



## **THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA: DIMENSIONS OF THE GAGAUZ SOCIO-LINGUISTIC MODEL**

**Ana Coretchi**, MA in Human Behaviour, Moldova  
**Ana Pascaru**, PhD, Moldova  
**Cynthia Stevens**, MA in International Affairs, USA

This paper addresses the socio-linguistic model concerning the Gagauz ethnic group, who live in the Republic of Moldova, a former Soviet republic that proclaimed its independence in 1991. At 3.5% of the population, these Orthodox Turks represent the smallest ethnic group in the country. The Moldovans (Romanian-speaking population) are the majority with 65% of the population; the next biggest group are Ukrainians at 13.8%, followed by 13% Russians. The remainder of the population is composed of Bulgarians, Poles, Byelorussians, Germans, and others.

The Gagauz minority was granted autonomy in 1994 under the Moldovan Constitution. Tensions between the Moldovans and minority Gagauz in 1990-1992 were stopped with an accepted compromise - a law that created a Territorial Administrative Unit of Gagauz-Yeri, or more commonly referred to as Gagauzia. The Gagauz, an ethnic group, who like the majority Moldovans are Orthodox, speak a language derived from the Turks group. According to some international organizations like the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and European Union (EU), the Gagauz's case is considered a textbook example of how autonomy based on ethnicity can have a positive impact on ethno-political conflict (Bowers, Doss, 2001). In this case, early accommodation of the Gagauz interests through the legal framework stemmed the level of violence that was demonstrated in Transnistria, the eastern part of Moldova, that declared itself an independent republic in 1990 and is providing its own separatist politics.

The Republic of Moldova experienced massive upheaval throughout its history, particularly under the Russian Empire and Soviet totalitarian state, causing a crisis of identity for the Moldovan majority as well as national minorities when independence came about in 1991. A major split was created between Moldovans and the Russian-speaking population, including Russians, Ukrainians, Gagauz and Bulgarians, especially after Moldovan was declared the State language. This development prompted Russians to illegally proclaim the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic on the left bank of the Nistru River.

At the end of the 1980s another separatist movement had emerged by Gagauz, who had colonised the south of Moldova in the 18th and 19th centuries. The Gagauz-Halki (People of Gagauz) Movement, acting in strong concert with the Transnistrian separatists, also demanded self-determination for their population of 157,000 inhabitants.

Eventually, with changes in the leadership of the Republic of Moldova in 1994, the Gagauz backed away from their demands and accepted the legal authority of the Moldovan Government. A law was passed that gave the Gagauz a special status as an autonomy, known as Territorial Administrative Unit of Gagauz-Yeri, as well as the right to declare independence if Moldova were to change its political statutes regarding Gagauzia. Under the Constitution, Gagauzia received a large cultural and administrative autonomy that allowed them to preserve their cultural traditions and costumes, including their language.

Using the issues surrounding the Gagauz minority in the Republic of Moldova, we aim to construct a socio-linguistic, politico-linguistic and linguistic-cultural model that could allow for more theoretical or practical investigation of the subject. To accomplish this, we will identify the main principles upon which to create such a model.

Modelling is a research method that enables us to gain knowledge about complex systems difficult to approach. It consists of identification of the original model to be studied, determination of an analogy, formulation of conditions, building of a system-model, gathering data and its registration, measuring its applicability to specific conditions, getting results and finally, its testing.

Using this method, we identified the following principles upon which the Gagauz socio-linguistic model can be constructed:

- Identifying the premises that cause change, such as the implosion of the Soviet mega-empire, creation of a new society lacking common values and democratic traditions, lack of leadership and management experience on all levels; etc.;
- Gleaning insights concerning the realities within the Moldovan society that led to establishing specific relations between the majority Romanian Moldovans and Gagauz minority;
- Determining the factors that caused this specificity, internal and external as well;
- Reflecting the present situation through the prospect of the relationship between majority-minority and vice versa, minority-majority.

