

RECONFIGURING IDENTITY UNDER MIGRATION: THE CASE OF THE GAGAUZ COMMUNITY IN BESSARABIA

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Abstract: Migration is one of the defining social processes of the 21st century, profoundly transforming not only demographic structures but also the meanings of identity and belonging. This study examines the relationship between migration and national identity through the empirical case of the Gagauz community in Bessarabia. Building on contemporary sociological theories that conceptualize identity as a dynamic and socially constructed phenomenon, the research integrates theoretical perspectives with qualitative empirical data. The analysis is based on 22 in-depth interviews conducted with representatives of the Gagauz community and focuses on the mechanisms through which ethno cultural identity is constructed, maintained, and transformed in conditions of migration. The findings demonstrate that identity is not eroded by migration but reorganized through a set of interconnected practices, including collective memory, folklore, ritual life, music, and intergenerational transmission. Particular attention is given to the role of folklore as a framework of collective memory, which functions as a substitute for territorial continuity in migrant contexts. Cultural practices emerge as central mechanisms for reproducing a sense of belonging, while contemporary processes such as mobility, institutionalization of tradition, and media influence lead to adaptive transformations rather than cultural decline. The study confirms that migrant communities can sustain strong forms of identity through symbolic and practice-based mechanisms, supporting the concept of the “imagined community” and the role of collective memory in identity formation. It argues that migration should be understood not as a threat to identity, but as a condition that reveals its dynamic, processual, and socially constructed nature.

Keywords: migration, national identity, Gagauz, Bessarabia, collective memory, folklore, imagined community, transnationalism

Field: Social Sciences

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary sociological research conceptualizes national identity as a dynamic and socially constructed phenomenon rather than a fixed and essentialist category (Smith, 1991; Hall, 1990; Brubaker, 2004). Within this perspective, migration places identity under continuous pressure, as it is simultaneously challenged, negotiated, and rearticulated through interaction with the “other” and within the interplay between local and global contexts (Misheva, 2022). These processes become particularly visible in the case of small ethno cultural communities existing outside their historical homelands. The Gagauz community in Bessarabia represents a compelling example of such a case, where migration has not led to the dissolution of identity but to its transformation and symbolic consolidation. Despite geographical displacement and the absence of a nation-state framework, the Gagauz maintain sustainable forms of cultural belonging through language, religion, folklore and collective memory. Building on this perspective, migration can be understood as a multidimensional and processual phenomenon that shapes identity through networked, institutional, and cultural mechanisms (Minchev et al., 2016; Misheva, 2022). In this sense, migration does not simply disrupt identity structures but contributes to their ongoing reconstruction, producing forms of belonging that are multiple, context-dependent, and symbolically mediated. The present study examines the interrelations between migration and national identity through the empirical case of the Gagauz community in Bessarabia. The ethnic identity of the Gagauz is formed not only through internal group cultural practices, but also through interaction with other ethnic communities, which influences perceptions, stereotypes, and social adaptation.”(Horozova,2021). It integrates key theoretical approaches with qualitative data in order to analyze the mechanisms through which identity is constructed, maintained, and transformed, with particular attention to the role of collective memory, folklore, and everyday cultural practices.

From classical approaches to contemporary sociological research, national identity is conceptualized as a socially constructed rather than inherently fixed category (Anderson, 1983). It refers to a collective sense of belonging to a particular nation, grounded in shared language, culture, historical memory, symbols, traditions, and values (Smith, 1991; Anderson, 1983). In this sense, national identity is not a static attribute but a dynamic process of symbolic construction and social reproduction.

The analysis of migration and identity in the case of the Gagauz and Bulgarians in Bessarabia can

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be grounded in the ethno symbolic approach developed by Smith, who defines an ethnic community as a historically constituted population sharing origin myths, collective memory, cultural elements, and a sense of solidarity (Smith, 1986). From this perspective, identity is not a fixed attribute but a culturally sustained system of symbols and practices that reinforce its resilience across time and changing political contexts. This approach can be further developed through Anderson's concept of the nation as an "imagined community" understood as a symbolic form of belonging constructed through shared narratives, cultural practices, and communication (Anderson, 1983). In migrant contexts, where direct territorial continuity is disrupted, such symbolic mechanisms become particularly significant, as they allow the community to reproduce a sense of collective identity beyond physical proximity.

In this sense, the identity of Gagauz and Bulgarians in Bessarabia can be interpreted as a form of transnational belonging, structured not by continuous mobility but by sustained symbolic connections with the perceived homeland. These connections are maintained through cultural memory, ritual practices, and social networks, which function as mechanisms for the ongoing construction of a shared "we" across space and generations.

