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Ethnopolitical Entrepreneurs as Nation Builders? Heritage and Innovation in Gagauzia

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Abstract

This article brings to light the lesser-known case of Gagauzia, an autonomous region in Moldova, to examine how global frameworks of authenticity and heritage are drawn upon and performed in three local ethnically centered initiatives. Drawing on data from twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork carried out between 2015 and 2018, this case study provides insight into the ways that notions of nationhood are constructed and perpetuated, with a focus on the role of a specific segment of society, ethnopolitical entrepreneurs. These are neither fully top-down nor bottom-up actors. Focusing on three Gagauzian “firsts” that claim to represent the “last” of disappearing cultural practices and identities, this article interrogates how the given initiatives fuse heritage and innovation to create metacultural discourses that advance notions of Gagauzian ethnic or national particularism. The article gives food for thought about the salience – or not – of elite actors’ articulations of nation, particularly within post-Soviet societies and underscores the array of social actors involved in any nation-building activity. Further, by highlighting the heterogeneity of intersectional, lived experience and articulations of belonging, the article problematizes group-based analysis and methodological nationalism.

Keywords: Gagauzia; heritage; ethnicity; ethnopolitical entrepreneurship; nation building

Background on Gagauzia

A small autonomous territorial configuration in southern Moldova with an official population of 134,535 (Statistica Moldovei 2014), Gagauzia is described by international organizations as “the poorest region in Moldova” (Minority Rights Group International 2018), while Moldova itself is “the poorest in Europe” (United Nations Development Program 2017, 37). The region is exceptionally dependent on remittances, sent home predominantly from Russia and Turkey (Keough 2006, 440; International Organization for Migration 2015, 28), and on foreign donor aid, with the Turkish Agency for International Development and Cooperation (2016, 37; 51; 56; 82) among the most prominent donors. Because of Gagauzia’s geographic position – at the crossroads of historic empires and contemporary nation-states (Katchanovski 2005, 877; Kapaló 2011, 3) – many locals are in the position to be granted various citizenships (Holsapple 2020). Russia, Bulgaria, and Romania, for instance, all have policies extending citizenship to eligible individuals on the basis of historic territorial or ethnic heritage claims. It is a relatively unique case in that no toponym – place name – Gagauzia existed prior to the Soviet Union’s collapse, unlike many other smaller republics and contested areas in the former Soviet Union. The territorial configuration, originally proclaimed as the Autonomous Gagauzian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1989, was the de facto Gagauzian

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Republic from 1990 through 1994, with transition to autonomy within Moldova in December 1994 (Angeli 2006; Kosienkowski 2017a, 293, 2017b, 116; ATU Gagauzia 2020).

Gagauzia is thus a recently invented configuration, where overlapping, conflicting articulations of ethnic, national, linguistic, and civic belonging are commonplace. This makes it an especially intriguing case. Through ethnographic data gathered during twelve months of fieldwork, in what follows I examine the emerging efforts to construct narratives about what is distinctly *Gagauzian*. The interplay between ethnopolitical entrepreneurship and nation building reveals that while top-down nation building in Gagauzia is lacking, this gap is in part filled by ethnopolitical entrepreneurs who are neither fully top-down nor bottom-up actors.

“Real” Gagauzians?

“I’m not a real Gagauzian,” offhandedly asserts Babushka Pasha,¹ the seventy-year-old matron in my host family in Comrat, Gagauzia’s capital, as I crack open walnuts with a hammer in our kitchen and she looks on approvingly. Cracking community-harvested walnuts is an activity that might be considered a local shibboleth of consent or volition (Michael 1998, 149), as a messy process that takes learning to achieve effective hammer angle and force. “And my mother was only halfway Gagauzian. It was only my grandmother who was a *real* Gagauzian,” and she launches into detailed descriptions of her grandmother’s traditional dress (involving an elaborate system of different skirts) and of her various folk beliefs: if a pregnant woman’s stomach is pointed, she will have a boy, but if rounded, then a girl; new mothers should sew garlic into their head scarves with red thread to protect them from the evil eye (*ot sglaza*). “She was a real Gagauzian!” Babushka Pasha concludes.