Why is it necessary to refer to the model to analyse these dynamics? We believe the model can help determine the root causes of motivation and de-motivation, which constitute the basis of relations between the Gagauz minority and Moldovan majority.

It is well known that contemporary societies are not mono-ethnic, being composed of minorities, either ethnic or national. Depending on how the correlation between the majority and minority is perceived, it is possible that national minorities could become integrated within society, at the individual and public level, regardless of ethnic, religious or residential area. Alternatively, a negative perception could aggravate the social condition, leading to violent acts of intolerance. Finding solutions to issues affecting the relationship between majority and minority are critical not only to the country in question, but to neighbouring states and the region as a whole.

In order to better understand the roots and causes of the specific socio-linguistic situation in the Republic of Moldova, we need to revisit the history of the problem. The Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic that was created in 1940 after annexation of Bessarabia by the Soviet Union, became a laboratory for a nationalities policy focused on Russification (Neukirch, 1996). The main aim was to deny that Moldovans and Romanians had been one people, separated because of territorial claims by the Soviet Union. A first step was to reform the Romanian script in Moldavia: the Romanian language that was written in Latin characters, after 1941 in the "Soviet part" of Moldavia was imposed to switch to the Cyrillic alphabet. A cohort of linguists worked to prove that the "Moldavian" language was independent of Romanian. One thesis said that Moldavian was an independent Eastern Roman Language (Sergievski), another one (Ceban) proclaimed that, because of intense contacts between Moldavians on the one hand and Russians and Ukrainians on the other, the formerly Roman language was being transformed into a Slavic one. In the context of the Soviet Empire the basic education in the national language was possible, but for higher education profound knowledge of the Russian language was necessary. So anybody who wanted to improve his social status had to learn the Russian language and had at least in part, to adapt to Russian culture.

In the middle of the 1960s, the situation deteriorated. Tensions arose in the external relations of Romania with the Soviet Union, and an anti-Romanian campaign was organised. A stronger emphasis was put again on the independence of Moldavia from Romania. Authors were criticised for giving way to foreign (Romanian) influences on the Moldavian language; Romanian books and films were prohibited, exchange programs were no longer possible. Russian was the official language, used especially in the administrative and economic sector. The share of the non-Moldavian population was much higher in urban than in rural areas, and Russian was more or less a common language for all non-Russian

nationalities in the Soviet Union.

The socio-linguistic situation started to change at the time of "perestroika," launched by Gorbachov. Already in 1988 a commission on behalf of the Communist Party of Moldova investigated the necessity and worked out a concept for a possible language reform. Finally two laws were passed in August 1989: the "Law on the status of the state language in the Moldavian Socialist Soviet Republic" and the "Law on the functioning of languages on the territory of the Moldavian Socialist Soviet Republic". It was not the only the task of these laws to correct the language policy "imposed by Moscow", but also to stress the independence of Moldovan and Russian culture.

Thus, the Moldovan language was declared the State language to be used in the political, economic, social and cultural sector. The Gagauz language became the second state language in areas with a high proportion of Gagauz people in the population. The Russian language was declared a language of communication among nationalities. The "degradation" of Russian language was one of the reasons for the conflict in the Transnistria region, which is mainly inhabited by non-Moldovan speakers. The identity of the Romanian and Moldovan language was officially recognised, Cyrillic script being replaced by Latin script. This point remains very important for a possible further development of a common national consciousness among Romanians and Moldovans.