2. MIGRATION AS A CHALLENGE AND TRANSFORMATIVE PROCESS

Migration challenges established notions of nation and belonging by introducing new forms of cultural diversity and by problematizing the boundaries of the national community and the criteria for membership (Anderson, 1983; Smith, 1991; Brubaker, 2004; Castles & Miller, 2009). In contemporary societies, this process generates ongoing tensions between the preservation of cultural continuity and the adaptation to increasingly heterogeneous social environments.

Within the academic literature, migrants are frequently perceived in ambivalent terms. On the one hand, they are interpreted as a potential threat to cultural homogeneity and social cohesion; on the other, as a source of cultural diversity, innovation, and social dynamism (Berry, 1997; Castles & Miller, 2009). This duality reflects broader structural and symbolic tensions within modern societies, where identity is continuously negotiated under conditions of mobility and intercultural interaction.

Empirical research further suggests that migration may lead to processes of identity destabilization, particularly in contexts where individual and collective forms of belonging come into tension (Humpál & Brezinová, 2022). At the same time, migration also creates opportunities for the emergence of new forms of social interaction, intercultural dialogue, and reflexive identity construction. In this sense, migration should not be understood solely as a factor of disintegration or assimilation, but as a process that actively contributes to the transformation and reconfiguration of identity. Contemporary sociological approaches reject essentialist interpretations of identity and instead conceptualize it as a dynamic, socially constructed, and historically conditioned system of belonging (Hall, 1990; Smith, 1991; Brubaker, 2004). Within this framework, migration acts as a catalyst that intensifies processes of identity awareness, negotiation, and symbolic boundary-making. „Linguistic diversity and the multicultural environment in Gagauzia play a key role in shaping contemporary Gagauz identity, combining local traditions with external cultural influences.”(Ciobotaru, 2023).

A key analytical perspective for understanding these processes is provided by Anderson's concept of the nation as an "imagined political community" (Anderson, 1983). The nation is sustained not through direct interpersonal connections, but through shared symbols, narratives, and collective representations that create a sense of belonging beyond physical proximity. Under conditions of migration, this imagined dimension becomes particularly salient, as geographical distance from the historical homeland increases the importance of symbolic markers and practices of cultural reproduction.

This perspective is further complemented by Halbwachs' theory of collective memory, which conceptualizes memory as a socially structured phenomenon maintained through stable frameworks such as family, religion, rituals, and traditions (Halbwachs, 1950). In migrant contexts, these frameworks play a crucial role in the intergenerational transmission of identity, transforming cultural practices - such as folklore, festive calendars, and rituals - into key mechanisms of continuity and belonging.

Building on these classical approaches, contemporary Bulgarian research emphasizes the processual and multidimensional nature of migration and identity. Misheva (2022) conceptualizes migration as a dynamic process in which individuals and communities exist in a constant state of adaptation and renegotiation of their belonging. From this perspective, migration does not erode identity but repositions it within a continuous interaction between past experience, present social integration, and future aspirations. It is within this theoretical framework that the analysis of specific historical cases becomes particularly relevant. The migration of Gagauz and Bulgarians to Bessarabia provides an empirically rich example of how migration does not necessarily lead to identity loss, but may instead result in processes of symbolic

consolidation and cultural resilience. In conditions of geographical displacement and the absence of a nation-state framework, identity is sustained through collective memory, cultural practices, and socially organized forms of belonging that extend beyond the boundaries of the historical homeland.

3. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF GAGAUZ MIGRATIONS TO Bessarabia

At the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, Bessarabia emerged as a major migration space for Balkan Christian populations, particularly Bulgarians and Gagauz. This process was closely linked to the Russo-Turkish Wars and the broader geopolitical transformations in the region, which triggered large-scale resettlement from North-eastern Bulgaria and Dobrudja toward the territories between the Prut and Dniester rivers. These migration flows were actively supported by the policies of the Russian Empire, which encouraged the settlement of Christian populations in newly acquired territories.

