shaping of public perceptions within the Republic of Moldova that are fundamentally linked to specific identity constructs.

Keywords

Republic of Moldova, ATU Gagauzia, Taraclia, identity; UE, Russia

1. Introduction and Methodology

Following the restoration of state independence in 1991, the Republic of Moldova has frequently experienced a pendular geopolitical trajectory oscillating between Eastern and Western spheres of influence. The deliberate choice regarding the country's strategic orientation toward future European integration has been neither a straightforward process

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nor one that achieved irreversibility during the subsequent decades. This specific geopolitical contextualization has engendered a distinct security reality: geographically, Republic of Moldova is situated on the border periphery of both the EU and NATO, while simultaneously remaining within a contested space of persistent Russian influence. The Russian Federation arguably exercises a de facto 'right of claim' over this territory by virtue of the Soviet legacy and historical spheres of interest.

Applying a historical analysis method to the evolution of public perceptions regarding the Republic of Moldova's geopolitical choices highlights a fundamental dual and antagonistic dynamic: these options emerge as existential dilemmas for a society situated on the geopolitical frontiers of the West and the East. The thematic and methodological framework employed in this study is grounded in the Realist paradigm of international relations theory. Republic of Moldova is conceptualized as positioned on the periphery of the Occident while concurrently existing within a contested sphere of Russian influence, over which the Russian Federation exerts control via both soft and hard power mechanisms. The inherent complexity of this analysis stems from the necessity of correlating these geopolitical preferences with specific identity affiliations and cleavages within Moldovan society.

The **purpose** of the research is to analyze a possible connection between the antagonistic dimension (East-West) of geopolitical options and public perceptions related to the identity dimension. This leads to a dimension of the evolution of public perception, seen both antagonistically by positioning itself in the proximity of a geopolitical fault that runs through Moldovan society and the diametrically opposite geopolitical positioning in relation to identity. Our **hypothesis** is that in the Republic of Moldova the choice of geopolitical preference was made in relation to the ethno-national, linguistic, cultural or religious identity group. Therefore, in this space we identify a geopolitical polarization and fragmentation generating border constructions in relation to identity. The validation of such a working hypothesis would suggest the existence of a profound identity cleavage that directly correlates with a divergence in geopolitical orientation. Specifically, a case study analysis of the evolution of public perceptions regarding external alignment preferences—including the potential for EU accession—within the Autonomous Territorial Unit (ATU) of Gagauzia and the Taraclia district can illustrate a rejection of European integration predicated primarily on identity considerations. This is evidenced by the predominant geopolitical preference among the Gagauz and Bulgarian populations in these regions for closer ties with the Russian Federation, largely irrespective of, or minimally influenced by, the tangible benefits derived from the broader EU rapprochement process.

In particular, through the **specific objective** we aim to verify whether the Gagauz and Bulgarian communities manifest distinct geopolitical preferences that diverge from the state's dominant external orientation. Furthermore, we investigate the potential development of discernible patterns in the shaping of public perceptions within the Republic of Moldova that are fundamentally linked to specific identity constructs. In this paper, the **research question** formulated is: *how did the identity cleavage influence the geopolitical choices of Gagauzians and Bulgarians in the Republic of Moldova?*

The analysis aims, under this report, to shape public perceptions regarding geopolitical options in relation to belonging to an identity community.

Methodologically, this analysis is instrumental not only for examining international relations and Republic of Moldova's geopolitical trajectory but also for elucidating the underlying sources of *societal insecurity*. This insecurity is manifest in a landscape where identity-based communities adopt divergent stances on matters of fundamental national interest, most notably the state's geopolitical orientation. The resulting *cleavage* is so pronounced that it constitutes a latent source of conflict, fostering diametrically opposed and uncompromising positions. Such a framework often precludes constructive dialogue, as the availability of reconciliatory discourse remains severely constrained by entrenched ideological and identity-driven antagonisms.

2. Conceptual Mapping and Problem Statement. Literature Review

The European Union's restrained commitment to the integration of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) states was discernible from the program's inception. Prior to late 2023, the EU consistently refrained from extending an explicit accession perspective to the six partner nations. Despite frequent high-level political rhetoric of support, these declarations lacked binding guarantees, institutional commitments, or definitive timelines (Brie, 2025). The constraints of this engagement were particularly evident during the 2011 Warsaw Summit. Although the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine had demonstrated substantial reform progress, the summit's outcome underscored the presence of significant geopolitical and political thresholds. This stance was articulated by the then Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, who noted that while these states harbored legitimate European aspirations, the necessary conditions for a clear membership outlook had yet to be consolidated, thereby deferring further integrationist advancements (EaP Summit, 2011).