Around the same time, Musa, a friend from Azerbaijan and student at Comrat State University for several years, mentioned having recently attended a wedding in the countryside of Gagauzia. He lamented that though the couple was Gagauzian and the festivities were held in the village, the wedding was *not* Gagauzian, citing a lack of traditional elements and shaking his head: it was just the usual white-dress, Western-copied affair.

Both Babushka Pasha and Musa link “real” Gagauzian-ness with premodern ways of life, invoking notions of tradition and heritage to qualify individuals and practices as authentic – or not. “In the context of heritage, authenticity could be described as a set of characteristics symbolizing something belonging to an era or other phenomenon in which the identity of a group is seen to be rooted,” so conceptualizations of authenticity are “projected primarily outside the modern era in terms of time, or outside modern society in terms of space” (Annist 2013, 251). Although both examples above are “genuine” in that they represent actual practices of contemporary, everyday life, they are not viewed as “authentic” precisely for this same reason, as authenticity is a notion typically linked with (ideas of) the past and juxtaposed with modernity.

These sorts of normative commentaries – from both locals and nonlocals – often caught my attention in everyday conversation during my twelve months of fieldwork between 2015 and 2018, and they are also evident in larger, top-down projects that can be considered emergent nation-building initiatives in the region. The Gagauzian *ispolkom*’s (executive committee) 2019 Brand of Gagauzia project, for instance, named as winner a minimalist drawing of grapes with a slogan in English “Back to Your Roots” (Gagauzinfo² 2019a). This competition, open to all residents of Gagauzia and ultimately voted on via Facebook, sought to create symbolism that “reflects the uniqueness of the region, its historic and cultural heritage, values of the Gagauzian people (*narod*)” with the aim of advancing in the tourism sector and attracting investors (Comrat Municipality 2019). The winning project fits the mold of many nation-branding initiatives (Kaneva 2012; Saunders 2017) that often deploy overtly “essentializing and exoticizing tropes” (Dzenovska 2005, 173–174) seeking to valorize some primordial connection as representing the “true” nature and uniqueness of a nation or people. While “back to your roots” is an ambiguous phrase – what exactly should, would, or could this entail? – it appeals to ideas of heritage in positing Gagauzia as a locale that epitomizes some sort of primal origin. “Roots” is an arborescent metaphor commonly drawn upon in framing ethnicity,

language, or territory as inherited and entrenched traits, from which individuals supposedly derive their identities (Malkki 1992; Bonfiglio 2010). How such frameworks of authenticity and heritage are drawn upon in three Gagauzian ethnopolitical entrepreneurs' initiatives is the focus of this article.

Aims

Looking at the role of a specific segment of society, ethnopolitical entrepreneurs, who, as noted above, are neither fully top-down nor bottom-up actors, provides insight about the ways articulations of nation are constructed via processes of *heritagization*, that is, creating a sense of legacy about aspects of the culture. Scrutinizing their claims to be the “first” initiatives that represent the “last” of some cultural practices or ethnic or national identities lends insight into the mutual constituency of heritage and innovation. Further, it evidences the overlap between heritagization and ethnic incorporation by means of homogenization and abstraction of notions of *narod* (the people). The interplay of the construction of exclusionary national narratives and economic (inter)dependence shows that the institutionalization of nation building in Gagauzia is, to a great extent, ultimately restrained by economic realities. Along with contributing to the body of Gagauzian studies (Katchanovski 2005; Keough 2006; Demirdirek 2008; Kapaló 2011; Kvilinkova 2013; Cantir 2015; Tudoroiu 2016; Kosienkowski 2017a, 2017b; Grigoriadis and Shahin 2021), I contribute to discussions on contemporary processes of nation building in postsocialist regions (Smith et al. 1998; Suny and Kennedy 1999a; Polese and Isaacs 2016; Polese et al. 2018), particularly to what extent it is a top-down process or involves elite participation. Bringing to light ethnographic data on inter-sectional and local experiences of belonging, I also aim to counter “methodological nationalism” (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003) both generally and in Gagauzian studies in particular.

