

Deconstructing the (geo)political identity of the Gagauz: Why is the quadratic nexus out of tune?

LIBOR JELEN

Charles University, Faculty of Science, Department of Social Geography and Regional Development, Prague, Czechia; e-mail: libor.jelen@natur.cuni.cz

ABSTRACT This article examines the formation of geopolitical and ethnic identity in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia in Moldova through the lens of constructivist nationalism theories, critical geopolitics, and Smith's concept of the quadratic nexus. Based on 12 semi-structured interviews conducted across the political, media, educational, and business sectors, the study demonstrates the existence of a deep "identity paradox" in which ethnic Turkic identity is decoupled from geopolitical orientation. Despite strong cultural and historical ties to Turkey and significant economic support from the European Union, Gagauz society remains predominantly oriented toward Russia. The article argues that pro-Russian geopolitical identity functions as a defensive mechanism protecting the ethnic boundary against perceived assimilation by the Moldovan state. The findings challenge the deterministic assumptions of the quadratic nexus by showing that external normative and economic incentives are filtered through historical trauma, motivated reasoning, and geopolitical stratigraphy actively reproduced by sub-state political elites and the Russian-speaking media space.

KEY WORDS Gagauzia – Moldova – geopolitical identity – ethnic identity – quadratic nexus – Russkiy mir

JELEN, L. (2026): Deconstructing the (geo)political identity of the Gagauz: Why is the quadratic nexus out of tune? *Geografie*, 131, 3, 223–245.
<https://doi.org/10.37040/geografie.2026.012>
Received May 2026, accepted June 2026.

1. Introduction

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the process of formation and transformation of national, ethnic, and geopolitical identities in the post-Soviet space has represented one of the most intense subjects of academic interest within political geography, ethnographic studies, and international relations (for a literature review see Jelen, Kopeček, Lepič 2026). The collapse of the centralized Soviet empire did not only trigger an institutional and economic transition, but also unleashed deeply frozen socio-cultural processes. The original Soviet nationality policy, which for decades systematically aimed to create an anational, secularized, and ideologically unified civic identity in the form of the “Soviet person” (*sovetskiy chelovek*), failed to eliminate ethnic interests (Dostál 1989, Friedgut 1992, Gitelman 1992). As the dramatic developments at the end of the 1980s demonstrated, the institutional architecture of Soviet federalism to some extent preserved ethnic identities and prepared the ground for their explosive political mobilization (Gleason 1990, Kaiser 1994, Tishkov 1996). The moment Gorbachev’s reforms of *glasnost* and *perestroika* weakened the repressive apparatus of the center, ethnic nationalism became the primary political program for both the titular nations of the union republics and specific sub-state national minorities (Connor 1992, Beissinger 1992). These groups began to feverishly search for and redefine their geopolitical, cultural, and civilizational anchoring in the newly emerging independent states, which often led to a deep fragmentation of the nascent political communities.

A textbook yet still insufficiently explored example of this complex transformation, internal hybridity, and permanent clash of identity narratives is the Republic of Moldova. Since gaining sovereignty, the political and discursive environment of Moldova has been defined by a deep polarization that paralyzes its state-building project. Society and political elites are structurally split along a line oscillating between a pro-Western, Europeanizing direction of the country (often linked to a pan-Romanian cultural narrative) and a defensive inclination toward the post-Soviet geopolitical space, personified by the concept of the “Russian World” (*Russkij mir*). While at the national level we have witnessed a gradual, albeit fragile, consolidation of pro-European political forces over the past decade – as demonstrated by the results of the presidential and parliamentary elections between 2020 and 2025 – at the regional level Moldova exhibits extreme divergence (Baar, Jakubek 2017; Kosienkowski 2021; O’Loughlin, Toal, Chamberlain-Creangă 2013; Simionov 2023; Roper 2001).

A specific and highly anomalous phenomenon in this regard is the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia (ATUG), located in the south of the country. The Gagauz represent a fascinating entity: they are a Turkic people who, however, profess Orthodox Christianity and use Russian as their main language of communication. In the early 1990s, Gagauzia went through a phase of radical ethno-political

mobilization and declared a *de facto* independent republic, thereby becoming a prelude to the bloodier conflict in Transnistria. Unlike Transnistria, however, the tension in the south was successfully resolved peacefully in 1994 through the granting of broad, constitutionally guaranteed territorial autonomy (King 1997, Zabarah 2012). From the perspective of liberal ethnic reconciliation theory, this step was supposed to lead to the gradual integration of the minority into the structures of the modernizing Moldovan state.

Over the past three decades, the European Union, the Council of Europe, and other Western donors have invested massive financial and normative capital into the infrastructure, civic society, and economic development of Moldova and as well Gagauzia (Morar, Dembińska 2021; Całus, Kosienkowski 2018). The assumption was clear: socio-economic modernization under Western guidance was meant to transform the loyalty of the minority (Kymlicka 2018). However, the reality of 2026 points to the failure of this linear assumption. No identity conversion with the majority society or internalization of pro-European values occurred among the Gagauz population or their political representatives. On the contrary, with Chisinau's growing pressure toward Europeanization and the escalation of the geopolitical conflict in Eastern Europe, Gagauzia has transformed into a rigid, pro-Russian bastion. Today, Gagauz elites openly rely on Turkey's economic aid and EU development funds, yet politically, culturally, and civilizationally they turn their eyes exclusively toward Moscow (Holsapple 2023, Kosienkowski 2021).

This obvious and deepening contradiction between material reality (Western and Turkic financial support) and the ideological, discursive anchoring (pro-Russian geopolitical identity) reveals fundamental theoretical and empirical gaps in existing social science research on ethno-political conflicts. Current models fail to satisfactorily explain why a minority rejects rational economic incentives for integration and chooses a strategy of geopolitical resistance.

The primary objective of this article is to deconstruct the (geo)political identity of the Gagauz at both the micro and macro levels and to analyze the structural tensions between their ethnic identity and geopolitical orientation. To integrate the theoretical framework with the empirical findings and conclusions, the study addresses three research questions:

1. How does Gagauz ethnic identity respond to the assimilatory pressures exerted by the central state, and how are historical traumas (the so-called maps of pain) activated in this interaction?
2. What is the relationship between the pragmatic economic dimension (the utilization of Western financial assistance) and the rigid pro-Russian cultural-historical dimension within the minority's geopolitical stratigraphy?
3. Why do the normative and economic influences of international institutions fail to produce the expected outcomes, resulting in a divergence from the theoretical predictions of the quadratic nexus model?