In the post-2014 geopolitical landscape, it has become increasingly evident that the conventional model of sectoral reform—predicated solely on the implementation of EU policies and the adoption of the *acquis communautaire*—is no longer a sufficient catalyst for enlargement. The shifting security paradigm suggests that technical alignment must now be inextricably linked with broader geopolitical imperatives and the stabilization of the Eastern flank, transcending the traditional framework of external governance. The European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), as it was conceived, no longer corresponds to geopolitical realities. It suffices to recall that the ENP had long been seen as a kind of "antechamber" for the enlargement of the European Union. Forced to take into account a complex combination of factors, the EU is not taking any chances/nor can it afford to promise accession to the EaP states. This situation is conditioned by a confluence of external geopolitical pressures and internal European Union dynamics. Regarding the latter, the momentum for further integration has significantly eroded following the successive enlargement waves of 2004, 2007, and 2013, giving way to a period of pronounced *enlargement fatigue*. Consequently, many member states have exhibited increasing reluctance toward further expansion. This cautious stance was exacerbated by the global financial and economic crises, which compelled the Union to prioritize *internal consolidation* and domestic policy challenges over the strategic imperative of territorial growth. „The need for institutional reform, but also the increasingly complicated geopolitical context (the conflict in Ukraine; the situation in the Middle East and North Africa; the refugee/immigrant crisis; trade tensions and the paradigm shifts in US foreign and security policy that marked Donald Trump's presidency, etc.) are likely to further complicate this picture. Last but not least, another vulnerability of the EU common policies regarding the neighborhood, visible also in the period after the Riga Summit, is given by the security dimension in the ENP approach” (Brie, 2025: 89-90). This proves to be insufficiently clear and not correlated with the current geopolitical situation, security thus proving to be a "weak point" (Gogolashvili, 2015: 18) on the agenda of the European neighborhood (Bărbulescu *et al.*, 2016: 110-111). The Russian invasion of Ukraine that began in February 2022 confirmed the blockages and shortcomings of the EaP, but also the limits of the guarantees that the EU could have given to the EaP states (Brie, 2022; Brie, Costea, and Toderaş, 2025).

The general geopolitical context and Russia's opposition to Euro-Atlantic expansion to the East, in particular, have shaped the policies of the Eastern Partnership member states since the beginning of this EU initiative. Systemic Russian interventions—manifested through the 2008 conflict in Georgia and the protracted aggression against Ukraine,

beginning with the 2014 annexation of Crimea and escalating into the full-scale military invasion of February 24, 2022—have fundamentally reshaped the regional security architecture. These actions were inextricably linked to the strategic co-option of the Lukashenko regime in Belarus and the deliberate maintenance of a protracted instability within the Transnistrian region. Collectively, these maneuvers illustrate a broader strategy of maintaining contested sovereignties across the post-Soviet space to impede Western integration.

The Republic of Moldova's pro-European trajectory is formalised through its application for EU membership, the subsequent attainment of candidate status, and the landmark official opening of accession negotiations on June 25, 2024, during the first intergovernmental conference (European Council, 2024). This process, however, remains profoundly complex, as Chişinău must navigate a volatile regional security landscape shaped by the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war. Furthermore, Republic of Moldova's European path is complicated by Moscow's multifaceted support for the Transnistrian region and the ATU Gagauzia, factors that continue to serve as instruments of geopolitical pressure.

At a conceptual level, *identity constructions*—while often positioned on the same analytical plane—carry distinct and multifaceted connotations. Regardless of the scale of reference (*European, national, or sub-national*), identity persists as a primary mode of expression within the public sphere, often operating in tension with universalist trends of globalization and value homogenization. In this globalized landscape, *ethno-religious identity markers* are not merely preserved but are actively amplified through digital and transnational channels. Consequently, we observe a dual phenomenon: the multiplication of global norms is met by an equally potent resurgence of the particular and the specific (Brie, 2016: 380). A fundamental characteristic of the state constructions of the nation-state type in Eastern Europe is their permanent lack of *legitimacy* or, rather, their incomplete legitimacy. By identifying the state with a single national identity, the other national communities inevitably found themselves outside of this legitimation process, which constituted *a fundamental source of inter-ethnic tension*. This reality led to the sacralization of state territory considered *national territory* (Gabor 2011: 118-128) (the rightful property of a single nation/nationality!), and the cultural-historical philosophy is to delegitimize as much as possible the contribution of other national communities (Brie and Blaga, 2015: 255-273; Brie and Solcan, 2025).