Methodology and Overview of Case Studies

I draw upon ethnographic data generated during two stays in Comrat, Gagauzia's capital: a nine-month visit from August 2015 through June 2016 and a three-month return in 2018 from January through April. During both visits, I lived with a multigenerational, multiethnic host family and took active part in family and community events, ranging from attending public and religious celebrations to mundane activities such as child and animal care, housework, agricultural tasks, and socializing. Living with a host family permitted constant insight into quotidian practices in a region where informal networks dominate society's functioning. In addition, during my first visit, I was an assistant in the foreign languages department of Comrat State University, where I led English clubs, translated documents, and assisted students pursuing international opportunities – experience that lent me participatory insight into the workings of the local educational system. This extensive participant observation in diverse settings complemented data generated through fifteen semi-structured interviews that I conducted with locals of assorted backgrounds and profiles during my 2018 stay. Because I was generally focused on shedding light on local experiences of “the politics of belonging” (Yuval-Davis 2011), my open-ended interview questions centered on norms, practices, and attitudes related to ethnicity, nationality, language, and citizenship.

The resulting three cases of ethnopolitical entrepreneurs' initiatives in Gagauzia look at the ways that they invoke discourses of authenticity and heritage in attempts to create exclusionary, nationalistic representations of Gagauzian-ness. First is the case of Vitalii Manjul, “the first Gagauzian rapper” (Gagauzinfo 2012), who compiles modern music drawing on folk songs, with the purported goal of encouraging new generations to connect with and take pride in their (ethnic) heritage. The next case is that of Ivan Patraman, who made *Dünürçülük* (loosely, matchmaking), the “first Gagauzian film” (GRT 2020). I explore how the film's presentation of romanticized images of preindustrial village life serves to advance the notion of a Gagauzian people with a coherent history and unified origins. Lastly is the case of Gagauzia's first ethno-tourism complex (United Nations Moldova 2017), Gagauz Sofrasi, a business created by Ana Statova that profits

economically by creating an attraction for touristic consumption centered on imaginings of premodern village life. While all three cases are initiatives of individuals, Manjul's creative production output is ample, diverse, and ongoing (his most recent work includes a song and music video on COVID-19 (Sanat Studiyyasi Kolay 2020)). In contrast, Statova's and Patraman's projects are (at this point) one-off ventures. For this reason, I discuss the first case in terms of the entrepreneur and the other two in terms of their product. This approach also reflects the local publicity and ways of referring to the three projects. For example, I observed that whereas Manjul receives considerable attention as a creative individual – the first Gagauzian rapper – the other two projects are usually described in terms of the products – the first ethno-village and the first film.³

Heritagization vis-à-vis Authenticity

I view the cases as cultural performances, “aesthetically marked and heightened mode[s] of communication framed in a special way and put on display for an audience” (Bauman 1992, 41). In considering cultural performances as “reflexive instruments of cultural expression” (Bauman 1992, 46) that often “[appeal] to tradition as the standard of reference for the performer’s accountability” (45), I look at how heritage – “a mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995, 370) – is used as a fulcrum of legitimacy in contemporary constructions of Gagauzian-ness. Those creating heritage – or carrying out the “transvaluation of the obsolete, the mistaken, the outmoded, the dead, and the defunct” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995, 369) – have largely selected certain aspects of preindustrial village lifestyles for heritage construction, “adding the value of pastness, exhibition, difference, and ... indigeneity” (370). These representations of premodern lifeways are held up as authentic, and theoretical discussions of the concept of authenticity often point to its etymological and semantic link with the notion of authority (Bendix 1997, 14; Cobb 2014, 1). This dynamic is evident in the Gagauzian case, as entrepreneurs’ projects and performances draw on supposedly authentic – and, therefore, authoritative – heritage narratives as a means of endowing their representations of Gagauzian-ness with validity.