To guide the empirical analysis, the study formulates three analytical propositions:

- A. The decoupling proposition: Among the Gagauz, ethnic origin has become anomalously detached from geopolitical identity. Pro-Russian orientation is not an exclusive attribute of ethnic Russians but functions as a distinctively Barthian shield protecting the ethnic boundary against perceived assimilation by Chişinău.
- B. The cognitive filters proposition: External normative and material incentives provided by the European Union and Turkey do not foster minority integration. Instead, they are reinterpreted through the cognitive filters of historical memory and motivated reasoning as existential threats, thereby reinforcing a defensive pro-Russian orientation.
- C. The sub-state brokerage proposition: This identity paradox, together with the persistent fear of assimilation, is actively maintained and instrumentalized by sub-state political brokers and a heavily saturated pro-Russian media environment in order to preserve their political dominance.

Addressing these objectives not only enables a reassessment of existing structural models by incorporating an overlooked bottom-up perspective but also provides a theoretical foundation for future comparative research on other atypical Russophile minorities across the post-Soviet space.

2. Theoretical framework: Geopolitical identity and the quadratic nexus

2.1. *The limits of the quadratic nexus concept in the post-Soviet space*

For a theoretical understanding of the dynamics of relations between ethnic minorities, majority societies, and external actors in the post-communist studies, the conceptual model of the so-called *triadic nexus* developed by Rogers Brubaker (1995) was dominant. That viewed ethnopolitics as a dynamic field of constant negotiation, tension, and interaction among three distinct actors: (1) the *nation-alizing state*, meaning a newly emerged or restored state whose political elites attempt to assert the cultural, linguistic, and political hegemony of the titular nation; (2) the *national minority*, which perceives this pressure as an existential threat and mobilizes to defend its identity; and (3) the *external national homeland* (or *kin-state*), which shares an ethnic origin with the minority and declares itself its legitimate international protector (Brubaker 1995, 2011).

With the onset of post-communist transformation and the ambitions of Central and Eastern European states to integrate into Euro-Atlantic structures, however, Brubaker's triadic model proved to be too reductionist. It did not account for the massive influence of supranational actors who fundamentally redefined the rules

of the game. David J. Smith (2002) responded to these limitations by transforming the model into a *quadratic nexus*. Smith integrated a fourth field into the scheme – international institutions and Euro-Atlantic structures (represented primarily by the European Union, OSCE, Council of Europe, and NATO). According to Smith's theory, this fourth dimension was meant to function as a key stabilizer and normative arbitrator. Through conditionality policies (economic incentives, the promise of integration, development funds), international institutions were supposed to compel *nationalizing states* to implement liberal standards for protecting minority rights, while simultaneously pacifying the radicalism of the *minority* by offering them legal guarantees and socio-economic development, thereby eliminating the need to resort to the revisionist protection of a *kin-state* (Lepič 2026, Smith 2020).

The case of Gagauzia, however, exposes a theoretical gap in Smith's optimistic linearism. In the spirit of the *quadratic nexus*, the massive presence of the EU and its financial injections into the infrastructure of the autonomy should lead to the gradual "Europeanization" of the minority and to the weakening of the influence of the revisionist *kin-state* (in this case, Russia as a geopolitical surrogate homeland). In the reality of Gagauzia, however, we see the exact opposite: although local actors materially absorb Western normative and financial impulses, at the discursive level they reinterpret them as a threat of their autonomy and identity (O'Loughlin, Toal, Chamberlain-Creangă 2013). The *quadratic nexus* model fails here because it suffers from *structural determinism* – it assumes that external institutional stimuli affect actors directly and rationally. It overlooks, however, the cognitive, psychological, and discursive filters through which local communities interpret international pressure. To understand why this model shows a structural mismatch in Gagauzia, we must shift from describing institutional fields to a deep conceptualization of *geopolitical identity*.

2.2. Conceptualization of geopolitical identity

Within critical geopolitics, identity is viewed not as a static, essential feature written down in demographic tables, but as a dynamic, constantly reconstituted, and performative process (Tuathail, Dalby 1998). Dijkink (2002) argues that the geopolitical identity and the resulting foreign policy preferences of sub-state communities are not the result of a cold, rational calculation of geographical reality, but are deeply saturated with emotions and historical memory. He introduces the term "*maps of pride and pain*". In the course of its historical genesis, each community constructs a mental map of the world onto which it projects traumas from experienced injustices, oppression, and assimilation (pain), alongside moments when it experienced security, prosperity, and recognition (pride). These maps subsequently function as rigid cognitive filters: external actors who are historically

associated with “pain” are *a priori* perceived with distrust, regardless of their current policies, while actors associated with “pride” are uncritically internalized as protectors (Dijkink 2002).

However, this identity does not maintain itself on its own. As Tuathail (1994) adds, (geo)political identity must be constantly practiced, narratively reproduced, and performed in everyday life. This process takes place through banal geopolitics – via school curricula, rituals, celebrations of historical anniversaries, consumption of specific media, and everyday political discourse. Identities are constantly in the process of becoming, which opens up space for their political instrumentalization.

When applying these concepts to the post-Soviet space, however, it is necessary to avoid the analytical trap of ethnic reductionism, which assumes that ethno-linguistic affiliation automatically determines geopolitical orientation (e.g., the equation: I speak Russian = I want to belong to Russia). Gentile (2015) responds to these limits with the concept of *political stratigraphy*, arguing – using the example of the Ukrainian Donbas – that geopolitical identity in post-Soviet borderlands resembles geographical layers (geopolitical stratigraphy). In the minds of individuals and entire communities, different, often seemingly contradictory identity sediments coexist. An individual may have a deeply rooted cultural and historical pro-Russian layer (nourished by family memory and language), but above it, there may be a pragmatic, economic pro-Western layer that responds to material benefits and the desire for modernization. Which of these layers is activated at any given moment and becomes dominant for political action does not depend on ethnic origin, but on a specific configuration of socio-economic factors, social class, achieved education, and the current political context (Gentile 2015).

This process of selective activation of identity layers is inextricably linked to the role of political elites. Stebelsky (2018), comparing the divergent developments in Kharkiv and the Donbas after 2014, shows that the transformation of latent regional identities into open political conflict or stability is a direct consequence of the clash of narratives that elites actively construct and disseminate. The geopolitical identity of a region is not fixed; it is modeled by which historical myths and geopolitical fears local leaders activate through the media. Local elites in these transit spaces function, within the scope of the concept by Morar and Dembińska (2021), as international brokers. These brokers operate within Putnam’s two-level game: they exploit the geopolitical ambivalence and identity fears of the local population (internal level) to secure a political monopoly and legitimacy, while simultaneously using this radicalized local identity as a bargaining chip and tool of blackmail against both the central government and external powers (external level; Putnam 2017).

2.3. *Confronting geopolitical and ethnic identity*

By connecting these perspectives, we arrive at the core of the theoretical paradox represented by the Gagauz case and at the necessity of confronting the concept of geopolitical identity with classical theories of nationalism and ethnicity. Classical modernist theories of nationalism, represented by Anderson (1983) and Gellner (1983), assumed that the processes of modernization, industrialization, and modern state-building inevitably lead to the cultural and linguistic homogenization of populations within the borders of a given political unit.