On the other hand, in the Republic of Moldova, „religious affiliation is deeply intertwined with politics, national identity, and collective belonging, not just individual spirituality. Orthodoxy functions as a symbolic public

good that political actors and parties use to anchor broader socio-political projects” (Putină, 2011b; Putină: 2025; Sprinceană, 2013). The public relevance of religious institutions is deeply embedded within the country's *fragmented national identity*. This landscape, marked by historical and geopolitical fault lines, generates antagonistic discourses regarding national orientation and the very nature of *sovereign identity* (Baar and Jakubek, 2017). These particularisms, which occasionally manifest as *radical nationalism* or *ethno-religious frictions*, gain traction across vast geographic distances. Concurrently, the nation-state, traditionally anchored to a defined territory, has not only withstood the pressures of a 'global society' but has demonstrated a resilient capacity to serve as a primary locus of affiliation. While *identity globalization* appears more pervasive in urban-industrial centers, rural environments—characterized by rich intangible heritage and cultural traditions—often exhibit significant resistance to homogenization. Thus, *local and national-cultural identities* remain most robustly preserved within agrarian contexts and in spatial proximity to significant cultural and historical sites (Brie, 2021).

Amidst a complex international landscape marked by external pressures, the Republic of Moldova—a candidate for EU accession—is actively pursuing political, economic, and institutional reforms to harmonize national standards with European benchmarks (Orjuhovschi and Brie, 2025; Brie, 2025). Simultaneously, the strategic influence of the Russian Federation within the post-Soviet space remains a decisive factor for the country's domestic security and stability. The geopolitical landscape presents significant complexities, further exacerbated by the internal socio-political climates. Specifically, the Republic of Moldova must navigate not only the aspirations of the majority but also the profound *identity cleavages* embedded within its society. These realities carry substantial political weight, having been historically shaped by *Russian malign influence* and interference. Such involvement manifests through the orchestration of certain political factions, the instrumentalization of sections of the *Orthodox Church*, and the enduring direct or indirect control exerted over a significant portion of the *media landscape* over recent decades.

The evolution of the situation in the ATU Gagauzia is very complex, particularly in political and identity-related terms. The construction of Gagauz identity is inherently embedded within the post-Soviet geopolitical landscape, a space where the Russian Federation instrumentalizes cultural, religious, and linguistic markers as levers of strategic influence (Vintilă, 2025: 144). The Gagauz community has consistently functioned as a borderland community. This reality stems

largely from its often-contested positioning between Bulgarian, Turkish, and, more recently, Russian identities claimed by members of the community. Religion constitutes a fundamental pillar in the articulation of Gagauz identity, functioning concurrently as an expression of spiritual devotion and a pivotal geopolitical marker. As a Turkic-speaking yet Eastern Orthodox population, the Gagauz represent a singular synthesis within the Eurasian continuum, effectively merging an Eastern cultural heritage with Byzantine spiritual traditions (Vintilă, 2025: 146). Beyond the debates surrounding their origins, the identity of the Gagauz people has undergone significant shifts across various historical stages that have shaped their existence. Over time, this community has increasingly transformed into a Russophile one, systematically supported by Moscow. „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” (Vintilă, 2025: 148). From Moscow's perspective, ATU 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). 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). According to Goltsov (2020), Russia's projection of power is mediated by historical narratives rather than conventional military presence. Consequently, the post-Soviet landscape is redefined: it ceases to be a collection of lost provinces and instead functions as a network of identity-based enclaves where Russian cultural and historical consciousness remains a primary vector of influence.

Although not very numerous (according to the 2004 census, it had 147,500 members, of whom 127,835 lived in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia), this community stands out for the importance it had in the history of Bessarabia (NBSRM, 2024a). According to the 2014 census, 134,535 inhabitants lived in the ATUG, of which 112,387 were Gagauz (NBSRM, 2024b).

ATU Gagauzia and the Taraclia district, as sub-national entities with distinct ethno-cultural identities, constitute pivotal determinants of Republic of Moldova's internal dynamics. These regions significantly modulate both social cohesion and political stability (Putină, 2011a). Critical variables, such as the degree of societal integration, prevailing public perceptions, and entrenched external affiliations—particularly long-standing path-dependent economic and historical ties with the Russian Federation—collectively influence the trajectory of state consolidation and the country's strategic alignment with the European Union (Goreainov and Brie, 2018). „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” (Putină, 2012; Orjuhovschi and Brie, 2025: 54).

The Republic of Moldova exhibits a profound geopolitical polarization and fragmentation, which catalyze the emergence of *identity-based symbolic borders* (Brie, 2016; Brie, 2021). Within this framework, geopolitical preferences are systematically correlated with ethno-national, linguistic, cultural, or religious affiliations. This reality—serving as a pivotal working hypothesis—portrays Republic of Moldova as a society characterized by chronic societal insecurity, wherein identity-defined communities adopt divergent and often antagonistic stances. The depth of this cleavage is such that it constitutes a latent source of conflict and irreconcilable positioning.