Foremost, my discussion is grounded in the understanding that articulations of heritage are “not some sort of innate or ‘authentic’ folk memory that was somehow primordially instilled but, rather, [represent] a dialogue between folk experience, elite interests and actions of commodification and commercialism” (Harvey 2005, 332). Valdimar Hafstein cautions, “Don’t be fooled by the talk of preservation: all heritage is change” (2012, 502). Indeed, while the cases I offer make claims of safeguarding, I draw attention to how they are, in fact, constructing anew, meaning that it is appropriate to speak in terms of heritagization as a process (Bendix 2009, 254). This act of adding value means that the significance and content of heritage is “neither static nor inherent, but ascribed ... choosing to emphasize or ignore particular items or aspects for social and political purposes” (Logan, Kockel, and Nic Craith 2016, 3). My study brings to light the tension between, but also the mutual constituency of, innovation and heritage, firsts and lasts (Jackson, Mücke, and Zhang 2020). It focuses on three Gagauzian “firsts” claimed to represent the “last” of some disappearing cultural practice or identity, thus fusing heritage and innovation to create metaculturally salient discourse that advance notions of Gagauzian ethnic or national particularism. The narrative of ethnic or national particularism under threat is referred to by Richard Handler (1988, 5) as a “negative vision” of nation. Handler points out that evocation of this negative vision “presupposes the positive vision of collective unity and maturity – for how can an entity that does not in the first place exist run the risk of disintegration?” (1988, 5). Voicing intent to “preserve” Gagauzian heritage serves to establish the narrative of a cohesive, distinguishable Gagauzian identity existing in the first place.

Ethnopolitical Entrepreneurs and Nation Building

Building on these ideas of heritage, I approach my three cases as instances of ethnopolitical entrepreneurship. Broadly, my discussion leans on Brubaker’s (2002) arguments regarding the

fallacy of taking groupness for granted. Rather than acknowledging that there exists some definable, bounded group of Gagauzians, I look at what is accomplished by invoking “Gagauzian” as a category or label. Ethnopolitical entrepreneurs are individuals who “may live ‘off’ as well as ‘for’ ethnicity,” for “[r]eifying groups is precisely what [they] are in the business of doing. When they are successful, the political fiction of the unified group can be momentarily yet powerfully realized in practice” (Brubaker 2002, 166–167). These three cases of ethnopolitical entrepreneurship put into relief how the workings of identity and business mutually constitute one another: Gagauzian-ness as an identity category is drawn upon to generate business activity, while the performances involved in running the businesses serve to (re)create and legitimize the existence – or the narrative of the existence – of the identity itself. Indeed, (cultural) performances construct and reify imaginings of culture not just for outsiders, but for an internal community as well, as the act of putting on display or staging certain identity narratives can invoke into being the (supposed) ways of belonging being performed. In discussing various case studies in Africa, John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff (2009) shed light on how “marketing what is ‘authentically Tswana’ is also a mode of reflection, of self-construction, of producing and feeling Tswana-ness” (9), and, turning attention to San, or Bushmen, they assert that “precisely by virtue of laying down those traces – of enacting them repeatedly for tourist-consumers – these San were not just shanty dwellers in Western rags ... They were seen, and reciprocally were able to see themselves, as a named people with a ‘tradition and a way of life.’ In other words, a culture” (11).

Thus I explore the extent of this reciprocal “being seen” and “seeing of self” in the Gagauzian context, homing in on this interplay as a key part of nation building. As Étienne Balibar (1991) puts it in regards to national formation, “The fundamental problem is ... to produce the people. More exactly, it is to make the people produce itself continually as national community. Or again, it is to produce the effect of unity by virtue of which the people will appear, in everyone’s eyes, ‘as a people,’ that is, as the basis and origin of political power” (93–94).