Gellner (1983) argued that modern industrial society requires a universal “high culture” and a unified literary language, ensured through the state educational system. The state thus mechanically assimilates or integrates peripheral regions. Anderson (1983) defined the nation as an “imagined political community”. This community is constructed through print capitalism – through the mass dissemination of information in a unified language via media, enabling individuals who will never personally meet to imagine themselves as part of one national body sharing the same time and space.

The Gagauz case, however, does not confirm these modernist assumptions. Since 1991, Moldova has attempted Gellnerian homogenization and nationalization through the promotion of the Romanian language and the implementation of a pro-European curriculum (Chinn 1994, King 1997, Putină 2011). According to Gellner, a small national minority should gradually succumb to this pressure and integrate. Yet the Gagauz responded to this pressure through a specific self-preservation reflex that can be explained through Barth’s (1998) concept of the ethnic boundary, which a group actively maintains and socially constructs against “the others” (us versus them). Cultural markers may change, language may even be forgotten, but as long as the boundary of distinctiveness is preserved, the ethnic group survives.

In Gagauzia, an interesting phenomenon emerged: in order to preserve their Barthian ethnic boundary against the Gellnerian nationalizing pressure of the Moldovan state, the minority effectively abandoned the development of its own language as the primary marker of identity and instead adopted the Russian language and a pro-Russian geopolitical identity as its defensive shield. Pro-Russian orientation became the key political marker through which the Gagauz fixed their distinctiveness from Chişinău and, by extension, from Romania (Baar, Jakubek 2017). Their Andersonian “imagined community” thus acquired a schizophrenic character: on the basis of ethnic origin, they recognize a sense of kinship with Turkey, yet their everyday informational space (saturated by Russian media) and shared historical myths integrate them into the imagined community of the “Russian World” (Kosienkowski 2021).

Geopolitical identity was therefore fully instrumentalized for the protection of the ethnic boundary. In order to understand how this deep tension emerged,

it is now necessary to analyze in detail the historical trajectories of the region's development.

3. Historical context: The development of Gagauz identity and tensions with Moldovan state-building nationalism

3.1. The interwar period: Bessarabia under Romanian rule and the origins of alienation

The historical genesis of modern Gagauz identity and its deeply rooted distrust of state-building projects associated with Romanian linguistic and cultural centers is a direct consequence of a series of traumatic historical ruptures. The ethnic origins of the Gagauz and their settlement in the Budjak region (present-day southern Moldova and southwestern Ukraine) constitute a complex historical phenomenon. Although competing scholarly hypotheses exist regarding their precise ethno-genesis – the most widely accepted tracing their ancestry to the Turkic Oghuz, Pecheneg, and Cuman tribes that adopted Eastern Orthodox Christianity in the Balkans – the decisive geopolitical turning point in the formation of their modern identity occurred at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

As a consequence of the Russo-Turkish wars, the then bilingual or Turkic-speaking Orthodox Christian Gagauz left their homes in Ottoman Dobruja and northeastern Bulgaria in large numbers in order to escape religious persecution. The Russian Empire offered them fertile land, exemption from taxation and military service, and the opportunity to settle in the newly annexed territory of southern Bessarabia (Budjak) in exchange for loyalty and the colonization of this strategically important frontier region (King 1997; Sağlam, Adıgüzel 2021). This episode permanently linked Gagauz security and collective existence to the Russian imperial space, transformed Budjak into their new homeland, and laid the foundations for a durable narrative portraying Russia as the historical protector and guarantor of Gagauz survival.

Subsequent developments throughout the twentieth century only reinforced this trajectory (e.g., King 1997, Simionov 2023). The first major formative shock occurred immediately after the First World War and the collapse of the Russian Empire, when Bessarabia was incorporated into Greater Romania (România Mare) in 1918. For the Gagauz population, which had until then enjoyed the privileges granted under Tsarist rule, the arrival of Romanian administration represented a profound rupture and the abrupt dismantling of the existing political and social order (Kosienkowski 2017, Roper 2001).

Bucharest viewed the newly acquired Bessarabian periphery with deep suspicion. Minorities were perceived as a potential fifth column of the revisionist Soviet Union, leading to the implementation of an aggressive and highly centralized policy

of nationalization and assimilation (Sağlam, Adıgüzel 2021). The Romanian state attempted rapid Gellnerian homogenization through the total Romanianization of the educational system, public administration, and the unification of religious life under the Romanian Orthodox Church. For the Gagauz, as a Turkic minority whose identity was Orthodox but linguistically entirely distinct, the prohibition of using languages other than Romanian in the official sphere represented profound marginalization (King 1997, Mayer 2014).

This assimilatory pressure triggered a deep defensive reflex among the Gagauz and fostered the emergence of strong anti-Romanian sentiment. The interwar period became embedded in the community's collective memory as an era of economic exploitation, cultural oppression, and social degradation. In terms of Dijkink's (2002) theory, this historical period laid the foundation for the Gagauz "map of pain". Fear of "Romanianization" and the loss of distinctiveness became a permanent trauma transmitted from generation to generation, one that modern local political actors are able to reactivate with remarkable effectiveness whenever Chişinău attempts rapprochement with Bucharest or the West.

3.2. The Soviet era: Institutionalization of ethnicity, Russification, and the trauma of modernization

The decisive rupture that structurally redefined the internal configuration of Gagauz identity and connected it to the Russian geopolitical space came with the Second World War and the subsequent Soviet annexation of Bessarabia in 1940 (definitively consolidated after 1944), which led to the creation of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR). Soviet nationality policy, shaped by Stalinist *korenizatsiya* and its later evolution (Jelen, Kopeček 2026; Shcherbak 2015), applied a highly ambivalent strategy toward the Gagauz. On the one hand, the Soviet regime formally institutionalized and made Gagauz ethnicity visible. For the first time in history, the Gagauz were officially recognized as a distinct nationality rather than merely a linguistic anomaly. In 1957, the Soviet Academy of Sciences created the first official Cyrillic alphabet for the Gagauz language, enabling limited education and publishing in the native language (King 1997; Sağlam, Adıgüzel 2021).

On the other hand, this process of cultural recognition was accompanied by brutal social engineering, Stalinist repression, forced collectivization of the agrarian south, and the catastrophic man-made famine of 1946–1947, which decimated the Gagauz population demographically (many villages lost up to one-third of their inhabitants; Hatlas 2009). Despite these documented atrocities of the totalitarian regime, the Soviet era paradoxically strengthened long-term Gagauz loyalty toward the Soviet-Russian system. The key mechanism behind this process was massive state-directed linguistic Russification.