Consequently, a distinct pattern emerges: ethnic Russians or Russophone identifiers (categories between which a rigorous analytical distinction must be maintained) predominantly favor a geopolitical orientation toward the Russian Federation and its institutional alternatives. Conversely, citizens who increasingly embrace a Romanian identity (defined through both ethnic lineage and, more significantly, linguistic affinity) demonstrate an escalating commitment to the country's European integration trajectory (Brie, 2023). Mirroring the broader post-Soviet experience, the Republic of Moldova has undergone a complex process of dual identity-building, encompassing both ethno-

national and civic-national dimensions. This trajectory, however, has been consistently impeded by deep-seated identity particularities that have fostered significant institutional and social resistance (Brie and Solcan, 2025: 159).

Further scholarly attention is required to identify specific behavioral patterns arising from the *identity fragmentation* inherent in Moldovan society. Such an analysis may reveal profound societal ruptures, particularly when these cleavages transcend socio-political or educational spheres to acquire distinct *communitarian-identity dimensions*. Consequently, this study examines whether Russophone (both ethno-national and linguistic), Bulgarian, and Gagauz communities prioritize an exclusive alignment with the Russian Federation, perceiving European integration as an *existential threat*. Such a reality would not only jeopardize Republic of Moldova's European trajectory but could also constitute a significant challenge to *national security*, extending beyond social equilibrium to affect the state's fundamental stability.

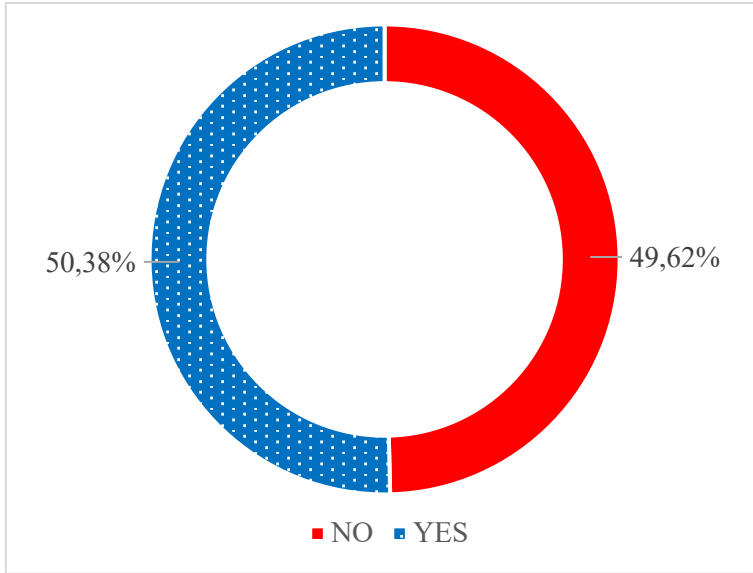
3. Shaping the Perception Regarding the Geopolitical Choice of the Republic of Moldova Among the Gagauz and Bulgarian Community

Our previous research led to the conclusion that in Moldovan society there is not only a political fragmentation, but also an identity-based one regarding preferences about the geopolitical orientation of the state's foreign policy.

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 (Orjuhovschi and Brie, 2025: 69).

In the referendum held on October 20, 2024, regarding the inclusion of the objective of the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU in the Constitution, 50.35% voted in favor (Brie, Costea, and Toderaş, 2025: 68). This confirms the polarization and geopolitical fragmentation at the national level. This reality may have other explanations than those related to the community-identity dimension. This fragmentation is social, economic, political, but from our point of view it is also identity-related.

Figure 1: *Do you support amending the Constitution in order to join the Republic of Moldova to the European Union?*



(Source: author's elaboration based on data CEC RM, 2026)

The central focus of this research transcends the mere quantitative division of the vote regarding EU integration. Our findings suggest that the recent electoral outcomes represent more than a political preference; they signify a profound geopolitical realignment. Within Moldovan society, we identify a persistent geopolitical fault line, wherein the citizenry is bifurcated between Western and Eastern orientations.

Of particular analytical interest is the established correlation between these geopolitical preferences and the identity profiles of the electorate. Our core premise posits that specific identity-based communities resist EU accession not merely on policy grounds, but as a direct manifestation of their communitarian affiliation. In this context, geopolitical choice becomes an extension of an entrenched ethno-cultural and linguistic identity.

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).