Ethnopolitical entrepreneurs, reconfiguring contemporary imaginings of Gagauzian-ness, have potential to be key actors in the production process described by Balibar. By shedding light on how local entrepreneurs perform and narrate Gagauzian-ness – both for outsiders and internal community – as a cohesive way of being and distinct identity, these cases demonstrate how “ethnic incorporation rides on a process of homogenization and abstraction: [the groups], for all their internal divisions, become one; their ‘lifeways,’ withdrawn from time or history, congeal into object-form, all the better to conceive, communicate, and consume” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009, 12). My three cases actively invoke a homogenized and abstracted notion of *narod* – the people. “The people,” as Homi Bhabha puts it, are “a complex rhetorical strategy of social reference where the claim to be representative provokes a crisis within the process of signification and discursive address ... The scraps, patches, and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects” (1990, 297). Gagauzian entrepreneurs endeavor to narrate Gagauzian-ness in relation to the banal “scraps, patches, and rags” of everyday premodern village life, thereby legitimizing the *narod* by claiming a historic existence.

I use the term *ethnopolitical entrepreneurs* as it is most apt to describe the confluence of national and political discourse creation and business activity in my three cases. This designation can be compared and contrasted with – and, thereby, contribute to discussions of – national intellectuals. Following Michael Kennedy and Ronald Suny (1999), intellectuals are “disproportionately involved” (2) in (re)negotiating the nation, as those who “do the imaginative ideological labor that brings together disparate cultural elements, selected historical memories, and interpretations of experiences, all the while silencing the inconvenient, the unheroic, and the anomalous” (2). Kennedy and Suny (1999) adopt a broad definition, including even actors “that are not so obviously ‘intellectual’” (5). This overlaps with Dorothy Noyes’s (2008, 39) notion of “provincial intellectuals.” Noyes asserts that “[t]he nation-state was made stable by the labor of provincial intellectuals trying to integrate their local realities and the overarching order into a viable whole”

(2008, 39). Indeed, the ethnopolitical entrepreneurs I discuss attempt to slot their projects into coherent national narratives, drawing on template discourses of heritage and nation as discussed above. Looking closely at Gagauzian provincial intellectuals brings to light the layers of contemporary nation-building processes, particularly regarding the synergy between top-down and bottom-up forces and actors.

Literature Review and Contribution

Gagauzia's geopolitical positioning has generated political-science scholarship on conflicting spheres of influence (Katchanovski 2005; Cantir 2015; Tudoroiu 2016; Kosienkowski 2017a, 2017b) and ethnic and national identity construction (Grigoriadis and Shahin 2021). The last work is particularly relevant as an exploration of the efforts of early twentieth-century priest Mihail Çakir to define and promote the category "Gagauzian" – a predecessor of the ethnopolitical entrepreneurs I discuss. Ethnographic studies of Gagauzia are far fewer, and those that do exist focus, for instance, on religion (Kapaló 2011), migration (Keough 2006), or language (Demirdirek 2008; Kvilinkova 2013). None remotely deal with contemporary heritagization and innovation processes or offer insight into ethnopolitical entrepreneurship and their nexus with local experiences of belonging. Importantly, though, this body of scholarship affirms that Gagauzia is an arena of competing, overlapping interests and influences, what I call elsewhere (Holsapple 2020) a borderlands region, ambiguously positioned "in-between" various titular nation-states' discourses and policies. I expand on the existing literature's evidencing of Gagauzia's historic and current positioning at the crossroads of various spheres of interest to contribute insight into how this landscape is navigated by contemporary would-be nation builders.

Further, my work differs in that, as already briefly indicated, I endeavor to follow Rogers Brubaker (2002) in declining to take an imagined group – "the Gagauzians" – as my analytic starting point. All works cited above set out their research puzzles presenting "the Gagauzians" as a definable, taken-for-granted group with traits, providing the template categorization as a linguistically Turkic, Orthodox Christian, often "pro-Russian" minority. They address "their" origin, as if there existed one homogenous block of settlers and as if ethnic categorization and identification processes (particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) were unambiguous (Brown 2004; Hirsch 2005). The people with whom I lived and interacted in Gagauzia are multifaceted individuals with repertoires of multifarious affiliations, allegiances, and situational, "intersectional" (Yuval-Davis 2011) identities, who rarely voiced belonging using only one ethnic or national category. Relying on normative, lump-sum typologies to describe Gagauzia's population reduces complexity (Bagga-Gupta and St John 2017) and draws attention to (often external) academics' role in molding or reinforcing the use and perception of ethnic or national categories, also referred to as "methodological nationalism" (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003). A group-ist analytic lens of "the Gagauzians" is inherently problematic, as it fails to represent local diversity and heterogeneity. I encountered many people who identified as "ethnically" Gagauzian, but do not speak Gagauzian, or, for instance, who identify as Gagauzian-speakers but also Baptist. So where do these individuals fit in the neat categorization of "the" Gagauzians as a "Turkic-speaking, Orthodox minority?" While, of course, there do exist individuals who fit the normative categorization of "Gagauzian" – they use the ethnonym Gagauzian, identify as Orthodox and Gagauzian-speaking – representing them as the majority or the standard is erroneous and serves to advance the myth of homogeneous nations and cultures.

