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Research Article

Gagauz Identity in the Post-Soviet Period*

Post-Sovyet Dönemde Gagauz Kimliği

Nesibe Ayşe SAĞLAM¹ , Yusuf ADIGÜZEL² 

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¹Erzurum Technical University, Faculty of Letters, Department of Sociology, Erzurum, Turkey

²Sakarya University, Faculty of Communication, Department of Journalism, Istanbul, Turkey

ORCID: N.A.S. 0000-0001-8969-8270;
Y.A. 0000-0002-8400-1099

Corresponding author:

Nesibe Ayşe SAĞLAM,
Erzurum Technical University, Faculty of Letters, Department of Sociology,
Erzurum, Turkey

E-mail: nesibe.saglam@erzurum.edu.tr

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ABSTRACT

The article covers how the reproduction and reconstruction of the Gagauz identity occurs in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia within Moldova in the Post-Soviet period, which institutions and practices were involved in this process and how identity was transmitted to new generations. The article also explores how individuals live, maintain and pass down their ethnic identity through media practices and socialisation areas like family, school, church where daily lives are spent. In-depth interviews were conducted with 28 people in April-May 2018 in the Gagauz Autonomous Region via the ethnographic technique. Our findings revealed that the Gagauzi lived, constructed and transmitted their ethnic identities in a "limited" rather than holistic way in their socialisation practices. Contrary to expectations, there is clear evidence that the Gagauz identity has begun to erode rather than strengthen in the post-autonomy period. We found their perception of Russian as their mother tongue besides their ethnic language has weakened Gagauz and the proliferation of mixed marriages leads to an erosion in their ethnic identity. The Gagauz identity, which has become more vulnerable and open to global influences, has ceased to be stationary and localised, but has begun to be reshaped by global conditions in line with transnational mobility.

Keywords: Gagauz, Gagauzia, Gagauz identity, Reproduction of identity



1. Introduction

Most social scientists consider identity as *flexible, superficial, external, in flux* rather than *given, defined, permanent, immutable* etc. L. Berger (2017: 125) stated that identity is not something “given,” but bestowed or constructed in acts of social recognition. Hall also argued that identity, the unity and internal homogeneity, accepted as foundational, is not natural, but a constructed form of closure, with “every identity naming as its necessary, even if silenced and unspoken other, that which it ‘lacks’ ” (2014: 282).

Identities constantly change due to differentiations in social structures and are reshaped depending on the era, geography, historical past, political-economic and the social conditions that they are part of. Ethnic identities are transformed according to social conditions at a global and local level and reposition themselves. In the breakaway regions, once a Soviet territory, ethnic identities started to reform after the Union’s dissolution. A need arose for a new ideology or identity model to fill the ideological gap formed after the dissolution. New identity models emerged at varying levels in each ethnic community. National models were reshaped by mixing both with elements inherited from the past and new trends caused by globalisation” (Garibova, 2012: 22-23). A common mixed identity model is emerging for all post-Soviet Turkic peoples. The “implicit” Russian identity, partially emerging in this model, is slightly incompatible with the local identity and is maintained in a nearly balanced way (2012: 24). Gagauz people also wanted to revive and reform their ethnic identity after political autonomy was granted in 1994 (King, 1997). The Gagauzi, Orthodox Christians of Turkic origin, speak “Gagauz”, close to Turkey Turkish, lived in the Balkans under the Byzantine Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire, the Romanian Kingdom and the Soviet Union. Today, the Gagauzi, the majority of them in Autonomous *Gagauz Yeri* in Moldova, live in various countries like Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkey and EU countries. They did not have their own state until Gagauzia was established, except for 130 years of political formation under the Byzantine Empire. From the 11th century under the rules of various nations, they preserved their identity by developing various identity strategies such as sometimes adapting to the states in question in their sovereignty, – perhaps sometimes partly assimilated, sometimes presenting themselves as they are. It was during the Soviet rule that the Gagauz identity was significantly differentiated and was on the breaking point of collapse. It was mainly caused by transformations in the social structure then, the closure of churches, the widespread modern educational institutions and the effects of media because these institutions and tools were crafted according to the Soviet Union’s identity policies. Until then, the Gagauzi were able to actually revive and reproduce their cultural identity in informal settings such as family, street, market-market, working life, cultural events, etc. However, educational institutions and media, which became widespread in this period, started to adversely affect the experience and reproduction of the Gagauz identity. With the dissolution of the USSR and the formation process of Gagauzia, it was aimed to activate, reproduce and build the ethnic identity in formal and informal areas. However, both local conditions and global socio-economic and cultural radical changes did not allow the new order of Gagauzia to be constructed on the basis of a static, fixed, locally oriented identity reproduction.

Our main research problem is to explore what changes the Gagauzi’s cultural life and identity underwent during the post-Soviet period. After the Union’s collapse, the Gagauzi, like other ethnic communities, faced a shock and crisis, and very rapid radical changes occurred in their social structure. Political autonomy was gained, but any sound institutionalisation of education, media, health, etc. was not achieved for a long time. Many men and women from all ages emigrated

abroad to access jobs, education or better living opportunities (Chirciu, 2014). Thus, the Gagauz society evolved from a self-closed, static, traditional community structure with an agricultural economy into an open, mobile, permeable structure interacting with various communities. Under the circumstances, the education, media and other institutions restructured were built around not Gagauzi, but Soviet language-cultural heritage. The impact of Soviet heritage on institutionalisation has also so far affected everyday life, making it difficult to reproduce the Gagauz identity. The present study aims to explore and reveal the case of the inhabitants in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia who define themselves as Gagauz, focussing on their efforts to reproduce their identities in daily life. With a diaspora in different countries and a population of 250,000 people, the Gagauzi deserve more social research. The erosion observed in the Gagauz's ethnic identity although they have their own educational institutions, universities and media outlets motivated us to conduct this research.¹