The migration process had a complex and multi-layered character, combining elements of forced displacement and voluntary relocation, as well as economic incentives and religious motivations. Rather than representing a temporary movement, the settlement in Bessarabia led to the establishment of stable and enduring communities, characterized by the development of local institutions, shared cultural practices, and dense social networks. These structures became the foundation for the long-term preservation and reproduction of ethno cultural identity. Historical and ethnographic evidence indicates that Bulgarians and Gagauz often migrated together and formed mixed or neighbouring settlements, which contributed to the emergence of a closely interconnected ethno cultural environment. In these communities, linguistic differences coexisted with significant similarities in religion, cultural practices, and collective memory, suggesting a shared historical experience and a high degree of cultural proximity between the two groups (Mateeva, 2009). From an analytical perspective, the migration to Bessarabia can be interpreted as a process of ethno cultural consolidation rather than fragmentation. Research shows that the Gagauz were frequently identified, both externally and through self-identification, as part of the broader Bulgarian ethno cultural space, despite their use of a Turkic language. This combination of linguistic difference and religious and cultural continuity highlights the complex and layered nature of identity formation in migrant contexts (Mateeva, 2009).

Thus, Bessarabia can be understood not only as a geographical destination of migration, but as a social space in which long-term interaction, coexistence, and shared historical trajectories contributed to the formation of sustainable identity models based on unity and diversity. Under conditions of migration, the national identity of Gagauz and Bulgarians in Bessarabia does not dissolve; on the contrary, it becomes more clearly articulated and socially reinforced. This observation supports Benedict Anderson's thesis that collective identity is often intensified in situations of "distance from the center of the national territory" (Anderson, 1983). In the case of Bessarabian Bulgarians, identity is structured around several stable points: the Bulgarian language, Orthodox Christianity, educational institutions, and community-based cultural practices such as ritual life, folklore, and traditional music. These elements are complemented by a persistent historical memory of the "old homeland," which functions as a symbolic reference point for collective belonging. A similar, yet more complex configuration can be observed among the Gagauz population. Their identity combines a Turkic linguistic base with Orthodox Christianity and a shared system of cultural practices that closely overlaps with those of neighbouring Bulgarian communities. This dual structure produces a form of identity that cannot be fully captured through the category of nation in the modern sense. Instead, it is more accurately described as ethno confessional, where religion, cultural memory, and social practice play a more central role than language alone (Brie et al., 2011, Moshkov, 2004)., Gagauz identity is formed as a complex synthesis between Orthodox Christianity and a Turkic cultural origin, with traditional beliefs and folkloric practices functioning as mechanisms for preserving ethnocultural memory in the context of contemporary transformations."(Kvilinkova, E. N. 2023).

From a theoretical perspective, these identity configurations can also be interpreted through the lens of transnationalism. Although the migration of Gagauz and Bulgarians to Bessarabia predates contemporary globalization, these communities exhibit key characteristics of transnational social formations. Their connection to the Balkans is maintained primarily on a symbolic level, rather than through continuous physical mobility. The "homeland" is not experienced as a concrete geographical space but as a culturally constructed field of origin that legitimizes identity and structures perceptions of belonging.

4. METHODOLOGY

The study is based on a qualitative interpretive research design aimed at understanding the social meanings and practices through which ethnocultural identity is constructed and reproduced. Within this framework, identity is approached as a dynamic and socially mediated process rather than a fixed attribute. The empirical material consists of 22 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives of the Gagauz community in Bessarabia in 2025. The respondents were selected purposively, with a focus on individuals actively engaged in cultural and folklore practices, in order to capture mechanisms of cultural transmission and identity preservation. The sample includes participants aged between 18 and 85, allowing for an analysis of intergenerational differences. The majority of respondents are women (17), reflecting their central role in the maintenance of cultural practices. The interviews were conducted in the main Gagauz settlements - Comrat, Chadir-Lunga, and Vulcanesti - between June and November 2025, with an average duration of 30 to 60 minutes. Data were collected through an interview guide structured around four thematic domains: identity and belonging; language and transmission; folklore and ritual practices; and social change. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed using thematic analysis with inductive elements. Ethical principles were strictly followed, including informed consent, voluntary participation, and the protection of anonymity.

5. EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS: MIGRATION AND MECHANISMS OF IDENTITY REPRODUCTION

The empirical findings should be interpreted explicitly within the context of migration. The mechanisms identified in the interviews do not represent general features of cultural life, but are directly shaped by the historical experience of displacement and settlement in Bessarabia. In the absence of territorial continuity and stable nation-state frameworks, the Gagauz community develops alternative modes of sustaining identity, in which cultural practices, memory, and social interaction take on a structuring role. In this sense, migration does not weaken identity, but reorganizes the mechanisms through which it is reproduced.