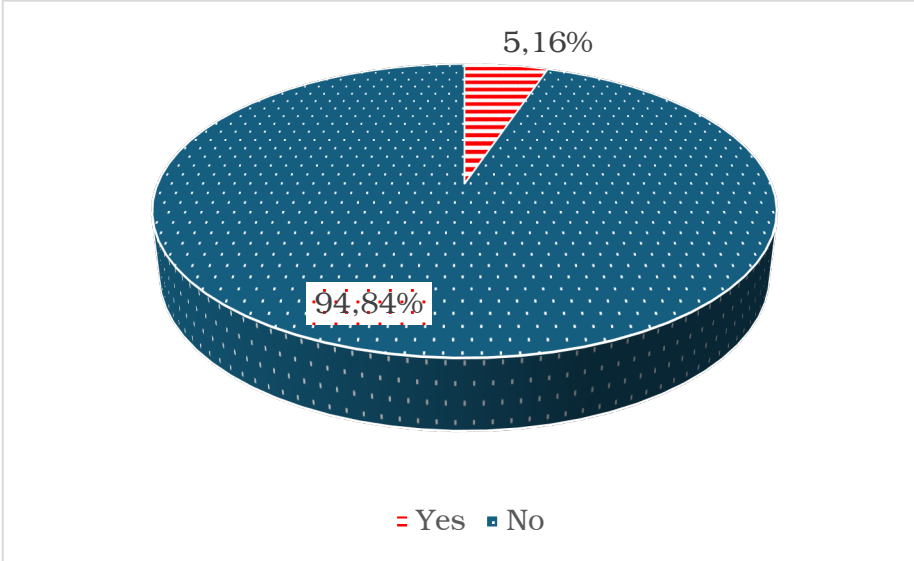
Based on the complexity of the analysis conducted by the IPP as part of the project “Moldova between East and West: views from ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia,” we would like to analyze the options for internal and external integration, as well as their attitude towards various international partners.

Within the logic of the announced methodology, given the identification of diametrically opposed perceptions regarding geopolitical options as strategic directions of the state, namely a major East-West geopolitical cleavage that involves substantial segments of the population, it becomes necessary to deepen the analysis toward identifying models and behavioral patterns related to the identity-based fragmentation of society in the Republic of Moldova. Such an analysis may reveal, at the societal level in the Republic of Moldova, the existence of cleavages and fractures in geopolitical options determined by a societal dimension. This reality is confirmed insofar as this cleavage acquires identity-communitarian nuances, not merely political-social or cultural-educational ones. As previously stated, we therefore seek to examine whether Russian, Bulgarian, and Gagauz communities have primarily expressed an interest in exclusive rapprochement with the Russian Federation and perceive rapprochement with the European Union as an existential threat. A comprehensive analysis that includes the behavior and geopolitical perceptions of ethnic Russians and of Gagauz or Bulgarians is difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, answers may be obtained through direct references or databases/research focusing primarily on regions in which these groups constitute the majority of the population.

In our research, we aim to conduct an analysis of the voting behavior of residents of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia in the referendum on the constitutional amendment held on 20 October 2024. Subsequently, at a secondary level, we conduct a case study drawing on the IPP database, which conducted complex sociological studies of ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia, territories predominantly inhabited by Gagauz and Bulgarians. The case study will help us identify possible patterns in the public perceptions of the identity-based community groups of ethnic Gagauz and Bulgarians. The purpose is to confirm the premise that certain

ethnic groups (the Gagauz and Bulgarians, in our case) choose the geopolitical option of rapprochement with the Russian Federation and reject rapprochement with the European Union based on reasons stemming from identity-based communal behavior. Confirmation of this hypothesis would point to the image of an identity-fragmented society in the Republic of Moldova, in which ethno-national and linguistic groups hold different, indeed, diametrically opposed geopolitical options.

Figure 2: *Vote in the referendum to amend the Constitution in view of EU accession in the Gagauz Autonomous Region (October 20, 2024)*