2. Methodology

Ethnographic field research, a qualitative method, was employed for the present study on the Gagauz people in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia in Moldova. The region has a population of 134,535, consisting of 23 villages and 3 towns. The interviews were held between April 16 and May 18, 2018 with people living in 7 villages and 2 towns named "Comrat, Ceardâr-Lunga, Avdarma, Beşalma, Dizgince, Tomai, Chirsova, Congaz and Copceac". The interviewees were determined through a purposive technique of snowball sampling. Since the research primarily focuses on how any Gagauz individual produces, maintains and circulates the values of his/her identity in daily life practices, the interviews were held with people with variables such as being from different villages, towns, age, gender, occupation, and having the ability to speak the ethnic language.

3. Data Collection Techniques

For the study, 28 people, –13 men, 15 women aged between 12 and 76– were interviewed through the qualitative technique of "in-depth interviews". We also visited nurseries, kindergartens, schools, a university, the Grt Center, Newspaper Anasözü, Mariya Maruneviç Science and Research Centre, cultural centres like Dom Kultur, museums, churches and some officials employed in these institutions provided illuminative information. Thus, the functions and roles of the relevant institutions in the revival and reconstruction of the Gagauz identity were explored.

Furthermore, we attended religious, national and cultural ceremonies in the region during our field work. These include Little Easter (April 16), Sunday Rites, Mihail Çakır Remembrance Day (April 26), Hıdırellez Feast (May 6, spring festival). Participating in them proved fruitful in understanding the inner world of the community and how they reproduce their identities in their local inner worlds.

The interviews were conducted via the interview form with semi-structured open-ended questions. All the interviews were recorded on a voice recorder with the permission and approval of the researchers. Observations and some experiences were also noted instantly. Research-related photos, video recordings, books and magazines were also obtained. Statistical data were obtained from the relevant institutions. The materials that can be considered as field notes also provided valuable data.

¹ We had this impression as a result of the preliminary research we made before determining the research population, our review of literature, monitoring of the media, interviews with the Gagauzi in Turkey and the data obtained from the interviews carried out in various cultural, religious, scientific activities etc.

Table 1: Participants in In-depth Interviews²

Interviewee	Place	Gender	Age	Occupation
Nikolay	Komrat	Male	76	Pensioner
Todur	Avdarma	Male	63	Attendant at Culture Centre & Teacher & Writer
Dora	Kongaz	Female	60	Teacher
Olga	Komrat	Female	59	Pensioner & Elderly Sitter
Şasa	Komrat	Female	58	Pensioner & Household employee
Lübov	Çadır Lunga	Female	57	Headmaster
Mihail	Çadır Lunga	Male	56	Thespian
Anna	Komrat	Female	53	Bazaar Worker
Maria	Avdarma	Female	41	Attendant at Culture Centre
Roya	Kirsova	Female	38	Market Owner
Dimitri	Dizgince	Male	32	Lecturer
Anjela	Beşalma	Female	30	Greengrocer
Lina	Avdarma	Female	26	Civil Servant
Georgy	Dizgince	Male	23	University Student & Teacher
Vita	Kıpçak	Male	21	University Student
Natalia	Avdarma	Female	20	University Student
Atanas	Çadır Lunga	Male	20	University Student
Dima	Kirsova	Male	20	University Student
Marina	Kıpçak	Female	20	University Student
Zina	Kongaz	Female	18	High School Student
Petri	Avdarma	Male	18	High School Student
Aleksander	Kongaz	Male	17	High School Student
Marianna	Avdarma	Female	16	High School Student
Slava	Avdarma	Male	15	Secondary School Student
Edvardo	Avdarma	Male	15	Secondary School Student
Valeşka	Kongaz	Female	14	Secondary School Student
Yuliya	Avdarma	Female	13	Secondary School Student
Vova	Avdarma	Male	12	Secondary School Student

4. Data Analysis

All the voice recordings obtained in the interviews were deciphered by the researcher and subjected to “content analysis” of certain concepts, codes and themes. The analysis was made using the MAXQDA 2018 analysis program, frequently used in qualitative research. Firstly, the sound recordings transcribed into texts were uploaded to the program, and then, for a systematic analysis, the data were analysed through certain themes and encodings created carefully and in detail (Creswell, 2017: 613). The themes and codes in question were created in the light of the data and the theoretical literature, with our main themes being family, education, media, church and national-cultural ceremonies.

5. Findings

Identity construction starts in the family as the first place for socialisation, and continue in areas such as schools, churches, media and last for life. In this study, the socialisation spaces of

² The interviewees permitted us to use their real names in the research. Some names given here are real names, but some were replaced by different names used in Gagauz to avoid confusion because they repeat more than once.

Gagauz identity and family as a collective memory transmitter are presented with regard to how the cultural identity is manifested in formal and informal settings like education, media institutions and national-cultural ceremonies, its transmission and reproduction, and to what extent Gagauz individuals manifest these transmissions and constructions of identity in daily life practices. The data were evaluated from the perspectives of instrumental/situational and constructivist approaches of ethnicity theories.