Russian was projected by the Soviet regime as the universal language of progress, science, industrialization, and social mobility (Dostál, Knippenberg 1979). Because Gagauz was primarily a rural language lacking developed literary and scientific terminology, and because educational experiments in Gagauz were abandoned in the 1960s, the Gagauz massively and voluntarily adopted Russian as their primary “high culture” (Roper 2001). Total assimilation occurred, but not into the Moldovan/Romanian environment; rather, into the Russian-speaking sphere (Crivenco, Jelen 2026; Mayer 2014).

This linguistic shift was accompanied by intensive ideological indoctrination by Soviet historiography, which systematically constructed the concept of artificial Moldovanism (*moldovenism*) in the MSSR. This narrative strictly separated Moldovan identity from Romanian identity and portrayed Tsarist Russia, and later the Soviet Union, as the historical savior of both peoples from Romanian fascism, bourgeois oppression, and Western imperialism (O’Loughlin, Toal, Chamberlain-Creangă 2013). For the Gagauz, Soviet identity became synonymous with modernization, urbanization, and security. Ethnic identity (Turkicness) was reduced to a folkloric and decorative dimension (dance ensembles, wine festivals), while geopolitical and civilizational identity became fully integrated into the Soviet, and subsequently Russian, world (Kosienkowski 2021). Thus emerged a deep Soviet nostalgia that survived the collapse of the regime itself.

3.3. *The collapse of the USSR, Moldovan independence, and ethnic mobilization*

When the Soviet imperial structure began collapsing in the late 1980s under the weight of internal economic contradictions and Gorbachev’s political liberalization, the newly opened institutional space in the MSSR was immediately occupied by radical majority nationalism institutionalized in the Moldovan Popular Front (*Frontul Popular din Moldova*). During this early and turbulent phase, the state-building project of the new Moldova sharply distanced itself from the Soviet narrative of moderate Moldovanism and fully embraced aggressive pan-Romanian nationalism. The dominant political discourse in Chișinău revolved around immediate reunification with Romania, accompanied by openly chauvinistic rhetoric toward non-titular minorities (King 1997, Zabarah 2012).

The turning point that triggered immediate ethno-defensive mobilization in the peripheries was the adoption of the language law in August 1989. This law declared Moldovan (Romanian), written in the Latin alphabet, the sole state language and mandated its compulsory introduction into administration and education, effectively marginalizing the entire Russian-speaking population overnight (Roper 2001). For the Gagauz, who at that time practically did not

speak Romanian, this step represented an immediate threat of losing employment, social status, and cultural survival. The interwar trauma of assimilation was reactivated – Dijkink’s “map of pain” became fully activated (Crivenco, Jelen 2026).

This nationalizing pressure provoked a wave of countermobilization. Whereas in industrial Transnistria, dominated by Soviet industrial elites of Russian and Ukrainian nationality, the reaction was primarily ideological and economic in defense of the Soviet status quo, mobilization in Gagauzia was purely ethno-defensive in line with Barthian boundary-making. In August 1990, local elites in Comrat proclaimed the independent Gagauz Republic (*Gagauz Yeri*) in response to Chişinău’s declaration of sovereignty. Moldova effectively fragmented into three separate and mutually hostile entities (King 1997, Mayer 2014, Zabarah 2012).

Tensions peaked in October 1990, when Prime Minister Mircea Druc organized the so-called “march on Gagauzia”, during which tens of thousands of nationalist Moldovan volunteers advanced toward Comrat with the aim of suppressing Gagauz autonomy by force. A bloody confrontation was prevented only at the last moment through the intervention of Soviet Interior Ministry troops and political pressure from Moscow. Unlike in Transnistria, where tensions escalated into full-scale war in 1992 with the assistance of General Lebed’s Russian 14th Army, the conflict in Gagauzia remained within political boundaries. Gagauz elites soberly understood the limits of their geopolitical position: the region was agrarian, economically weak, geographically fragmented, and – unlike Transnistria – lacked territorial continuity with pro-Russian forces or a substantial industrial base, forcing them to seek an institutional compromise with the center (King 1997, Horák 2019, Zabarah 2012).

3.4. The autonomous status of 1994 and the institutionalization of geopolitical schizophrenia

A crucial structural turning point occurred after Moldova’s parliamentary elections in 1994. Radical pan-Romanian forces suffered a crushing defeat, and the Agrarian Democratic Party of Moldova, together with the socialists, came to power. These forces revived the Soviet concept of moderate, sovereignty-oriented Moldovanism based on the country’s multiethnic character and pragmatic relations with Moscow (O’Loughlin, Toal, Chamberlain-Creangă 2013). This political shift at the center opened a window of opportunity for a historic compromise. In December 1994, the Moldovan parliament adopted the constitutional Law on the Special Legal Status of Gagauzia (*Gagauz Yeri*), thereby formally dissolving the unrecognized republic and replacing it with the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia (ATUG; Putină 2011).

In the mid-1990s, this institutional model was internationally celebrated (by the OSCE and the Council of Europe) as a unique, innovative, and peaceful solution to ethnic conflict through territorial autonomy in the post-communist space (Wöber 2013). Gagauzia obtained extensive powers: its own legislative body (*Halk Topluşu*), its own directly elected governor (*bashkan*), who automatically became a member of the Moldovan government, three official languages within its territory (Gagauz, Russian, and Moldovan/Romanian), with Russian remaining the dominant administrative language, and, most importantly, Article 1(4) of the ATUG Constitution, which guaranteed the minority the right to external self-determination (secession) should the Republic of Moldova lose its international legal sovereignty – an explicit constitutional safeguard against Moldova’s unification with Romania (Horák 2019, Roper 2001).

However, this specific institutional architecture also produced an unintended long-term structural breakdown within the mechanisms of the quadratic nexus. While autonomy successfully integrated Gagauzia territorially and pacified the acute phase of the conflict, it also de facto institutionalized and froze its distinct identity. As convincingly demonstrated by Kosienkowski (2021), local Gagauz elites began using the newly acquired autonomous institutions as an autonomous platform for permanently building their political legitimacy upon total rejection of integration into Moldovan civic society and upon integration into the concept of the “Russian World” (*Russkiy mir*).

Whereas the modern Moldovan state-building project – especially after the watershed year of 2009 and definitively after 2020 under the presidency of Maia Sandu – became increasingly redefined through the lens of Europeanization, EU structural reforms, and a clear departure from Russia’s sphere of influence, Gagauzia remained mentally, discursively, and institutionally anchored in the Soviet-Russian spacetime. This historical development created a unique environment of geopolitical schizophrenia: the region is economically dependent on subsidies from pro-European Chişinău and EU-funded projects, yet its Barthian ethnic boundary is continuously maintained in a defensive and aggressive mode against the center, while rigid and uncritical loyalty toward Moscow has become, in the minds of both elites and the population, the principal existential guarantee of autonomy. The findings from our 12 semi-structured interviews, which form the core of the following analytical section, vividly illustrate this deep contradiction between material reality and cognitive orientation.