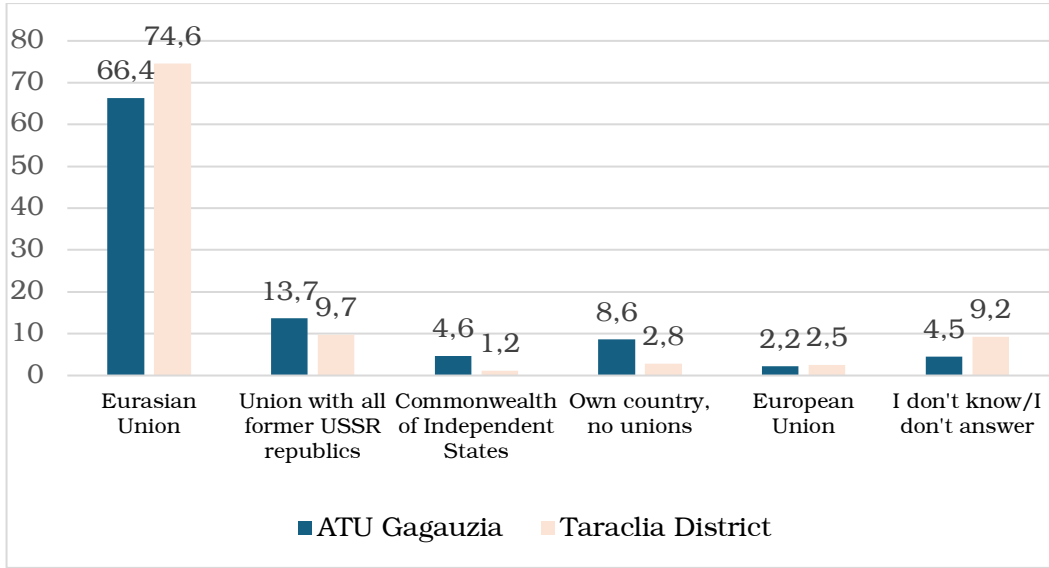


(Source: author's elaboration based on data CEC RM, 2026)

From a methodological perspective, our hypothesis can be tested more clearly within the compact Gagauz communities of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia. In this case, the identity boundary revealed through the expression of geopolitical preferences becomes even more pronounced: in ATU Gagauzia, only 5.16% of voters supported accession to the European Union. Thus, out of a total of 57,847 valid votes cast, only 2,985 were in favor of amending the Constitution to enable EU accession, while 54,862 voters opposed this initiative (CEC RM, 2026).

The conclusion is unequivocal: the Gagauz population overwhelmingly rejects the idea of accession to the European Union, a stance accompanied by a strong preference for geopolitical rapprochement with the Russian Federation.

Figure 3: Preferences of residents of ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia District regarding a possible union (%) (2015)



(Source: author's elaboration based on data IPP, 2015; Nantoi et al., 2016: 35)

The data from the sociological research conducted by IPP in 2015 indicate, as can be observed in the preceding chart, an overwhelming inclination among ethnic Gagauz in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, as well as among Bulgarians and Gagauz in Taraclia District. Regardless of the name of the union or organization, support for a geopolitical alignment centered around the Russian Federation is very high reaching approximately 85% in both regional administrative units (with the difference that Bulgarians in Taraclia show a higher share of “don’t know/no answer” responses). The option of belonging to the European Union is extremely limited in both communities, a fact that once again demonstrates the very strong ties with Russia inherited from the Soviet period.

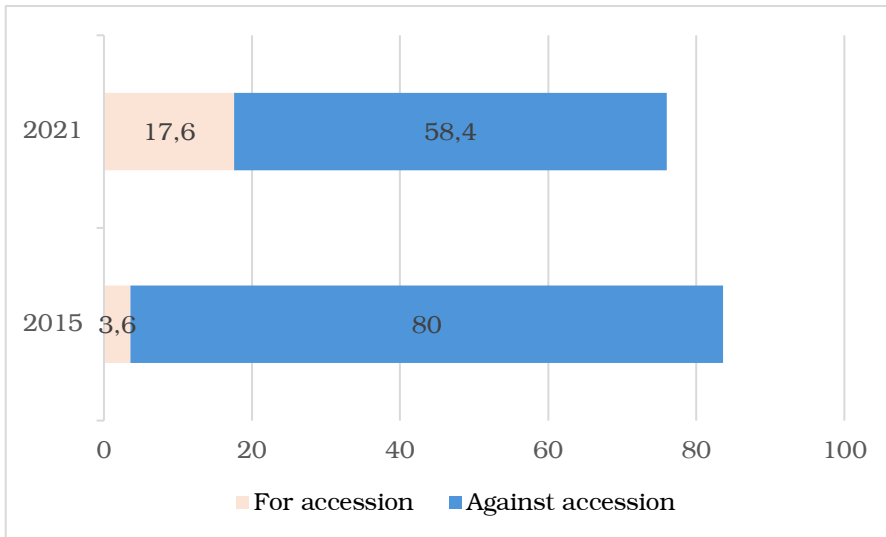
Even though these figures reflecting such low levels of inclination toward the EU may seem difficult to accept given the broader context and the evolution of relations with the European Union (among other factors, EU-funded projects have been implemented in the region), the survey data were nevertheless confirmed by the reality recorded during the referendum of 20 October 2024, when only 5.16% of voters in ATU Gagauzia chose the option of EU accession.