First of all, we examined the family, which is the first area of socialization, trying to determine the presence and absence of ethnic life experiences suggesting identity indicators such as language spoken at home, worship, rituals, celebration of special days, music listened to and meals. Our analysis hinged on the views of the sociologists Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's "primary socialization" and G. H. Mead's "self-formation and development." Secondly, the role of educational institutions characterised by formal relations in the construction of ethnic and national identities was explained through the approaches of the constructivist theory representatives Eric Hobsbawm, Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner. However, due to the vague application of the Gagauz language and culture in educational institutions in Gagauzia, we tried to understand the identity transmission, scrutinising individually all the stages of education in connection with G. H. Mead's approach to the "formation and development of social self" and Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's "secondary socialization." To what extent the media contributes to the transmission and reproduction of identity was also considered in our analysis. After that, it was investigated whether the institution of the church, which has become functional in the post-soviet period in Gagauzia, is effective in forming common perceptions, group belonging and collective memory among individuals through religious prayers and rituals and in transferring this memory. Finally, it was investigated whether cultural ceremonies, invented or revived after autonomy was granted, are effective in bringing together the group members and transferring information about their identity and values. Considering all these, the study was concluded with general evaluative comments on the present situation of the Gagauz cultural identity in terms of its viability, transmission and reproduction in all socialisation areas.

6. Identity in the Gagauz Family

Family transfers ethnic identity to individuals through language, religion, cultural practices, actions, lifestyle and many subjective values. Language is one of the most important vehicles for transmitting them. Our participants stated they generally speak in their ethnic language "Gagauz" while a larger group said they speak "Gagauz-Russian" or Russian more often, with a trivial percentage stating they only speak "Russian". Among the Gagauzes, the use and reproduction of the ethnic language in the family survives, though along with Russian. However, they do not speak Gagauz with all family members; they choose one language or another depending on whether the addressees are children or adults and while the ethnic Gagauz language is used in talking with adults (youths, middle-aged and elderly ones), they usually speak only Russian with children until a certain age (8-10).

We speak Gagauz with grown-ups at home, but Russian with children (Anjela, F, 30).

Researcher: Why Russian with kids?

Russian is used both at school at the nursery. Wherever they go, Moscow or other parts in Russia, they must know Russian. Mine understands Gagauz language, but don't understand it completely. They can understand but can't respond in Gagauz (Anjela, F, 30).

At home, I speak Gagauz with my husband and my mother-in-law and Gagauz and Russian with children. I do that so the children know both Gagauz and Russian because they also need to learn Russian. (Lina, F, 26).

Roya, F, 38: I speak Gagauz with my son, but speak Russian with my little daughter.

Researcher: Why are you making such a distinction?

Roya, F, 38: Because my son is older, but I speak Russian with my daughter. She will learn Gagauz anyway because we speak Gagauz in the family. But I want my daughter to acquire Russian correctly from an early age, so now I speak Russian with her.

Children begin to be taught the ethnic language only after acquiring Russian. Therefore, for the new Gagauz generation, the ethnic language is no longer a mother tongue, but a second language learned later. Russian, on the other hand, has replaced Gagauz as the first language to be acquired.

The preservation of Orthodox Christianity in the family, another component of the Gagauz identity, is maintained through actively joining religious ceremonies/rituals, transferring their ethnic religion to new generations, teaching worship to their children, and taking children to religious ceremonies. Religious beliefs shape perceptions, lifestyles and daily practices of individuals. All our participants stated they had Orthodox Christian beliefs, thus spending their special occasions like birth, wedding, death etc. in accordance with this religion. They also said they were careful to celebrate various religious festivals. Some parents said they gave their children suggestions and incentives for their religion.

My children pray. I tell them to pray altogether, I know they pray. But I don't know whether their own children pray? I tell mine to teach their kids to pray (Nikolay, M, 76).

I urge my children to go to the church, and they do so (Anjela, F, 30).

My children go to the church, where my son plays nice music. (Dora, F, 60).

We have many married youngsters taking their children to the church every Sunday so they can be healthy and strong (Marianna, F, 36).

The interviewees' statements demonstrated that Gagauz ethnic music, also indicative of identity, is generally retained in mind and reproduced in most Gagauz families through Gagauz radio stations.

For example, I always listen to Gagauz radio (Marianna, F, 36). My father tunes into Gagauz channels always playing folk songs. We also listen to music in Russian and Gagauz (Natalia, F, 20).

Gagauzia Radio (GRT FM) is the only radio frequency in which songs, folk songs and various radio programs are broadcast in Gagauz. In addition, music is broadcast in different languages such as Russian, Moldovan, Bulgarian, Turkish, Ukrainian and English. Although some youths said they did not listen to it, the interviewees from all age groups stated Gagauz radio was listened to in their homes.³

Like other ethnic groups Gagauz people have unique eating cultures. The interviewees said they mostly consume meat dishes and pastry foods, adding that wine, a Gagauz national drink, is present on almost every family's dinner table at each meal time.

Our traditional dishes, roasting, pickles, stuffed leaves, and soup are the best dishes (Marina, F, 20). Gagauz people mostly like meat. Also, wine accompanies meals every day. But of course in moderate amounts. Not so much. For example, my husband avoids drinking wine when we sit with the children. At lunch, we drink 100g or so, 70-80g with my daughters. I think it's good for the heart and blood. Wine is clean and just grape juice. With no harm it is almost like medicine (Maria, F, 41).

3 1-2 years ago my mother used to listen to Gagauz station respecting my father's preference and I used to listen to it, but I no longer do. However, we always listen to Gagauz radio (Zina, F, 18).