The first mechanism concerns identity as a lived and actively maintained form of belonging. The empirical data demonstrate that Gagauz identity is not perceived merely as an inherited status, but as a continuous moral obligation grounded in everyday practice and intergenerational responsibility. Respondents consistently articulate belonging as something that must be actively preserved and transmitted. As one participant explains, "being Gagauz means preserving what you received from your parents and elders... if you do not pass it on, then you have lost it" (R01). This framing reveals that identity is experienced not as a passive condition, but as an ongoing ethical commitment. Another respondent similarly emphasizes that identity is embedded in daily life rather than formal categorization: "this is not just a word or a record in a document... it is something you feel every day - in the language you speak at home, in the way you celebrate, in the songs you know" (R01). Such statements indicate that belonging is constructed through routine practices and embodied experiences, rather than through institutional or political frameworks.

In the context of migration, this pattern acquires particular analytical significance. The displacement from an original territorial and national center means that identity cannot rely on state structures or territorial continuity. Instead, it must be reproduced through culturally embedded practices. Respondents explicitly detach their sense of belonging from the political framework of the state, emphasizing instead the role of language, religion, family traditions, and cultural memory. As one participant notes, "we live in Moldova, but in our home, in our language, we are Gagauz" (R02). This distinction illustrates a clear separation between civic belonging and ethno cultural identity.

Moreover, the data reveal that identity persists even under conditions of partial linguistic or cultural change. A respondent observes that "even when a person does not speak the language every day, the belonging remains" (R03), suggesting that identity is sustained through broader symbolic and cultural frameworks rather than a single marker. This indicates a shift from territorially anchored identity toward a more flexible and practice-based form of belonging. Importantly, identity is also conceptualized as a form of shared moral and social order. Respondents frequently associate it with values such as respect for family, tradition, and community, describing it as "an inner sense of 'our own people'" (R03). This reinforces the idea that, in migrant contexts, identity is less dependent on formal structures and more on the reproduction of shared meanings and relational ties.

Overall, the empirical evidence shows that migration does not dissolve ethno cultural identity, but transforms its mode of existence. Identity becomes less territorially grounded and more dependent on everyday cultural practices, intergenerational transmission, and symbolic continuity. In this sense, belonging is not given but continuously produced, sustained through the active engagement of community

members in maintaining and reproducing their cultural world.

The second mechanism is the role of folklore as a framework of collective memory. In migrant conditions, where direct connection to the historical homeland is interrupted, folklore functions as a substitute for territorial continuity, allowing the community to reproduce a sense of historical belonging through symbolic and ritual practices. Respondents describe customs as “the memory of our ancestors,” which reflects an understanding of tradition not as a passive inheritance, but as an active process through which the past is continuously made present.

Calendar and family rituals - such as Christmas, Easter, Hederlez, weddings, and funerals - become key moments in which the community symbolically reconstructs itself. Through participation in these practices, identity is not simply remembered but actively reproduced. In this sense, collective memory is sustained through repeated social practices and embodied forms of participation, rather than through abstract knowledge alone (Connerton, 1989). Migration thus transforms folklore from a cultural residue into a central mechanism of identity maintenance, compensating for the absence of stable territorial and institutional frameworks.

The third mechanism is the role of music and song. In the context of migration, where intergenerational transmission of identity is no longer embedded in a stable social environment, song emerges as a key medium of continuity. Respondents describe it as both memory and narrative, emphasizing its role in connecting past and present. The statement “song teaches children who they are” highlights the importance of music as a pedagogical tool. Through songs, younger generations are introduced to a shared symbolic and emotional framework. In migrant conditions, where everyday cultural immersion is reduced, such mediated forms of transmission become particularly important. Music is also central to collective events - weddings, gatherings, and celebrations - where it structures communal time and reinforces shared belonging. In this sense, it functions as both a narrative and an affective mechanism of identity reproduction.

The fourth mechanism is the embodied experience of belonging through dance. Migration often disrupts stable social structures, making it necessary to recreate forms of cohesion through practice. Dance provides such a space, where belonging is enacted collectively. Respondents emphasize that “in dance, we are all one,” indicating that shared movement temporarily reconstructs community. In the absence of continuous everyday interaction within a compact territorial setting, dance becomes a form of embodied unity, allowing individuals to experience belonging physically and collectively. Thus, dance functions not only as cultural expression but as a mechanism for re-establishing social cohesion in migrant conditions. The fifth mechanism concerns the transmission of tradition. Migration alters the traditional modes of cultural reproduction, reducing the role of the family as the sole transmitter of identity. While the family remains important, respondents increasingly point to institutions - schools, cultural canter, folklore ensembles, and festivals - as key sites of transmission. This shift reflects a broader transformation from informal to organized cultural reproduction. In migrant contexts, where everyday cultural practices are less densely embedded, institutions compensate by structuring and formalizing the transmission of tradition. This process represents not a loss of authenticity, but an adaptation to new social conditions.