4. Analysis of the interviews

4.1. Research methodology

Methodologically, this article is based on empirical research consisting of 12 in-depth semi-structured interviews with key experts and influential actors in local public life. The sample was constructed through purposive expert sampling to represent the four principal structural pillars shaping the regional geopolitical discourse (Toal 2000): the political sphere (P1–P3), the media environment (M1–M3), the educational sector (V1–V3), and the local business sector (B1–B3).

The primary inclusion criterion for participation was Gagauz ethnic origin combined with long-term active involvement within the local community. Given the specific socio-cultural environment and the potential distrust toward external researchers, informants were initially identified and approached through a key gatekeeper, followed by snowball sampling. This strategy enabled effective access to local elite networks and ensured a high degree of openness during the interviews (Hendl 2023).

Data collection was conducted sequentially in two phases. The first phase took place during fieldwork in autumn 2023 in the autonomous region, specifically in Comrat, Ceadâr-Lunga, and Vulcănești, as well as in Tiraspol and Chișinău outside the region. In spring 2024, the dataset was supplemented by additional online interviews reflecting the rapidly evolving geopolitical context. Individual semi-structured interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were conducted in English or Russian. With the informed and voluntary consent of all participants, the interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. In accordance with ethical standards for qualitative research, all participants remain strictly anonymous and are identified only by their primary field of expertise and regional place of activity, thereby minimizing the risk of political or social repercussions.

The resulting textual corpus was subjected to a rigorous deductive thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke 2006), whose conceptual framework was derived a priori from the theoretical models of geopolitical stratigraphy and the quadratic nexus. Throughout the empirical analysis, respondents' statements are presented as edited quotations (Sandelowski 1994). These excerpts were subject to minor stylistic and grammatical editing, while preserving their substantive meaning and communicative intent, in order to enhance readability and argumentative clarity. Owing to space limitations, the analysis does not explicitly cite all twelve respondents. Instead, those quotations judged to be analytically most representative were purposively selected because they most effectively illustrate the theoretical concepts under investigation. This qualitative research design makes it possible to move beyond official political narratives and to examine the cognitive filters through which both ordinary citizens and local sub-state elites rationalize their paradoxical geopolitical preferences.

4.2. Political sphere: Sub-state brokers and the instrumentalization of fear

Interviews with representatives of the local political elite (P1–P3) clearly demonstrate the validity of Morar and Dembińska's (2021) concept of international brokers. For Gagauz political actors, the permanent maintenance of geopolitical tension between Chişinău and Moscow represents the primary source of their political survival and internal legitimacy. The discourse of political respondents is dominated by the narrative of the “existential threat to autonomy posed by Maia Sandu's pro-European government”.

Respondent P1 (former politician, Comrat) explicitly stated:

“Under the guise of European integration, Chişinău is attempting the total liquidation of our autonomous powers. Every reform introduced by the central government is aimed at weakening Comrat. The European Union is a foreign project for us that does not respect our specific identity. Russia is our only real guarantor of sovereignty and rights. If Russia falls, Gagauzia will fall as well, and we will be assimilated by Romania.”

This quotation vividly illustrates the activation of Dijkink's (2002) “map of pain” – European integration is not perceived as an opportunity for modernization, but is redefined through a cognitive filter of fear as a threat of assimilation. Political elites deliberately use Article 1 of the constitution concerning the right to secession as a political weapon.

At the same time, respondents in the political sphere display extreme pragmatism, confirming Putnam's two-level game. Respondent P2 (former civil servant, Ceadâr-Lunga) admitted:

“Of course we do not reject the money flowing here from European projects or from Turkey. Infrastructure is being built with Western money. But political loyalty is another matter. Turkey is our ethnic brother, but Russia is our civilizational protector. We have to maneuver. When Chişinău pushes too hard, we must go to Moscow to show that we have a powerful partner behind us.”

This opportunistic calculation demonstrates how sub-state elites transform the quadratic nexus into their own business model: they absorb material benefits from one field (EU/Turkey), while drawing political legitimacy from another (Russia).

4.3. Media environment: Constructing the “imagined community” of the Russkiy Mir

Analysis of interviews with respondents from the media sector (M1–M3) reveals how the Andersonian “imagined community” is constructed on a daily basis in Gagauzia. The informational space in the region is completely saturated with

Russian narrative influence, creating a specific cognitive isolation from the rest of Moldova.

Respondent M1 (local media journalist, Comrat) described the situation as follows:

“The Gagauz population lives in a completely different informational spacetime than the rest of Moldova. People here do not watch Moldovan television stations because they do not understand them or deeply distrust them. The main sources of information are Russian satellite channels, Telegram social networks, and Sputnik. Perceptions of the war in Ukraine are radically different here – people do not perceive it as Russian aggression, but as a conflict between NATO and Russia in which Russia is defending traditional values. Media in Comrat must respect this narrative, because if you write in a pro-European way, you lose your audience and will be labeled a traitor.”

This informational monopoly, however, is not sustained solely by secular media but is deeply intertwined with the religious sphere, which in the region remains under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. According to Kosienkowski (2021), the Orthodox Church in Gagauzia constitutes a key transmission node through which local elites sacralize the region’s pro-Russian geopolitical orientation and transform it into a moral obligation to defend the Orthodox faith.

Respondent M2 (independent journalist, Chişinău) highlighted this close relationship between media and religious discourse:

“The media and the Church speak the same language here. Local priests enjoy enormous authority in the villages and essentially function as political commentators. When Russian television talks about the ‘decadent West’, the priest repeats the same message from the pulpit on Sunday, adding that the pro-European government in Chişinău wants to destroy the Orthodox family. Local media then reinforce these religious narratives. Orthodox Christianity has therefore become the principal argument for why we must remain loyal to Moscow. In popular understanding, being a true Gagauz means being an Orthodox Christian under Moscow’s spiritual authority – anything else is regarded as a betrayal of one’s identity.”

This finding also confirms Stebelsky’s (2018) argument regarding the clash of narratives. Russian media have successfully redefined the boundaries of the Andersonian community in the minds of the Gagauz population. Ethnic identity (Turkicness) is pushed into the background because the shared informational space integrates the population into the transnational “Russian World”.

Respondent M3 (independent journalist, Comrat) additionally pointed to the phenomenon of motivated reasoning:

“People in Gagauzia actively filter reality. If you show them a new kindergarten built with EU money, they will say: ‘That may be nice, but they are only doing it to bribe us and then sell us to Romania.’ But when Russia sends symbolic assistance in the form of cheaper gas, people celebrate it as a brotherly rescue. Emotional attachment to Russia completely overwhelms rational facts.”