As a result, identity continues to be produced through ethnic language, ethnic religion, worship, rituals, music, cuisine culture, etc. which reflect identity indicators in family. As long as these are retained, Gagauz identity will continue to be produced because “family plays a decisive role in the maintenance of the social order, through social as well as biological reproduction, that is, reproduction of the structure of the social space and social relations” (Bourdieu, 1995: 139). While identity transmission occurs in this manner in Gagauz families where all members live together, the situation differs in families where some family members are not home, especially where parents have gone abroad to work. Due to the socio-economic problems in Gagauzia many parents have left their children behind at early ages to be looked after by grandparents or close relatives so as to work abroad particularly in Turkey and Russia, which is still the case. This situation causes the elimination of parents’ roles of transmitting their native language, religion and culture to children. The fact that mothers and fathers, especially mothers, go abroad is a problem in itself. In this case, the old generation (grandparents) often replaces parents, becoming transmitters of the identity. In fact, the old generation’s replacement of parents in Gagauzia seems in a sense to be more advantageous in identity transmission because it is them that transmit and entrench traditional values in others (Durkheim, 2006: 340). However, while there is no problem with the old generation’s transmission of religion, culture, and lifestyle, problems occur with the ethnic language’s transmission because mother tongue cannot be transmitted to the majority of children though there are those to whom it is transmitted. That is because parents going to work in Russia usually live away from children until they are 8-9 years old, they encourage the older generations with them to speak Russian, not Gagauz for them to adapt to social and education life in Russia more easily. Therefore, parents abroad, whose function in identity transmission becomes problematic, also prevent older generations who serve to compensate for gaps in identity transmission from fully transmitting ethnic values to the new generation. In short, the ethnic identity’s transmission to and reconstruction in future generations cannot be carried out efficiently even during the primary socialisation process.

7. Gagauz Identity in Educational Institutions

For Gagauz society the active role of educational institutions in the transmission and construction of their identities is a recent phenomenon. With the foundation of Gagauzia, this process, though in a limited way, started in all educational settings, including pre-schooling (nurseries), primary education, secondary education and university. Teaching Gagauz has been made compulsory for students in all schools (Menz, 2013: 66; Kvilinkova, 2013: 85).

The Gagauz people did not have their own schools for many years; therefore, they were educated in the schools and languages of the states they lived in (Greek, Bulgaria, Romania and Russian Union). (Such educational opportunities were accessible to only a limited number of Gagauz people.) The inclusion of the Gagauz in modern mass education occurred during the Soviet period (1944-1991) (Iusumbeli, 2008: 310-313). They were only educated in their native language for a short time between 1958 and 1961 (Karanfil, 2013a: 2168). During the Soviet period, this first happened when Khrushchev was in power between 1956 and 1961, during which indigenous cultures were given concessions. Before that, no schools had ever existed where the language of instruction was in Gagauz and those opened under Khrushchev were closed after 1962 (Chinn & Roper, 1998: 90). Secondly, with the USSR’s disintegration process, in the late 1980s, education in the Gagauz language began to be offered in some classes limitedly although the dominant language of instruction was Russian, (Chinn & Roper, 1998: 90). Following the autonomy of Gagauzia, courses

of “Gagauz Language and Arts”, “Gagauz Language and Literature” and “Gagauz History and Culture” started to be taught in Gagauz in all institutions from kindergartens to universities (Özkan, 2017: 37, 38; Kvilinkova, 2013: 88). This new period is “considered as a turning point in the revival of the Gagauz language and identity because after a very long time, Gagauz schools started to use their ethnic language as the language of instruction again. Also something that is quite noteworthy is that the Gagauz language served as a language of communication only at home and in the street for centuries and did not gain status” (Karanfil, 2013c: 113).

Although all the courses in nurseries/kindergartens (Uşak başçaları)⁴ are presented in Russian, the common language of communication there, 2 classes a week have been allocated to the course “Gagauz Language and Crafts” since the establishment of Gagauzia.

We only teach pupils to speak the Gagauz language. There are also courses of crafts, speech arts, language development, etc. (Dora, F, 60, teacher).

At kindergartens the kids learn to speak in Gagauz 2 days a week. There is little written instruction here, and it is only in Russian. We don't teach how to write in Gagauz fearing that any mixture of the two languages will cause difficulties (Çadır Lunga Kindergarten Principal, F, 67).

Apart from this course, lessons of spoken Gagauzian are provided through daily activities such as eating, cleaning, dressing and playing on certain days and at designated times every week.

I have activities for 1 group one day every week. I spend my time in that group all day. The kids have breakfast in the morning and we talk about what we eat and what tools we eat with in Gagauz. Then we do things in the craft class, then we go out and I play with them in the courtyard.

I try to teach theme-based games in Gagauz language (Dora, F, 60, teacher).

Each group also has plays, theatres and fairy tales, in which the ethnic language is used for a day every week. At the same time, information about the Gagauz language, culture and history is shared with the kids through religious-national ceremonies held at certain times.

We make great efforts in this kindergarten. We also celebrate Easter and Christmas. We play games with the kids, which is very amusing. We try to teach our culture and customs here. They always do this at school because they are vital values and should not be lost. Otherwise, our culture will be lost (Avdarma Kindergarten Principal, F, 53).

With such efforts, we try to ensure that children recognise, love and adopt the Gagauz language, culture, and history. Trying to teach children even routine daily practices and simple conversations in nursery schools indicates that ethnic language use is not a common practice in families. Then, the ethnic language, produced in informal areas until recently, and transmitted in the family in a natural manner since birth, is no longer transmitted as a mother tongue, but is tried to be taught, compensated and transferred as a second language in formal fields and in kindergartens. However, as Berger and Luckmann (2008: 204) argue, the primary socialisation process determines the formal processes of secondary socialisation: “it must deal with an already formed self and an already internalised world. It cannot construct subjective reality ex nihilo. This presents a problem because the already internalised reality has a tendency to persist. Whatever new contents are now to be internalised must somehow be superimposed upon this already present reality.” Since Gagauzi children speak only Russian with their parents at home up to a certain age, Russian has become their mother tongue. Therefore, the Gagauz language has become a secondary language and kindergarten teachers mention having difficulty teaching their own language to kids.