Vitalii Manjul: The First Gagauzian Rapper

"I used to be assimilated" Vitalii Manjul (b. 1971), "the first Gagauzian rapper" (Gagauzinfo 2012), tells me, referring to the early days of his career when he sang in Russian. It is March 2018, and at the invitation of mutual friends eager to help me research what they call "real" Gagauzian-ness, I am in

his cramped, smoky, chilly studio in *dom kultura* (house of culture) on Lenin Street in Comrat. I gaze at the walls covered with Orthodox icons and pictures of his children while he continues to speak about the discovery of his “real” (*istinnaia*) identity and his goal that today’s generations (re)connect with the traditions of their ancestors through his music that fuses folk song elements and modern hip hop style. Manjul is an active, prominent figure in Gagauzia. Along with his career as a musician, he teaches children’s art classes in *dom kultura* and studies at Comrat State University. His sculptures are part of the local landscape, with the most prominent – “Monument to the Friendship of the Gagauzian and Bulgarian Peoples” – in the village Chirsova, which I visited in April 2016. It functions as a landmark discursively and materially constructing Gagauzians and Bulgarians as separate groups. This is significant considering Bulgaria’s official policy (State Agency for Bulgarians Abroad 2014, 6) through which Gagauzians are considered a “Bulgarian historic community” and permitted access to Bulgarian citizenship on this basis. Manjul’s sculpture, as is the case with much of his work that he asserts seeks to preserve Gagauzian identity (Gagauznews 2017), is clear in its message that Gagauzians are a distinct nation (albeit apparently on friendly terms with Bulgarians: Holsapple 2020, 14).

Manjul’s recent songs draw upon imaginings of pre-urbanization rural ways of life. His music videos of *Kız toplarmış* (Manjul 2018) and *Mari Marinke* (Manjul 2017), for example, both feature traditional costumes, dances, and presentation of separate spheres for men and women, as was typical in premodern European village life. Like the Sofrasi mural discussed below, the music videos situate Gagauzian-ness at once in the past and the present – though in selective versions of both. They alternate between showing the same performers in the same locale in traditional, village clothing and modern, Western garb, thereby evoking both continuity with the past and continuity into the future. While apparel might have changed over the past century, the videos suggest, aspects of life that presumably matter in articulating identity – language and territory, for instance, and, of course, gendered spaces and appreciation for folk music and dance – are fixed features of Gagauzian-ness. Manjul’s songs and music videos endeavor to encapsulate Gagauzian-ness in specific performances that can be thought of as metacultural (Hafstein 2012, 508) or “a cultural means of objectifying and laying open to scrutiny culture itself” (Bauman 1992, 47). Moreover, by establishing the performing self “as an object for itself as well as for others, performance is an especially potent and heightened means of taking the role of the other and of looking back at oneself from that perspective” (Bauman 1992, 48). Manjul’s narrative on freeing himself from “assimilation” through (re)connection with those aspects of his identity that are supposedly “more” genuine describes a process that occurred in interplay with his cultural performances, demonstrating that “metacultural prominence correlates with cultural self-consciousness” (Jackson, Müske, and Zhang 2020, 120). By putting his identity in the spotlight for public consumption, Manjul ultimately reconfigures his own articulations of belonging, then draws on this reconfiguration to articulate normative commentary on Gagauzian identity generally. This narrative on his own transformation bestows authority to language as necessarily intertwined with ethnic or national identity, and it also suggests that there is some “true” self, tied to familial or blood heritage, that can be uncovered.