In this context, the Moldovan society is one that appeared on the European map in 1991 with a Moldovan (sic Romanian) majority joined by the representatives of various nationalities: Russians, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, Gagauz, Jews, Gypsy, Poles, Germans, etc. In comparison to the contemporary societies that are constituted by the national minorities in the classic understanding of this term, representatives of the national minorities that are part of the Moldovan society are not densely settled together to constitute a critical mass of population. This speaks to the lack of identity criteria. Meanwhile, 90% of the Russian minority is living in the urban areas, and Ukrainians can be identified in urban and rural places, or at least behave with the majority in villages. The Gagauz minority, like others, took advantage of the political uncertainty and demanded rights that are in fact, contrary to international legislation. Thus, being supported since 1990 by the revenge forces that built their fortress on the left bank of the Nistru River, the Gagauz leaders had organised and claimed in reality, not a cultural autonomy but an administrative one. Until this point they had never enjoyed such autonomy, since the majority of the Gagauz people are settled in Ukraine, and could be found in Romania and Bulgaria as well.

Taking into consideration the whole situation in the Moldovan society, we will refer to the constitutive parts of the proposed socio-linguistic model to identify those that are producing variances, blockages of communication, intolerance and disintegration, including insight into the ethnicity itself. In that sense, it is necessary to approach these components of the model through the identity that could facilitate the understanding of the social environment. Examining the phenomena of the Gagauz ethnic identification, the dominance of the political factor is obvious. A cultural autonomy is not possible when the Gagauz villages are mixed with the Moldovan or Bulgarian communities.

The division of the Moldovan society according to the ethnic criteria is just a visible part of the iceberg. This is a way to hide the incompetence of the governing body that is challenged to solve the problems confronting the society, negatively impacting the majority as well as minority populations. Among the key issues that persist is the attempt to manipulate and politicise the linguistic context within the society. The Law on the Functioning of Languages (1989), considered in relation to international legal standards, was tolerable to those unfamiliar with the language of the majority, and encouraged the representatives of the national minorities to learn the official language during a transition period up to 3-7 years.

Another law that favoured improving the language policies was that on citizenship (1990). This law granted citizenship and equal rights to all those who live or arrived in the country by the day independence was declared on August 27, 1990. The same with the Law on Education (1995). From the legal point of view, concrete steps for the minorities' integration into Moldovan society were constituted, being regulated at the beginning by communicating in Russian, which was to facilitate the ultimate use of Romanian in the social arena. Unfortunately, the conditions and terms determined for the study of the Romanian language were not respected. Even more, they were annihilated and



replaced by the populist declarations like those that the introduction of the Romanian language along with Russian as a language of communication between national minorities would jeopardise the rights of the national minorities to promote their identity. This message resonated especially among Gagauz communities that even today just formally are considered promoting their cultural identity and language.

For purposes of comparison, Estonia granted citizenship only to those who were born in Estonia before 1940. The population that migrated there after the Second World War from other parts of the USSR, mainly representing Russian or Russian-speaking peoples, overnight was transformed into a second-class people because they did not know the majority language. After a decade, the Estonian authorities developed a State strategy for integration of the non-Estonians into Estonian society (2000-2007). Now we have in Estonia the most successful new democracy among the former Soviet republics, on its way to becoming a member of the European Union, with developed democratic institutions and a social life in deep transformation, where State institutions are collaborating with NGOs to solve social problems.

Due to the misunderstandings that grew between majority and minorities since the independence of the Republic of Moldova, two education systems developed in parallel. The first one focuses on teaching in the Romanian language that from the didactic and axiologic point of view is re-directed towards re-integration into the Romanian Education Concept, adjusted to the European Education Concept. The second involves teaching in Russian, and is resistant to both the Romanian and European Education Concepts. The latter approach persists in maintaining its position at any price within the context of the Soviet/Russian Education Concept, and is found in kindergartens, schools, colleges and Universities, in which the Russians, Ukrainians, Gagauz, and Bulgarians are studying. Generally, the majority of the minorities who live in Moldova recognize and accept this type of education.