4.4. Educational sector: Gellnerian schism and the reproduction of Russian narratives

Interviews with actors from the educational sector (V1–V3) reveal a deep Gellnerian tension between Chişinău's state educational policy and the local reality in Comrat. Education constitutes the main battlefield over the interpretation of history and linguistic dominance.

Respondent V1 (university lecturer, Tiraspol) explained the linguistic paradox of autonomy:

“Chişinău constantly pressures us to increase the share of instruction in the Romanian language. But we have neither teachers nor interest from parents for that. In our schools, the language of instruction is Russian. Gagauz is taught only as a subject, as folklore. Our children think in Russian, read Russian literature. When they leave for universities, they do not go to Chişinău because they do not know Romanian; instead, they go to Tiraspol, Moscow, or Saint Petersburg.”

This quotation constitutes a direct confrontation with Gellner's (1983) theory. The Moldovan state is failing to implement its “high culture” on the periphery. Since the Gagauz language cannot fulfill the role of a universal language of modernization, Russian has fully assumed the role of Gellnerian high culture in Gagauzia. In this way, the status quo fixed during the Soviet era is reproduced.

Respondent V3 (university lecturer, Comrat) pointed to Barth's (1998) mechanism of boundary maintenance:

“The educational system in Gagauzia does not produce Moldovan citizens of Gagauz nationality. It produces Gagauz who define themselves in sharp opposition to the Moldovan state. Russian here serves not only as a communication tool; it is politics. As long as we speak and teach in Russian, Chişinău will not be able to assimilate us. The pro-Russian geopolitical orientation is therefore a direct product of our educational system, which conserves Soviet identity.”

4.5. Local business: Geopolitical stratigraphy and the limits of economic pragmatism

Interviews with representatives of the business sphere (B1–B3) provide the clearest evidence of the geopolitical stratigraphy's presence. Entrepreneurs represent the only group in which a deep contradiction emerges between cultural sentiment and economic interest.

Respondent B1 (entrepreneur, Ceadâr-Lunga) described his internal identity tension:

“From a business perspective, we are fully integrated into the European market. Thanks to the free trade agreement (DCFTA), we export our wine to Poland, Czechia, and Germany. The Russian market is de facto closed to us because of Moscow's continual political embargoes. We earn our money in the West. European

funds helped us modernize our technology. If you asked me as a businessman, I would have to say that our future lies in the EU.”

At this moment, it appears that the respondent is dominated by a pragmatic, pro-European layer. However, respondent B1 immediately added:

“But when I come home in the evening and switch off business, I am Gagauz. And as a Gagauz, I fear what Chişinău is doing. I fear that they will drag us into a war against Russia; I fear the loss of our traditions that Russia protects. So in a referendum I would still vote against the EU and in favor of the Eurasian Union. I know it is economically irrational, but identity is stronger than the wallet.”

This fascinating quotation is the ultimate confirmation of the limits of economic determinism within the quadratic nexus. The entrepreneur explicitly admits that the cognitive layer of cultural sentiment toward Russia (Dijkink’s map of pride) is placed higher in the hierarchy of values than material profit.

Respondent B2 (entrepreneur, Vulcăneşti) further develops this identity split in connection with the current crisis:

“The war in Ukraine complicated everything. We lost logistical routes to Russia, fertilizer prices skyrocketed. Chişinău tells us that Russia is to blame. But our people see it differently. They see it as the fault of Maia Sandu’s pro-Western policy, which provoked Moscow. The external shock of war did not lead us to turn away from Russia. On the contrary, it increased our fear and bound us even more tightly to Russia. The crisis only strengthened our defensive pro-Russian identity, because we feel ourselves to be under total siege.”

5. Discussion

5.1. *The limits of the quadratic nexus*

The synthesis of theoretical concepts and empirical findings makes it possible to formulate a revision of the existing political-science understanding of ethno-political processes in the post-Soviet space. The first major point of discussion is a radical critique of the structural determinism inherent in Smith’s (2002) quadratic nexus model. The original model assumed that international institutions (the EU field) function as a rational, normative force capable of mechanically “rewriting” local nationalist and revisionist discourses through financial incentives and human-rights standards. However, this assumption completely fails when confronted with rigid, historically embedded identity structures. In such a case, ethnic minorities are forced to adopt individual strategies in relation to the majority and the state (Lepič 2026).

The case of Gagauzia clearly demonstrates that international pressure and EU incentives are not perceived objectively by the minority population; rather,

they are filtered through the prism of local power politics and historical traumas. Because Moldova's European integration objectively requires the centralization of standards, transparency, and public-administration reform, local Gagauz elites (acting as international brokers) have successfully redefined and presented it to the population as an "existential threat" to the very survival of Gagauz autonomy.

The discussion here introduces a fundamental theoretical shift: the fourth field of the quadratic nexus (the EU) does not necessarily function as a stabilizer of conflict but may unintentionally act as a catalyst of further polarization when it encounters rigid identity stratigraphy. Material assistance from the West is absorbed within the pragmatic layer (Gentile 2015), while political loyalty remains frozen within a deeper layer of cultural sentiment toward Russia.

5.2. *The decoupling of ethnic and geopolitical identity*

Classical literature on nationality politics (including Brubaker's early works) implicitly assumed that a minority's ethnic identity and geopolitical orientation exist in natural synergy – the minority logically looks toward the external power that shares its ethno-linguistic origin (the kin-state). The case of the Gagauz, however, represents a profound anomaly in which ethnic and geopolitical identity become completely decoupled.

While at the level of ethnic identity (linguistic origin and Turkic culture) there exists a strong transnational connection to Turkey, manifested through Ankara's massive investments in Comrat's infrastructure, Russia absolutely dominates at the level of geopolitical identity (foreign-policy orientation and civilizational loyalty).

This theoretical paradox can be explained precisely through the psychological mechanism of motivated reasoning described by our respondents from the media sphere. Gagauz geopolitical identity is not shaped by rational evaluation of contemporary benefits (the EU invests the most, Turkey builds hospitals and roads), but by a rigid pro-Russian narrative functioning as an absolute cognitive filter. The crucial integrative element that enables and legitimizes this decoupling is the institutional and discursive influence of the Russian Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate (Kosienkowski 2021). In this context, Orthodox Christianity functions not merely as a religious marker but as a sacralized civilizational bridge to Moscow, effectively redefining pro-Russian orientation as a moral obligation and as a defense against the secular West. Ethnic identity (Turkicness) is marginalized within the hierarchy of values and instrumentalized by local elites only when useful for balancing pressure from Chișinău. Geopolitical identity (the Orthodox "Russian World" and Soviet nostalgia, as discussed by Bakke, Rickard, O'loughlin 2023) becomes the primary cohesive force of the

minority. The Barthian ethnic boundary vis-à-vis Moldova is thus maintained not through the development of an autonomous culture, but through geopolitical attachment to Moscow. Pro-Russian orientation is perceived as the only reliable safeguard against Gellnerian assimilation by the central state.