By 2021, however, the situation had changed, indicating that the Republic of Moldova’s progress within the Eastern Partnership framework, together along with its efforts and increasingly strong ties with the EU, led to an increase up to 17.6% in those who selected the EU as their preferred option for external integration (while no less than 58.4% would vote against

EU integration). By comparison, the Eurasian Economic Union is preferred by 42.9%. Notably, in 2021 there was also a high proportion of respondents who opposed integration into the Eurasian Union (37%).

When the attitudes of Gagauz and Bulgarians toward external partners were measured, a clear preference emerged for the Russian Federation (over 90% reporting very good or good attitudes) and for the Eurasian Economic Union (60% reporting very good or good attitudes). Although positive and very positive attitudes toward the European Union amount to 51.5%, the data nonetheless reveal a substantial share of respondents who hold negative or very negative attitudes toward it (33.4%).

Figure 4: Voting option in the event of a referendum on EU accession in ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia District (%)

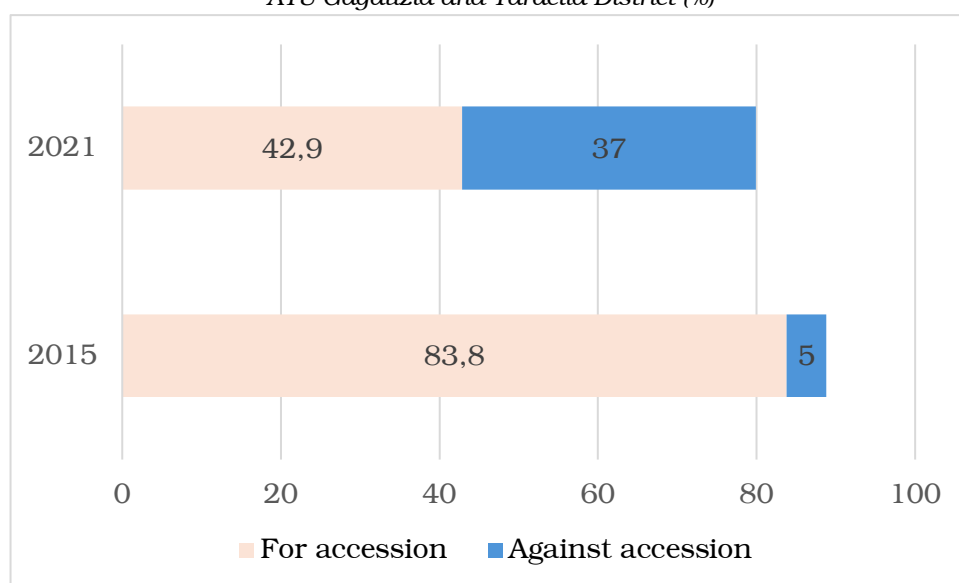


Note: the remaining percentages are: „I don't know”/„I don't answer”
(Source: author's elaboration based on data IPP, 2015, 2021)

Voting preferences in the case of the referendum on accession to the European Union (measured separately from accession to the Eurasian Union) reveal the same trend previously observed with regard to preferences and attitudes toward external partners. Thus, the EU's position improves in the geopolitical perceptions and preferences of Gagauz and Bulgarians. From 3.6% in 2015, the share of respondents who would vote in favor of EU accession increased to 17.6% in 2021 (this trend, however, was not confirmed in the 2024 referendum although it is possible that the broader geopolitical and domestic political context following the outbreak of Russia's invasion of Ukraine led to a reversal of the trend recorded during the 2015-2021 period).

In the case of a hypothetical referendum on accession to the Eurasian Union, the same trend is observed: among Gagauz and Bulgarians, public perceptions appear to be reshaped toward the early development of a more positive view of the EU, alongside a decline in support for potential accession to the organization led by the Russian Federation. Whereas in 2015, 83.8% of the population would have voted in favor of accession to the Eurasian Union, this statistic declined to 42.9% by 2021. This decrease can be attributed both to a substantial increase in those who would vote against joining the union (37%) and to a rise in the number of undecided respondents.