Coming back to the Gagauz socio-linguistic model, it should be mentioned that despite the concessions received from the majority, the Gagauz identity remains confused because the majority of them continue to speak Russian instead of their native language. As it was already mentioned, this is a consequence of the totalitarian past that provided strong Russification in the national republics (King, 2000). Also, most leaders of Gagauzia are pro-Russian and tend to reject the Romanian Moldovans who constitute the national majority. Moldovan critics and foreign observers as well, allege that the Gagauz governmental entities use mainly the Russian language. In response to Gagauz demands, the central government established in 1992 a new University in Comrat, the main city of the autonomy. This happened even though there already existed in Chisinau, at the State Pedagogical University "Ion Creanga", a Department for National Minorities to ensure Higher Education accessibility for minorities and the development of specialists to teach in the communities populated by minorities such as Gagauz and Bulgarians. Because until now the subjects at the University of Comrat are taught in Russian, young people, in the majority of cases, are not familiar with either the Romanian or Gagauz languages.

Finally, the education that targeted the representatives of the minorities in Moldova is neither an alternative education, nor one complementary to the State. Instead, it's an education that reflects nostalgia on the part of the population for the old regime and its incapacity to adapt itself to democratic changes and European values (Pascaru, 2000). Soviet education as a value system was limited in that as it included only a marginal exponent of the national cultures of the Soviet nations. The parents and grandparents educated by the Soviet ideology now are modelling the younger generation, compounding the issues of a system that failed to encourage learning other languages and cultures. As a result, the education for minorities is hampered by the incapacity to revitalise the national component of the education and by the impossibility, due to objective and subjective factors, to integrate into universality.

The fact that the cultural promotion of the Gagauz ethnicity is completed in the Russian language means maintaining it in the Cyrillic alphabet, and not developing Gagauz as a dialect of the Turk language. This fact supports the utopian idea of creating a new language - a Gagauz one, but in reality produces a population that remains hostage to the local political elite. For example, within University of Comrat a centre for the creation of the educational terminology and textbooks in Gagauz language was established. But the attempts to develop in the autonomy teaching in Gagauz language even in the primary school failed because of the lack of the qualified teachers and Gagauz textbooks. On the other side, the circulation and study of the language of the majority of the population is further marginalized. Young people are estranged from the problems and interests of the majority, who are blamed as the main cause of all socio-economic failures. Meanwhile, Gagauz leaders remain loyal to the Communist



ideology and totalitarian past. Even if they sometimes seem to be attracted by the benefits of the market economy, they still use these privileges to their benefit and not for that of the community. At the same time, the rights granted to the Gagauz community do not include any responsibilities and this is another important component of this model. The necessity of providing equal opportunities to study for all the citizens of this region, regardless of their ethnic or religious belonging, the study of the state official language, the preservation of ethno-cultural identity, integration into the European educational space, the validation of the terms of studies and of the qualification received in the University are still an urgent and unsolved issue (Gremalschi, 1998).

It should be pointed out that representatives of the majority played a part in escalating tensions by failing to involve representatives of the minority to support the changes to be implemented in the country. On the other hand, the society was too receptive to the demands of the minorities and sufficiently blind to the obstacles that would thwart successful integration. As an example, the same Law on Education that allows students to study in the language of their country of origins while essentially following the curriculum of that country, means that the student is formed on a culture of a foreign state. Thus, within the frame of the examined socio-linguistic model, the process of de-nationalization is supported and encouraged by those who initially declared the return to their identity.

There is yet more evidence that shows how the linguistic policies after a decade of social transformations can be manipulated. This is seen in the way the Communist government that came into power in a democratic way in 2001 is trying to address these policies. At the beginning of this year, the Moldovan government adopted a decision to introduce the study of the Russian language as compulsory in the pre-university institutions. This decision supported bringing back into the power of the Russian language and effectively ignored the social need for the minorities to learn Romanian. This is confirmed by the fact that non-Moldovans hold the leading positions in the economy and are using Russian marketing tools in the media, having as a consequence a deeper wedge into the society.

According to the Public Opinion Survey conducted by the Institute of Public Policy in December 2001, further division of the Moldovan society is evident. From those surveyed, 42% supported the idea of integration into European Union, among whom 62% were young people of 18-29 age. Among those 35% who are supporting the integration into the CIS structures, 22% are representatives of the younger generation (IPP, 2001).