4 ‘Uşak Başçaları’ are pre-schooling institutions with a certain curriculum and teachers, created in the USSR period and function as kindergartens, and all children in Gagauzia attend them from ages 2-2.5 until school age from 8.30 am to 6 pm.

In Gagauzia, Russian continues to dominate all school programs as the language of instruction in all primary and secondary schools. In the Gagauz language, only 3-4 hours of “Gagauz Language and Literature” and “Gagauz History and Culture” are taught weekly from the primary school to university.

Table 2: Subjects in Gagauzi Language in Gagauzia in 2017-2018 Academic Year⁵

Grade Subject	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X	XI	XII
Gagauz Language	3	3	3	3	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	1
Gagauz History and Culture (Gagauz Literature)	-	-	-	-	1	1	1	1	1	3(so) 2(sci)	3(so) 2(sci)	3(so) 2(sci)

The table shows grade-based hours and classes taught in Gagauz in a weekly schedule in Gagauzia. In grades 10-12, classes in the Gagauz language range from 4 hours (3 social and 1 Gagauz Language) in social fields to 3 hours (2 science and 1 Gagauz Language) in science fields. The interviewees’ statements also confirmed that the general language of instruction is Russian today, but some classes are taught in the ethnic language in all grades:

In general, classes are taught in Russian at school. We have 5 classes of Gagauz Language a week. Some of them are allocated to teaching Gagauz Language (3 class hours) and some of them are for Gagauz History and Culture (2 class hours) (Edvarado, M, 15)

There are 3 hours of elementary Gagauz Language in primary and secondary schools and 4 class hours in high schools; that is, we have courses of “Gagauz Language”. The students also have “Gagauz History and Culture”, also taught in the ethnic language (Lübov, F, 57, headmistress)

At Comrat University, the only university of the region, only a limited number of classes are offered in the Gagauz language in the first year, with all other courses taught in Russian. There is no department where Gagauz is the language of instruction.

There are only 2 classes of Gagauz here. We have them only this year and then there is none (Dima, M, 20, University student)

Even though, compared to pre-autonomy, all educational institutions from kindergartens to Gagauzia universities have become more functional for the transmission, construction and reproduction of the Gagauz language, history, culture, that is, its identity, this happens to a limited extent. That is because the curriculum of educational institutions is implemented using the Soviet heritage Russian language, not by focusing on the language and culture of Gagauz. Ultimately, individuals’ identification is formed in the Russian language from the ages 2-2.5 to 25 through educational institutions. According to our participants, this long-term identification (in Russian) in schools pervades many practices in their daily lives such as their work environment, street and market language, watching TV, listening to music, reading newspapers, internet use, social media language and even speaking at home, all carried out in Russian. This situation should not only be considered as the use of a different language other than ethnic language in everyday life because cultural codes, symbolic values and meanings are also conveyed via this language. Gagauz individuals find it reasonable to identify with Russian language and culture. Some families, teachers and students find it right that the Gagauz language, culture and history are limitedly transmitted at all educational levels. For various reasons, they do not want more courses to be taught in Gaga-

⁵ We took this course program personally from Avdarma School on May 2, 2018 during our field work.

uz in educational institutions. Russian is considered more functional than Gagauz in accessing education, work and life opportunities outside their regions.

Gagauzia is too small and so is our native language, so where else can we go with this language; what can we achieve with Gagauzian, where and how can we raise ourselves properly? (Maria, F, 57)

8. Gagauz Identity in the Media

For Gagauz people, although the media has become functional with the autonomy process for production and construction of national identity, Russian remains the dominant media language. A Turkish page first appeared in the press in newspaper “Literatura Şi Arta”. In 1988, newspaper Anasözü, the longest living newspaper ever published in the Gagauz language ever since (Güngör & Argunşah, 1998: 79), it started to be published. In addition, the newspapers Meydan, Gagauz Voice, People’s Union, Voice of Truth and Açıkgöz have been and are still mainly printed in Gagauz or Gagauz-Russian. Apart from these newspapers, others are either completely or predominantly in Russian. The magazine Sabaa Yıldızı is a Gagauz periodical published as an ethnic, cultural and historical magazine. In addition, then there is magazine Güneşçik for children and Mirror Magazine, a literature magazine. There are also books published in Gagauz in genres of fairy tales, stories, novels, poetry etc.

The publications mentioned here are not found sufficient by the people we interviewed. These publications, meant to produce, transmit and spread the identity of Gagauz, seem to have little effect on our participants, and almost most of them read Russian, not them.

I read Gagauzi Beltch –Gagauzia News, which is in Russian (Lina, F, 26).

I read Moldovan newspapers because Russian used there is quite clear and I like reading about politics (Petri, M, 17).

I don’t read papers. I use the internet to follow what happens in Moldova or Gagauzia. *The researcher: Which newspaper on line do you follow?* I read Gagauz Media, which is in Russian (Vita, M, 21).

The first radio broadcast in Gagauz began in 1986 (Türk, 2016: 91). “Gagauz Radio” was founded in 1990 and remains the only radio frequency broadcasting in Gagauz⁶. “Gagauz TV”, the only TV channel broadcasting in Gagauz language, was set up in the late 1990s and continues to broadcast under the name Gagauzia Radio Television (GRT). While in the early days of GRT broadcasts, only 25-30 minutes of news was presented in Gagauz, nowadays besides “News”, various Gagauz programs are presented about Gagauz language, history, culture and religion. Middle-aged and elderly interviewees said they watch GRT for “News” and “special programs on Gagauz history, culture”, young people often said they rarely watched the channel because it has no movies, series and diverse programs and when they watch it, it is for news and special programs appealing to them.