Figure 5: Voting option in the event of a referendum for accession to the Eurasian Union in the ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia District (%)

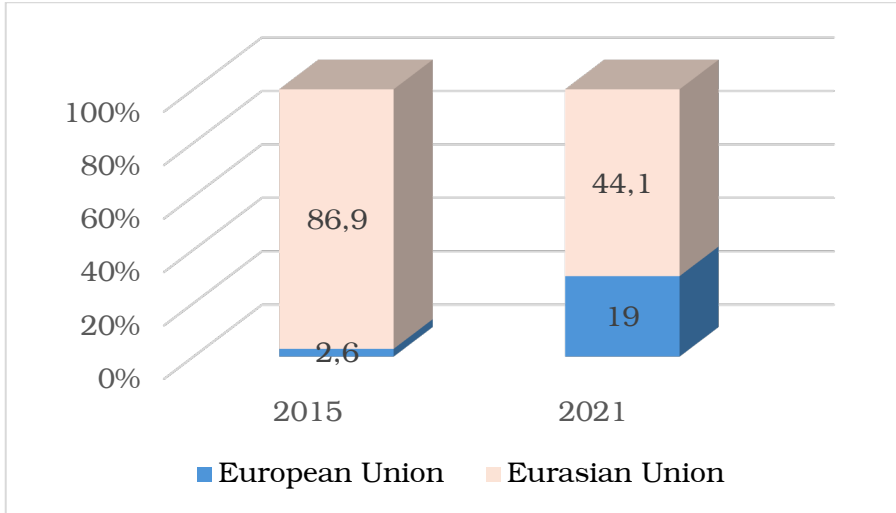


Note: the remaining percentages are: „I don't know”/„I don't answer”
(Source: author's elaboration based on data IPP, 2015, 2021)

IPP also measured external orientation preferences, which allows us to observe and analyze options expressed through an exclusive choice, eliminating the possibility of selecting both of the tested alternatives as preferred options. Moreover, respondents are placed in a situation that requires a more categorical choice, and the results can more clearly illustrate potential associations anticipated in relation to ethno-national and cultural-linguistic identity. The outcome of such a joint measurement of external preferences can contribute to clarifying analyses aimed at testing our hypothesis that, in the Republic of Moldova, there exists a cleavage in the choice of geopolitical options between these Gagauz and Bulgarian communities in the south and the majority option expressed by the Moldovan/Romanian community in the rest of the country. Evidently, as in

the case of the Transnistrian region, the Russian or Russian-speaking community displays a consistent inclination toward pro-Russian and anti-European options.

Figure 6: Voting option in the event of a referendum with the possibility of choosing between joining the EU or the Eurasian Union in the ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia District (%)



Note: the remaining percentages are: „I don't know”/„I don't answer”

(Source: author's elaboration based on data IPP, 2015, 2021)

Support for EU accession in case of a referendum was very low in 2015 (2.6%), highlighting a correlation with the separate measurement of this option (the decrease was only 1% when measured jointly with the pro-Eurasian Union option). This could suggest that citizens who favor the pro-EU option hold more crystallized views, however, given the very small numbers involved, such an interpretation must be treated with caution. More pronounced, however, are the dilemmas reflected in preferences for accession to either of the two unions in 2021 (19% in favor of EU accession and 44.1% in favor of accession to the Eurasian Union). Nevertheless, as in the categorical pattern observed in 2015, the Gagauz community in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia and the Bulgarian and Gagauz communities in Taraclia continue to show a stronger preference for accession to the Eurasian Union.

4. Conclusion

The evolution of public perceptions in the Republic of Moldova between 2009 and 2024 has highlighted a process of shaping in relation to domestic political realities, the geopolitical context, the level of political rapprochement with the European Union or the Russian Federation, the tangible outcomes of the Eastern Partnership particularly the

implementation of the Association Agreements as well as in accordance with the demographic structure of the population of the Republic of Moldova. The results of our research on public perceptions regarding EU accession, incorporating the identity component into the analysis, align with expectations and confirm our research hypothesis: public perceptions related to geopolitical orientation have been shaped primarily by identity fragmentation, rather than solely by other forms of fragmentation and polarization based on political, socio-economic, residential, or educational criteria.

The main conclusion is that Moldovan society is geopolitically polarized along ethnic and linguistic identity lines. Thus, Moldovan citizens of Russian ethnicity or Russian-speaking citizens, as well as Gagauz and Bulgarians, tend to prefer closer relations with the Russian Federation in terms of the Republic of Moldova's external orientation. The findings point not only to the existence of clearly delineated identity boundaries within Moldovan society, but also to the presence of an identity cleavage characterized by antagonistic and divergent positioning with respect to East-West geopolitical options. This cleavage has the potential to acquire conflictual dimensions. This reality reaffirms the premise that, in the Republic of Moldova, there exists a source of societal insecurity that may be geopolitically exploited by both internal and external actors.

Against the backdrop of this cleavage within Moldovan society, and despite current progress and firmly taken decisions in favor of closer integration with the European Union, the reversible nature of the Republic of Moldova's geopolitical choice of rapprochement with EU structures is once again confirmed. At any time, in the context of a changing international environment or amid socio-economic and political upheavals, a pro-Russian and anti-European government may come to power, and European integration may be suspended or even removed from the state's foreign policy agenda.

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