In this context, the external factor is not to be ignored. The pro-Russian orientation of the government was launched through communication channels, on all levels without taking into consideration the international criticism from parties dismayed by the turn in the foreign policies of the Republic of Moldova. This means that in this environment, not only the majority stands to lose but the whole society, regardless of ethnic affiliation. So, the Moldovan society risks remaining divided, as long as the linguistic policies of the former totalitarian system are in play. The Bilateral Treaty between the Republic of Moldova and Russian Federation signed by the end of 2001 contains in the additional protocol that the Russian language must be declared as a second official language besides the Moldovan (Romanian) one.

Furthermore, from January to March public protests erupted in the middle of Chisinau in response to the temptation of the Communist Parliament majority to introduce Russian for compulsory study in the primary schools. A public company supported by the pro-Communist media, together with the media that is printed in Russian, demonstrated a common front and misinterpreted the essence of the protests, while the majority tried to defend the democratic values gained during the last decade. The majority, expressing its disagreement towards the attempt of the government to introduce the compulsory study of the Russian language, stressed to the public that this would violate the rights of the other national minorities living in the country - Ukrainians, Bulgarians, Gagauz, etc. Instead of support that would be a natural response when the minorities are promoting their own identity, the majority was accused of extremism and aggressiveness. Only the representatives of the Ukrainian minority tried to express their disagreement, but their voice was too weak to have an impact.

The protestors were labelled nationalists and the young people educated by the new democratic educational environment, were called neo-fascists. Some representatives of the minorities, who were asked about their position on this issue, declared that they do not care about the Romanian language in



any way because they don't want to live in Moldova and would like to leave it at first occasion. In the mixed schools, the situation is even worse because the Russian language issue is perceived as a real threat that might jeopardise the fragile cohesion that was achieved during the last decade of democratic changes. Some parents of the non-Moldovan students who believed their children should be integrated into the Moldovan society and directed them to attend schools where teaching is provided in Moldovan/Romanian language, expressed their disapproval and frustration and signed some petitions concerning this compulsoriness of the Russian language in the national pre-university institutions.

Many observers have praised Moldova for how tactfully it has dealt with the Gagauz problem. While the Transnistria-Moldova relationship degenerated into armed conflict in 1992, and then full-scale hostilities, there was only limited violence as the Gagauz and Moldovans resolved their issues. Today, Moldova controls Gagauzia's external relations as well as the region's defence. This authority extends to frontier protection, so Moldovan officials supervise Gagauzia's only frontier, which is with Ukraine. The supreme authorities of Gagauzia are formally subordinated to those of Moldova, but it is obvious that serious difficulties now threaten to disrupt the calm that surrounds Gagauzia. Debates over the relative distribution of resources quickly led to political demands by some Gagauz leaders. Those demands are expressed in calls for a greater degree of Gagauz autonomy or, a more radical option, a union with Transnistria, and separation from the Republic of Moldova. Thus, the most radical demand is for creation of a federalised Moldova in which Comrat will share power with Chisinau. Tiraspol, which is the capital of Transnistria, would represent the third element in the three-way split envisioned by the supporters of a federal state.

Recent developments in the political life of Moldova cast uncertainty over the whole country, and particularly Gagauzia. Gagauz leaders heavily supported Communist Party candidates in the February 2001 elections and clinched a 60% majority in Parliament. They so far have failed to deliver on their promises, prompting the political leaders during 2001 and beginning of this year to threaten the Parliament and Government that the radical measures would be taken if the promises were not fulfilled. The dissatisfaction is likely to increase tensions and the situation may become more acute in the near future because the incompetence of the actual Communist government is stressing the fragile climate that was established during the last decade between majority and minorities.