I usually watch Russian channels because there is more to watch, like films and concerts. I also like Gagauz channels because I keep up with what happened where. They broadcast concerts on holidays, which I also like watching. (Olga, F, 59)

We watch Russian channels and there are all kinds of channels. They inform us of any news from Comrat. I watch them in the Gagauz language (Anjela, F, 30).

I’d rather watch and like Russian programmes (Dima, M, 30).

6 GRT İstoriyası [History of GRT] (2019, 15 March). *Gagauziya Radio Television*. Retrieved from <https://grt.md/grt/>

There is a Russian channel I like watching (Petri, M, 18).

I watch Russian channels and films (Marianna, F, 16).

Though some women who have been to Turkey for work and some people, members of whose families are there, say they watch Turkish channels, Gagauzians from all age groups (child-ren-young-middle-aged, elderly) said they mostly watch Russian TV channels. GRT FM, on the other hand, can be said to be the most popular media platform of identity transmission among nearly all age groups, occupying an important place in their daily lives.

We listen to Gagauz radio. Gagauz songs are good and cheerful (Şasa, F, 58)

I always listen to GRT radio while working in the kitchen. I often listen to Gagauz ballads. *The researcher: In which language do they broadcast music?* In Russian, Moldovan and Gagauz. We always listen to Gagauz radio for the news. The news from Comrat, the whole Gagauzia (Maria, F, 41)

We often listen to GRT, which we like a lot. I like listening to Moldovan, Bulgarian and Gagauz music (Dimitri, M, 32)

I tend to listen to Gagauz music. We have a Gagauz radio channel I listen to (Dima, M, 20)

It is noteworthy that this radio station broadcasts Russian, Moldovan, English and Turkish music as well as Gagauz programs and music.

In brief, given the limited number of local media possibilities in Gagauzia, although there have been attempts to introduce, display, produce and circulate the Gagauz language, history, culture, religion and traditions, the current state of individuals in terms of following these media platforms of ethnic identity does not suffice to experience adequate identification through them. Therefore, Gagauz individuals can be said to have a minimum level of reproduction of their identities through local media. In Gagauzia media, it is not the Gagauz language-culture (identity) but the Russian one that is dominant as in the Soviet period.

9. Gagauz Identity in Churches

Christianity plays an important role in the formation of the ethnic union of the Gagauz people. Their religion distinguishes them from other Turks in the Balkans (Turkish-speaking Muslim Turks) (Pokrovskaya, 2017: 421; Menz, 2007: 123). For Gagauz people, Christianity and the church are important areas of identification. However, they have never had any national churches. They were committed to Greek, Bulgarian, Romanian and Russian Churches in various periods and performed their prayers in the languages of the priests of Bulgarian, Romanian and Russian origins even in their regional churches (Aygil, 1995: 75). Actually, the Bible in Gagauz (Evangelie) has been available for about a century (Kvilinkova, 2013: 84).⁷ It was first translated into Gagauz by Mihail Çakır in 1909 (Bulgar, 2007: 35). However, because they lacked their own national churches, they could not perform their Bible-based religious practices in Gagauz, and always conducted worships in the languages of the churches they were affiliated with. In the Soviet era, as in other regions, the churches they attended were closed. Churches were used for other purposes - mostly as warehouses (Hatlas & Zyromski, 2011: 539). With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Gagauz people experienced religious renaissance and churches were re-opened for worship (Hatlas & Zyromski, 2011: 540). Thus, churches closed in the Soviet period, became functional again in the post-soviet period, when Gagauzia became autonomous. All Orthodox churches in Gagauzia have since been affiliated with the Moldovan Orthodox Church, which it-

7 In addition, Kvilinkova (2013: 79-84) claims religious texts have an important role in the use of the term "Gagauz language" and in the development of the "Gagauz language".

self is affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church. The language of worship is Gagauz, Moldovan and Russian, in accordance with their religious commitment and the region's official languages. Among our interviewees, the city-dwellers stated that worship in churches is conducted in the three languages mentioned above, and those living in the villages said it is performed in two languages, in Russian and Gagauz.

Prayers are held in three languages at church so everybody understands them – in Russian, Gagauz and Moldovan (Olga, F, 59)

Russian is used more often, but Gagauz is also used at church. Gagauz is used in villages because everybody understands Gagauz there. In towns and Comrat different languages are used because not all inhabitants are Gagauzi there. So Russian is the language of worship there (Mihail, M, 56)

Prayers are recited in Gagauz, Russian and Moldovan. The Moldovan language is the least used, with Gagauz and Russian being used equally (Marina, F, 20)

In fact, the worship in the cities, towns and villages is mostly conducted in Russian and only some short prayers are recited in Gagauz and Moldovan. Therefore, the general language of rituals in churches is Russian and the ethnic language is produced to a limited extent. Today, some churches are making attempts at performing religious ceremonies in the ethnic language. If Gagauz people can successfully pursue these initiatives, they will be able to create their national churches and perform their religious rituals in their ethnic language.