In one interview (Gagauzinfo 2018a), Manjul elucidates on his goals: “I want that, besides club music and rap, youth have love and memory of the traditions of their people, their dances. So that young people are not ashamed to dance ‘Kadynzhu.’ I see that today’s generation does not hold in esteem the songs and dances of their grandparents. This is a big problem.”⁴ In this evaluative commentary, Manjul endeavors to define the values that Gagauzians, especially younger generations, should hold. By framing contemporary disinterest in heritage as problematic and something that needs correcting, Manjul not only attempts to generally advance consciousness of being Gagauzian but also effectively advertises his own music as the “right” culture to consume – one that aligns with ethnic or national identity.

However, the systems of selectivity inherent in heritage construction processes – reflective of the tension between innovation and safekeeping – means that what Manjul touts as authentically

Gagauzian is, of course, decidedly different from the original folk material. In publicity for *Mari Marinke* – both sung and performed in the music video by Manjul himself – he asserts, on one hand, that the song has a two-hundred-year-old history, and that “our grandmothers” sang it. However, on the other hand, he explains that when reworking the song: “we gave this text literary form (*literaturnost*’), changed some words, added those that today are used, so that the text would be more grammatically correct (*gramotnyi*)” (Gagauznews 2017). Manjul’s production methods highlights how heritage creation and conservation is ultimately a “selective process unfolding within particular regimes of value” (Jackson, Müske, and Zhang 2020, 123), with only a certain version – in this case, one consumable for modern audiences – of aspects of the past being elevated to the status of “tradition.” Manjul is upfront about his alteration of source folk material in his creative process. But it would seem that the very act of giving *literaturnost*’ and *gramotnost*’ to the ancient songs is in conflict with what supposedly makes the material special to begin with, what sets it apart from modern musical expression. This instance is telling in regards to the paradoxical aspects (Cobb 2014, 1–10) inherent in notions of authenticity: modernity creates the demand for something “special,” removed from our time, yet this something is inevitably altered – and, therefore, loses “authenticity” – through modern processes of production and dissemination.

Speaking about the folk songs on which he bases his modern compositions, in another local interview Manjul asserted, “These are real Gagauzian songs, not Turkic, not Turkish, but pure Oghuz songs. This is the root, the source! For me this is very important! I want to preserve our identity and remind the youth that they should listen to real music” (Gagauznews 2017).

Along with invoking the pervasive arborescent metaphor of some “real” culture or identity having primordial roots (Malkki 1992), Manjul’s purported goals bear striking resemblance to efforts of early folklorists bent on locating some original “source” of an imagined group, or something “pure,” untainted by influences of modernity (Bendix 1997, 7–16). In his process of defining something as distinctly Gagauzian – not Turkish or modern – Manjul makes choices regarding what to include and exclude in his representations, thereby reconfiguring popular imaginings of Gagauzian-ness and (re)investing the category with meaning and authority. He draws a distinction between Gagauzian and Turkish, setting them up as bounded cultures with discrete practices. These sorts of narratives on uniqueness of Gagauzian-ness, particularly as distinctive from Turkish culture came up in my own interview data. University student Nelia opines, “I was talking with one Turk. He also says that Gagauzian [language] – it’s not from Turkish. And I really liked that because they find us to be equals. Not that we came from them, that we’re some kind of appendages (*otrostki*). We’re like their equals.”⁵

Turkey is a key receiving country for migrant workers from Gagauzia (Guboglo 2006, 363–409; Keough 2006, 440), and the Turkish Agency for International Development and Cooperation, plays a pivotal role in financing Gagauzia’s developing infrastructure (2016, 37; 51; 56; 82). Considering Gagauzia’s dependence upon remittances and aid funding from Turkey, its economic standing is far from “equal” (Holsapple 2020, 13–14). Nelia’s and Manjul’s views show how “cultural anxiety” – preoccupations with defining and maintaining “our” culture (Grillo 2003, 157) – intertwined with asymmetrical geopolitical power dynamics, can be expressed through nationalist narratives on heritage.