Applying the same tactic of manipulation, the actual government tries to return to the raions (districts), the old territorial-administrative system (disapproved by the European organisations) and by announcing new local elections to keep under control all branches of power in the country. Fortunately, the Constitutional Court declared to be anti-constitutional the communist's majority attempts to disrupt before terms the mandate of the local authorities elected in 2000. After this unsuccessful attack against democratic accomplishments, the communists are looking now for other ways to bring back the Moldovan society to centralized system. Because the Gagauz autonomy leaders declared they were not going to participate in anticipated elections and expressed their disapproval with the central government, the last launched in February another campaign, aiming to demonstrate the incompetence of the Gagauz authorities. The President blamed the Bashkan (head) of the Gagauzia for the misuse of public money and provoked tensions in the autonomy by encouraging shouts to dismiss him. It was tried to erode the social environment within the Gagauz autonomy through a counterproposal on local level of the legislative power to the executive one. This is the way in their understanding how better to control the local authorities. Even more, the central authorities are now blaming the international organizations and neighboring countries for the deficiencies and failures in their own governance.

Unfortunately, the Moldovan society continues to be atomistic. The civil society is at its infancy, with some 2500 non-governmental organisations that are striving more for their own survival in the impoverished environment than for solutions to the problems that jeopardise the democratic achievements. Among the attempts undertaken by the NGOs are those that are implemented with enormous efforts by a couple of the strongest organisations, among which the Soros Foundation-Moldova could serve as an example. In that sense some projects could be mentioned, among which are those that address issues of confidence building in divided societies, of educating tolerance in a multicultural environment, attempts to put together majority and minorities, including the Gagauz, and to develop opportunities to integrate the majority and minority into the community, of overcoming barriers that persist in any environment, teaching people to be tolerant of other views and opinions, regardless of their ethnic or religious affiliation, and not at least, to build bridges of communication through



integration and promotion of the general-human values within society.

In conclusion, the following features of the reconstituted model should be mentioned:

- The transition of the post-totalitarian countries to authentic democracies involves an impartial tackling of the problems connected with the elaboration and promotion of public policy that would anticipate manifestations of ethnic or religious intolerance to exclude xenophobia and separatism.
- The authorities of the Republic of Moldova made considerable efforts for the improvement of interethnic relations, the creation of conditions for the free development of each citizen without regard to his/her ethnic origin or religious belonging. First of all, the laws permitted the reintroduction of the Latin script and that gave the Romanian language the status of state official language. This fact contributed decisively to the elimination of linguistic discrimination of the autochthonous population and created conditions for the natural development of the educational system. Another law provided citizenship of the Republic of Moldova to all the people, who at the moment of the Declaration of Independence lived on the territory of the former Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic without making restrictions as to the date of arrival. The Law on Education (1995) created favourable conditions for the instruction of minorities in their mother tongue, stipulating the study of the official state language as well, but in fewer proportions.
- Regrettably, the political elite's inexperience and the inability of many governors to grasp and fairly resolve the multiple problems that appeared in the course of creating the new State grounded the basis for the appearance of some interethnic tensions; the stimulation of territorial separatism, the prevalence of the rights of some communities to the detriment of human rights. The current legislation is imperfect and stimulates unreal expectations, violates the balance between the rights and obligations both of the majority and of the minorities, prescribes to the language of a minority representatives the status of interethnic language of communication to the detriment of the official state language and encourages leaders, representatives of some national minorities to use their cultural identity to gain benefits for their own, as is the case of Gagauz minority.
- The analysis of similarities and differences in education in Central and East European countries allows us to affirm that monitoring of human rights, exclusion of xenophobic, ethnic, and confessional manifestations are positive premises for the consolidation of the state of law, the formation of a tolerant environment, the observance of individual and collective liberties.
- The exchange of information and discovering other realities present in the societies of Central and Eastern Europe and Western Europe as well, still remain a priority. In the course of recent events, especially in the light of the events of September 11, the collaborative relations between experts, researchers, and NGO leaders in the region have to be more fruitful and efficient in the future.

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