Religion becomes meaningful as far as individuals and groups give it meaning (Mitchell, 2014: 554). Mihail Çakır said every faithful and good Christian Gagauz must go to the church and pray on Sunday and on Christian feast days (Cited in Bulgar 2007: 87). The Gagauzi accept seven sacraments, recognised by the Orthodox church: baptism, sacred anointment, confession/penance, komka (accepting sacrifice of Christ), popazlık (holy orders); marriage, anointment of the dead (cited in Güngör & Argunşah, 1998: 93). These religious practices are conducted in church, and among individually practiced religious actions are morning-evening prayers and fasting. Gagauz people perform most of their religious worships and rituals in churches. Although they cannot perform religious practices entirely in their ethnic language, they go to church for worship to produce their religious identity of “Orthodox Christianity” effectively. The places of worship are those where the production of religious values and identities are managed and regulated (Guest, 2012: 100,101). All the interviewees in this study stated they were committed to their ethnic religion, Orthodox Christian beliefs and the majority of the interviewers said that though not so often, they go to churches once or twice a month and perform their religious rituals as required by their religion.

I go to the church more than once a month. My children also go, my son plays music there. So does my husband (Dora, F, 60)

Perhaps not every week, but as long as we can, we go to the church (Elena, F, 46)

Yes, I do, not every week though. Everybody here believes in Allah (God), so they attend the church. They all go on Easter day and at other times they go on Sundays (Vita, M, 21).

I attend the church on big Easters. I think I go once a month (Aleksandr, M, 17).

Most interviewees stated they actively attended major religious ceremonies marking special occasions in their lives, such as post-natal baptism, “steonoz” -church marriage- and religious commemoration days (the birth and resurrection of Christ, etc.). All these religious practices and ceremonies held in churches enable them to meet as congregations, creating a common perception of identity and group belonging and collective memory.

10. Gagauz Identity in National-Cultural Ceremonies

Gagauz people have both cultural ceremonies from the past and national ceremonies invented after Gagauzia's foundation, which help preserve and maintain their identity. The national-cultural ceremonies they celebrate today are the Hıdırellez Festival, Mihail Çakır Memorial Day, the Mother Tongue Festival, the November Festival, and the Wine Festival. The November and Hıdırellez festivals are ceremonies of cultural origin related to their traditional lives and Turkish culture. Though these ceremonies ceased to be celebrated in the Soviet era, they have been revived today. National ceremonies such as Mihail Çakır Remembrance Day, the Mother Tongue festival and Wine festival were invented after the foundation of Gagauzia.

The biggest cultural ceremonies from the Gagauzi's past are Hıdırellez and November Festivals. They did not celebrate these festivals during the Soviet period, but started to celebrate by reviving them after autonomy (Argunşah, 2007: 77). They are festivals created and defined based on their traditional lifestyles of farming and livestock-raising (Çimpoş, 2016: 278). The November festival used to be thought to mark the start of winter, yields of farming and animal husbandry used to be harvested and animals sacrificed and served to people. Today, this festival is celebrated as a day when only some families sacrifice (slaughter) animals and serve them to their relatives and friends.

The November festival day is a big day. We sacrifice animals on that day. We set the table to eat together. This festival is our tradition and our culture (Yuliya, F, 13).

Hıdırellez Day is considered as the beginning of summer and is celebrated as marking the revival of nature (Argunşah & Güngör, 1998: 98). Today, Hıdırellez is enjoyed with a rich ceremony attended by most Gagauzians, both as a Turkish tradition and as a meaningful memorial day for their Orthodoxy.

We are so amused at Hıdırellez, which is a huge festival. Everyone gets together, eats and drinks, there are concerts, games, horse races and we attend the festival every year (Olga, F, 59).

With this ceremony, an atmosphere is created where the Gagauz language, culture and history (identity) are displayed with people eating traditional Gagauz meals, enjoying themselves accompanied with the local folk dances. The Hıdırellez festival plays an important role in introducing and transmitting the Gagauz identity to younger generations.

As for national ceremonies, the Memorial Day of Mihail Çakır, who made huge contributions to the revival of Gagauz national identity, has been commemorated on his birthday since the 1990s. Todur Zanet, summarises Mihail Çakır's role in the maintenance of Gagauz identity as follows: "Intellectual Mihail Çakır occupies a special place in the language, culture, history, science and religion of Gagauz people and also in the heart and soul of each Gagauz. Undoubtedly, the existence and identity of Gagauz people today owes so much to Gagauzia's apostle Mihail Çakır, whose efforts and accomplishments are a God-granted gift."⁸ Mihail Çakır was almost forgotten during the Soviet period! After the USSR broke up, Gagauz scholars began investigating his life and works. Today, his books are studied in schools and his prayers have begun to be recited in churches (Karanfil, 2013b: 195). The commemoration day for Mihail Çakır "was first introduced on 26-28 April 1991 to mark the 130th anniversary of his birth and he was commemorated with great ceremonies" (Argunşah, 2007: 77). This ceremony creates an atmosphere in which the Gagauz identity becomes alive, introducing their national leaders to Gagauzi people through prayers, poems, songs, folk songs and conferences in Gagauz, informing Gagauz people

8 Mihail ÇAKİR'in duuma gününden 158 yıl tamamlandı [It has been 158 years since Mihail ÇAKİR's birthday] (2019, 27 April) *Anasözü Newspaper* Retrieved from: <http://anasozu.com/mihail-cakirin-duuma-gunundan-157-yil-tamamnandi/>

of Mihail Çakır's efforts and recommendations for them. However, the ceremony is not completely marked by festivities in the ethnic language either.

With "Mother Tongue Day", invented after Gagauzia's autonomy, the Gagauzi celebrate the introduction of the written language in Gagauz language. People like Mihail Çakır, Dionis Tanasoglu, Nikolay Baboglu, Stepan Kuroglu, who contributed to the development of the Gagauz written language are commemorated on this day, celebrated with poems, theatrical plays, songs, folk songs prepared by students in the Gagauz language and folk dances. With this festival, the importance of the Gagauz language is emphasised, and the mother tongue's revival and use by young generations are encouraged.