5.3. Sub-state brokers as architects of “frozen integration”

Whereas Morar and Dembińska (2021) described international brokers as state-level political actors maintaining Moldova within a geopolitical gray zone between the West and Russia, the theoretical contribution of this article lies in transferring this concept to the sub-state, regional level. Interviews with political representatives (P1–P3) suggest that Gagauz regional elites actively exploit and reproduce tensions within the quadratic nexus in order to preserve their own power and economic interests.

For Gagauz sub-state brokers (bashkans, local oligarchs, and deputies), the ideal permanently maintained condition is what may be termed “frozen integration”. If Gagauzia were to fully integrate into pro-European Moldova, local elites would immediately lose their exclusive role as “defenders of the nation” against Romanianization, forfeit their political monopoly, and be forced to submit to transparent rules and EU anti-corruption standards, which would destroy their clientelist networks. Conversely, if the region were to declare full separatism (following the model of Transnistria), its agrarian character and geographical isolation would lead to immediate economic collapse.

It can therefore be argued that local elites exploit the population’s geopolitical stratigraphy: through total control of the local media environment, they continuously reinforce fears of assimilation by Chișinău and glorify Moscow. In doing so, they ensure that the population grants them a permanent democratic mandate to continue opportunistically maneuvering between Chișinău, Ankara, and Moscow. Sub-state elites have thus transformed the quadratic nexus into a highly profitable business model.

6. Conclusion

This article has conducted a theoretical and empirical deconstruction of the (geo) political identity of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia in Moldova. The research demonstrated that certain explanatory models of post-Soviet identity formation, especially the optimistic linearism of Smith’s quadratic nexus concept, fail to adequately explain the ethnopolitical reality of this region. Massive financial and normative support from the European Union and Turkey has not resulted

in the integration of the minority into Moldova's pro-European state-building project; rather, it has generated a specific defensive reflex. Theory must therefore integrate psychological and cognitive filters, as well as the lived geopolitical stratigraphy of minorities (bottom-up), into its core analytical framework. These filters (motivated reasoning, maps of pain) determine whether external normative pressure (the EU) will be accepted by the community or whether it will provoke a radical defensive counterreaction.

Through the analysis of 12 in-depth semi-structured interviews across the political, media, educational, and business sectors, the research demonstrated the presence of profound geopolitical stratigraphy. Within the minds of local actors, a pragmatic economic dimension (the utilization of Western funds) coexists with a rigid, dominant cultural-historical pro-Russian dimension. This condition is actively maintained by sub-state political brokers, a saturated pro-Russian media environment and the institutional influence of the Russian Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. Together, these actors sacralize geopolitical orientation toward Moscow, deliberately reactivate historical traumas (Dijkink's maps of pain), and reinforce fears of Romanian assimilation.

The case of the Gagauz provides a major theoretical contribution to the study of ethnicity by demonstrating the possibility of a complete decoupling between ethnic origin and geopolitical identity. It shows that a pro-Russian geopolitical identity in the post-Soviet space is not the exclusive domain of ethnic Russians (as is often assumed on the basis of studies of the Baltic states or Donbas), but can be successfully narratively and discursively grafted onto an atypical Turkic ethnic group when religion, historical memory, and linguistic Russification are effectively instrumentalized as tools for protecting ethnic boundaries.

The ethnic identity of the Gagauz has thus paradoxically detached itself from its linguistic and ethnic foundations and become linked to geopolitical loyalty toward Moscow, which functions as a Barthian shield maintaining the ethnic boundary vis-à-vis Chișinău. The case of Gagauzia therefore sends a clear signal to international policymakers and conflict theorists alike: economic conditionality and material incentives are powerless when confronted with deeply rooted identity structures and cognitive filters shaped by historical memory. Future research should focus on comparing Gagauzia with other atypical Russophile minorities in the post-Soviet space in order to verify the broader validity of the identity paradox described here.

References

- ANDERSON, B. (1983): *Imagined Communities*. Verso, London.
- BAAR, V., JAKUBEK, D. (2017): Divided national identity in Moldova. *Journal of Nationalism, Memory & Language Politics*, 11, 1, 58–92. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jnmlp-2017-0004>
- BAKKE, K.M., RICKARD, K., O'LOUGHLIN, J. (2023): Perceptions of the past in the post-Soviet space. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 39, 4, 223–256. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2023.2170153>
- BARTH, F. (1998): *Ethnic groups and boundaries: The social organization of culture difference*. Waveland Press, Long Grove.
- BEISSINGER, M. (1992): Elites and Ethnic Identities in Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics. In: Motyl, A.J. (ed): *The Post-Soviet Nations: Perspectives on the Demise of the USSR*. Columbia University Press, 141–169.
- BRAUN, V., CLARKE, V. (2006): Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3, 2, 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- BRUBAKER, R. (1995): National minorities, nationalizing states, and external national homelands in the new Europe. *Daedalus*, 124, 2, 107–132. <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783845211817-132>
- BRUBAKER, R. (2011): Nationalizing states revisited: Project and processes of nationalization in post-Soviet states. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 34, 11, 1785–1814. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2011.579137>
- CAŁUS, K., KOSIENKOWSKI, M. (2018): Relations between Moldova and the European Union. In: Flenley, P., Mannin, M. (eds.): *The European Union and its eastern neighbourhood*. Manchester University Press, 99–113. <https://doi.org/10.7228/manchester/9781526109095.003.0007>
- CHINN, J. (1994): The politics of language in Moldova. *Demokratizatsiya*, 2, 2, 309–315.
- CONNOR, W. (1992): Soviet Policies toward the Non-Russian Peoples in Theoretic and Historic Perspective: What Gorbachev Inherited. In: Motyl, A.J. (ed): *The Post-Soviet Nations: Perspectives on the Demise of the USSR*. Columbia University Press, 30–49.
- CRIVENCO, A., JELEN, L. (2026): The Gagauz diaspora in Transnistria: Preserving identity in a multi-ethnic environment. In: Kopeček, V., Lepič, M., Jelen, L. (eds): *Ethnicity and Ethnic Minorities in Post-Soviet Eurasia*. Routledge, London, 162–174. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003652885-15>
- DIJKINK, G. (2002): *National identity and geopolitical visions: Maps of pride and pain*. Routledge, London. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203437933>
- DOSTÁL, P. (1989): Regional Interests and the National Question under Gorbachev. In: Alexander Bon, A., van Voren, R. (eds.): *Nationalism in the USSR: Problems of Nationalities*, Second World Press, 28–43.
- DOSTÁL, P., KNIPPENBERG, H. (1979): The “Russification” of Ethnic Minorities in the USSR. *Soviet Geography*, 20, 4, 197–219. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00385417.1979.10640287>
- FRIEDGUT, T.H. (1992): Nations of the USSR: From Mobilized Participation to Autonomous Diversity. In: Motyl, A.J. (ed): *The Post-Soviet Nations: Perspectives on the Demise of the USSR*. Columbia University Press, 190–219.
- GELLNER, E. (1983): *Nations and nationalism*. Cornell University Press.
- GENTILE, M. (2015): West-oriented in the East-oriented Donbas: a political stratigraphy of geopolitical identity in Luhansk, Ukraine. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 31, 3, 201–223. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2014.995410>