The final mechanism is adaptation to contemporary social change. Respondents identify factors such as migration, media, and changing family structures as influencing cultural practices. While these processes weaken the spontaneous reproduction of tradition in everyday life, they also generate new forms of cultural expression. The data suggest a shift from everyday practices to staged performances, from local rituals to organized festivals, and from informal transmission to institutional frameworks. Rather than indicating cultural decline, these transformations demonstrate the adaptive capacity of the community. Overall, the empirical analysis shows that migration does not lead to the erosion of ethno cultural identity, but to its reorganization. In the case of the Gagauz community in Bessarabia, identity is sustained through a combination of mechanisms: strong self-definition, ritualized memory, musical and embodied participation, institutional transmission, and adaptive transformation.

These findings support the interpretation of the community as an imagined ethno cultural formation, in which belonging is not grounded in territorial continuity or political structures, but in shared symbols, practices, and collective memory. Migration thus acts as a structuring condition that intensifies the role of cultural mechanisms in the reproduction of identity.

Contemporary migration processes introduce a new layer to the identity dynamics of Bessarabian Bulgarians and Gagauz. Today, these communities are actively involved in labour migration, educational mobility, and transnational networks connecting them with Bulgaria, Turkey, Russia, and the European Union. Unlike the historical migration that led to settlement and relative stability, current mobility is characterized by circulation, temporariness, and connections with multiple territories. These processes contribute to the emergence of multiple and situational forms of identity. Individuals increasingly combine

regional, ethnic, national, and supranational affiliations, shifting between them depending on context. Self-identification becomes flexible - for example, as a "Gagauz from Moldova," a "Bessarabian Bulgarian," or a "European citizen" - reflecting the layered nature of belonging in contemporary migration settings. At the same time, increased mobility leads to a reflexive rethinking of national identity. Contact with the perceived historical homeland - through education, work, or cultural programs - transforms identity into a conscious and situationally activated resource rather than a fixed attribute. In this sense, identity is no longer simply inherited but strategically mobilized in different social and institutional contexts.

The present study demonstrates that migration should not be understood solely as a process of displacement or disruption, but as a structuring condition that actively reshapes the mechanisms of identity formation and reproduction. Through the empirical case of the Gagauz community in Bessarabia, it becomes evident that migration does not inevitably lead to assimilation or the erosion of ethno cultural belonging. On the contrary, it may contribute to the consolidation and intensification of identity, particularly under conditions of geographical distance from the historical homeland. The findings confirm that identity in migrant contexts is not territorially fixed, but socially and symbolically produced. In the absence of stable nation-state frameworks, belonging is sustained through alternative mechanisms - collective memory, folklore, language, ritual practices, and everyday cultural participation. These mechanisms function as substitutes for territorial continuity, allowing the community to reproduce a shared sense of "we" across space and generations.

The study further supports key theoretical perspectives within migration and identity research. Anderson's concept of the "imagined community" is empirically illustrated in the ways the Gagauz construct belonging through shared symbols and narratives despite the absence of direct interpersonal ties (Anderson, 1983). Similarly, Halbwachs' and Connerton's understanding of memory as a socially embedded and practice-based phenomenon is confirmed through the central role of ritual, folklore, and embodied participation in sustaining identity (Halbwachs, 1950; Connerton, 1989). At the same time, the analysis highlights the adaptive capacity of ethno cultural identity under conditions of mobility and social change. Contemporary transformations - such as migration, media influence, and institutionalization of tradition - do not signify cultural decline, but rather a reorganization of identity practices. The shift from everyday to staged forms, from family-based to institutional transmission, and from local to transnational frameworks reflects the dynamic nature of identity in late modern societies. In this sense, the case of the Gagauz in Bessarabia contributes to broader debates in migration studies by demonstrating that identity is not weakened by mobility, but reconfigured. Migration transforms identity from a territorially anchored structure into a flexible and context-dependent system of belonging, sustained through symbolic production, cultural practices, and social interaction.

Ultimately, the study argues that migration should be conceptualized not as a threat to identity, but as a condition that reveals its fundamentally processual, relational, and constructed nature. The persistence of the Gagauz community illustrates that even in the absence of political unity or territorial compactness, ethno cultural identity can remain resilient - precisely because it is continuously reproduced through memory, practice, and participation.

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