Another national ceremony is "Wine Festival" as viticulture is an important source of income in Gagauzya. After grapes are picked, everyone makes wine from them. Hand-made samples of wine are introduced and the best ones are determined in November with a large organisation in Comrat every year which includes Gagauz local dishes and folk dances. The wine festival, at which the Gagauz people come together and renew their collective memories, was invented in 2007 as a national ceremony.⁹

These ceremonies create an atmosphere where the Gagauz identity is exhibited. Most of our interviewees said they usually attend them without fail. Through these ceremonies, both local residents and Gagauz people abroad meet every year. Thus, the group both feels a sense of belonging and differentiates themselves from other groups. However, Russian is still the more common language in these ceremonies.

In festivals, Russian is often used, but Gagauzian is also used compared to other festivals (Elena, F, 46)

During celebrations Russian is used more often, but Gagauzian is also used (Marianna, F, 16)

While poems, songs, folk dances, folk dances, theatres etc. are performed and displayed in Gagauz during ceremonies, the general presentation language, speeches and explanations are mostly in Russian. Nevertheless, these ceremonies' contributions to the production, transmission and construction of the Gagauz identity are important in that they bring the Gagauz people together and repeatedly create an environment every year where the ethnic group's unique language, religion, history, culture, lifestyle etc. are displayed.

11. Conclusion and Discussion

In each area of socialisation such as family, school, media, church and national-cultural ceremonies, the Gagauzi in Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia live, transmit and produce their ethnic identities not in a holistic, but limited and problematic way in their daily lives. While Gagauz people lived their identities only in daily life during the Soviet period, since the autonomy was granted, they have had the opportunity to live and produce it effectively in all areas including official and public ones. However, although there are some developments about identity transmission in these areas after autonomy was established, this has not reached sufficient levels. Since the Soviet period, the Russian language and Russian culture, which have been more effective in education, media and official institutions in the region, have continued their efficiency. In the times of progress, they have also affected informal areas such as the family, street, market, working life and cultural events. In short the transmission of the Gagauz identity has decreased in time. Such that for the new generation, Gagauz has become a second language learned after the Russian language, thus losing its status as the mother tongue to be acquired first.

9 Wine festival can be defined as a national festival due to the place and time to be held and its content.

The interviewees in the study defined themselves as having the Turkish language, of Turkic origin (Oghuzes) and Orthodox Christian. However, considering the daily life practices, there are strong signs that the features “the Turkish language” and “the Turkic lineage” have eroded. As an ethnic language, they stated they generally use Gagauz and Russian in their daily lives, and even use Russian more often; therefore, they now consider both languages as part of their identity, perceiving Russian as their mother tongue, like Gagauz. This situation, expressed by most of the participants, reveals that the defining boundaries of the Gagauz language, a crucial component of the Gagauz identity, have been wearing thinner.¹⁰

Having lived together with Bulgarian, Moldovan, Ukrainian and Russian nationals, and having believed in the same religion in the past, today they do not find it odd or objectionable to have inter-racial marriages with these groups though they were not so common in the past. Nowadays, they marry Turks and different nationals unreservedly. In extra-group marriages, differences in ethnic lineage are considered to be more normal compared to religious differences. The following statements show that it is not important whether the person to be married is of Gagauz origin and that extra-group, mixed marriages are common:

What matters for us is that the person to marry is a good person. We prefer good people. Just because you are Gagauz does not necessarily mean you should marry Gagauz people (Şasa, F, 58).

Gagauz people marry Ukrainians, Russians, Bulgarians, and Gypsy girls. Often those of other nationalities marry Gagauz girls. Due to interracial marriages, we increasingly carry mixtures of different blood and ethnicities (Mikhail, M, 56).

These utterances indicate that the socio-biological “common lineage” boundary separating Gagauz people from other groups has become permeable and has begun to erode. The wearing of boundaries of ethnic language and lineage, which constitute important components of the identity in their local geography, is thought-provoking. This also has to do with the actual and intended migrations from the region. While individuals build their own and children’s identities, what language they prefer children to speak in the family and what language of education they prefer depends on their objectives about education, employment and access to better living opportunities in transnational countries. Thinking “the language is of no use for me” with the hope of migrating from Gagauzya, some even consider Gagauz to be dysfunctional and unnecessary, avoid using the ethnic language and try to build their language identities according to their expectations about the new global settlements for living. Rather than a fixed, locally-based identity building in their local regions, the Gagauz people are trying to build their identity in line with the expectations of transnational mobility, prioritising global areas.

Ever increasing migrations from Gagauzya pose an important threat to Gagauz identity. Due to these migrations and the socio-economic and cultural situation of Gagauzya, most participants in the research worry about the future of the Gagauz identity. They think Gagauz people will disappear and they will not survive to see the end of this century if the current policies continue and some measures are not taken. They predict the new generation will not stay in the local region; they will migrate abroad and adopt the languages and cultures of the countries where they settle. What will happen remains to be seen. However, it is obvious that there are problems today with the reproduction, circulation and construction of their identities in Gagauz people’s local regions. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the identity of the Gagauz will disappear. In other words,

10 The fact that Gagauz language is on the list of endangered languages is another sign that the defining boundaries of the Gagauz ethnic language have worn out (Wurm, 2001: 54,55).

ethnic identity may not necessarily occur over a certain ethnic language and ethnic religion. As Malesevic points out (2019: 56), groups can be linguistically assimilated; religions can be secularised or transformed; traditions or symbols can be forgotten or meticulously resurrected, but groups can still remain “ethnic.”

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