- GITELMAN, Z. (1992): Development and Ethnicity in the Soviet Union. In: Motyl, A.J. (ed): The Post-Soviet Nations: Perspectives on the Demise of the USSR. Columbia University Press, 220–239.
- GLEASON, G. (1990): Federalism and Nationalism: The Struggle for Republican Rights in the USSR. Westview Press.
- HATŁAS, J. (2009): Gagauzja i Gagauzi: historia oraz współczesność. Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu.
- HENDL, J. (2023): Kvalitativní výzkum: základní teorie, metody a aplikace. Portál, Praha.
- HOLSAPPLE, C. (2023): Ethnopolitical entrepreneurs as nation builders? Heritage and innovation in Gagauzia. Nationalities Papers, 51, 2, 280–298. <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2021.76>
- HORÁK, S. (2019): The emergence and failure of the Gagauz Republic (1989–1995). In: Hoch, T., Kopeček, V. (eds.): De Facto States in Eurasia. Routledge, London, 274–295. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003652885-3>
- JELEN, L., KOPEČEK, V. (2026): Ethnicity in Soviet and post-Soviet states in context. In: Kopeček, V., Lepič, M., Jelen, L.: Ethnicity and Ethnic Minorities in Post-Soviet Eurasia. Routledge, London, 13–30. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003652885-3>
- JELEN, L., KOPEČEK, V., LEPIČ, M. (2026): Introduction. In: Kopeček, V., Lepič, M., Jelen, L.: Ethnicity and Ethnic Minorities in Post-Soviet Eurasia. Routledge, London, p. 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003652885-1>
- KAISER, R.J. (1994): The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR. Princeton University Press.
- KING, C. (1997): Minorities policy in the post-Soviet republics: The case of the Gagauzi. Ethnic and Racial Studies, 20, 4, 738–756. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.1997.9993987>
- KOSIENKOWSKI, M. (2017): The Gagauz Republic: An autonomism-driven de facto state. The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review, 44, 3, 292–313. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18763324-20171233>
- KOSIENKOWSKI, M. (2021): The Russian World as a legitimation strategy outside Russia: The case of Gagauzia. Eurasian geography and economics, 62, 3, 319–346. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2020.1793682>
- KYMLICKA, W. (2018): Liberal multiculturalism as a political theory of state-minority relations. Political Theory, 46, 1, 81–91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591717696021>
- LEPIČ, M. (2026): Situations and strategies of ethnic minorities in post-Soviet Eurasia: A conceptual and theoretical framework. In: Kopeček, V., Lepič, M., Jelen, L.: Ethnicity and Ethnic Minorities in Post-Soviet Eurasia. Routledge, London, 31–46. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003652885-4>
- MAYER, M. (2014): Gagauzové–jazyk a jejich etnická identita. Kulturní studia, 3, 2, 39–54.
- MORAR, Ș., DEMBIŃSKA, M. (2021): Between the West and Russia: Moldova's international brokers in a two-level game. Eurasian geography and economics, 62, 3, 293–318. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2020.1836984>
- O'LOUGHLIN, J., TOAL, G., CHAMBERLAIN-CREANGĂ, R. (2013): Divided space, divided attitudes? Comparing the Republics of Moldova and Pridnestrovie (Transnistria) using simultaneous surveys. Eurasian Geography and Economics, 54, 2, 227–258. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2013.816619>
- PUTINĂ, N. (2011): The Socio-political dilemmas of integration of Gagauz in republic of Moldova. Eurolimes, 163–179.
- PUTNAM, R.D. (2017): Diplomacy and domestic politics: the logic of two-level games. International organization, 42, 3, 437–470. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315251981-16>

- ROPER, S.D. (2001): Regionalism in Moldova: The Case of Transnistria and Gagauzia. *Regional & Federal Studies*, 11, 3, 101–122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/714004699>
- SAĞLAM, N.A., ADIGÜZEL, Y. (2021): Gagauz identity in the post-Soviet period. *Journal of Economy Culture and Society*, 63, 279–296. <https://doi.org/10.26650/JECS2020-0112>
- SANDELOWSKI, M. (1994): Focus on qualitative methods. The use of quotes in qualitative research. *Research in nursing & health*, 17, 6, 479–482. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nur.4770170611>
- SHCHERBAK, A. (2015): Nationalism in the USSR: A Historical and Comparative Perspective. *Nationalities Papers*, 43, 6, 866–885. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2015.1072811>
- SIMIONOV, L.M. (2023): Shifting attitudes towards identity, borders and geopolitical choices: The case of Moldova. *Regional science policy & practice*, 15, 1, 200–222. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rsp3.12613>
- SMITH, D.J. (2002): Framing the national question in Central and Eastern Europe: A quadratic nexus? *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics*, 2, 1, 3–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14718800208405119>
- SMITH, D.J. (2020): The “quadratic nexus” revisited: Nation-building in Estonia through the prism of national cultural autonomy. *Nationalities Papers*, 48, 2, 235–250. <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2018.38>
- STEBELSKY, I. (2018): A tale of two regions: geopolitics, identities, narratives, and conflict in Kharkiv and the Donbas. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 59, 1, 28–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2018.1428904>
- TISHKOV, V. (1996): *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in and after the Soviet Union: The Mind Aflame*. SAGE. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446279427>
- TUATHAIL, G.Ó. (1994): (Dis) placing geopolitics: writing on the maps of global politics. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 12, 5, 525–546. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d120525>
- TUATHAIL, G.Ó., DALBY, S. (1998). Introduction: rethinking geopolitics: towards a critical geopolitics. In: Tuathail, G.Ó., Dalby, S. (eds.): *Rethinking geopolitics*. Routledge, London, 13–27.
- WÖBER, S. (2013): Making or breaking the Republic of Moldova: the autonomy of Gagauzia. *European Diversity and Autonomy Papers-EDAP*, 2.
- ZABARAH, D.A. (2012): Opportunity structures and group building processes: An institutional analysis of the secession processes in Pridnestrovie and Gagauzia between 1989 and 1991. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 45, 1–2, 183–192. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2012.03.007>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article was written with the support of the project Where have all the natsmen gone? Ethnic Minorities in the Post-Soviet Area (GAČR 22-13347S).

ORCID

LIBOR JELEN

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3168-7090>