Gagauz Sofrasi⁶: The First Gagauzian Ethno-Village

On April 3, 2018, I peered out of the crowded *marshrutka* (public transportation “routed taxi”) wondering how far down Lenin Street in Congaz – Europe’s largest village, I am constantly told – I need to go to reach Gagauz Sofrasi, the region’s first ethno-touristic complex. Hesitantly, I ask the driver, who nods in recognition: “*Anin dom*” (Ana’s house) in reference to the business’s owner, entrepreneur Ana Statova. The *marshrutka* deposits me in front of a complex that beckons me in to try on national costumes in a small museum, sample local wine and dine on *gözlemä* (a savory cheese-filled pastry) in a traditional-style cellar, or stay the night in a room furnished with hand

sewn linens and heated by old-fashioned stoves. Statova's project took off in 2016 supported by a grant from the European Union's Support for Agriculture and Rural Development Program, implemented by the United Nations Development Program (United Nations Moldova 2017). Gagauz Sofrasi fits the mold of other initiatives of the "ethnicity industry" that "assert[s] a collective subjectivity by objectifying it for the market" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009, 18). The business also supports the suggestion that the nation "functions as an easily reproducible and networked commodity product" (Saunders 2017, 4), as it utilizes the national label of "Gagauzian" to create an experience-based attraction for economic profit. Comaroff and Comaroff (2009, 140) argue that these sorts of business ventures that hinge on ethnic identity, that is, "Ethnicity, Inc. . . . emerges out of a loose, labile dialectic: a contrapuntal interplay of, on one hand, the incorporation of identity and, on the other, the commodification of culture." Sofrasi evidences the mentioned dialectic in its attempt to consolidate the narrative of a collective Gagauzian identity and also draw upon local culture – or what the complex constructs and imagines as local culture – as an object of economic value. The complex creates opportunities to experience – with bodily, sensory, and emotional aspects – a representation of Gagauzia. It is intended primarily for outsiders, but, with banquet and wedding reception services, it is also advertised to locals for special occasions. In this way, it evidences the "being seen" and "seeing of self" dynamic of Comaroff and Comaroff's "Ethnicity, Inc." The insider and outsider clients mutually (re)affirm one another. Touristic interest in Sofrasi proclaims the importance (and, first of all, existence) of Gagauzian ethnic or national expression, while local celebration of festive events in the same locale serves as articulation of belonging with said ethnicity or nationality.

I enter the open complex (no tickets required), and one of the first displays that catches my eye is a large image of an extraordinary equine creature. The accompanying text informs me it is a hipparion, a long-extinct three-toed horse genus whose fossils were recently discovered in Gagauzia near Congaz. This display evokes an atmosphere of past-ness, seemingly creating the parallel that Gagauzians also have an ancient past, and, therefore, value and legitimacy. The terrace wall is painted with a mural of Gagauzia that features modern landmarks: the Gagauzia sign marking its "border," for instance, with its two contemporary flags of the Republic of Moldova and Gagauzia, and Manjul's sculpture, "Friendship of Gagauzian and Bulgarian Peoples." However, it also depicts peasants in traditional work dress toiling (with the exception of a group of men drinking wine around a *sofrasi*) at agricultural tasks: fetching water from the well, baking bread, feeding livestock, making hay, and – most prominently – transforming grapes into wine with premodern wooden presses. The mural simultaneously situates Gagauzia both in the past and present. It thereby alludes to the "ambivalent temporalities of the nation-space," through which "the language of culture and community is poised on the fissures of the present becoming the rhetorical figures of a national past" (Bhabha 1990, 294). As Dace Dzenovska (2005, 174) notes, "A nation that can be branded and marketed is not the same nation that emerges out of 19th-century Herderian Romanticism. Yet, the former does not replace the latter: both visions coexist, are related to each other and even constitute each other." Gagauz Sofrasi's mural demonstrates just this through its presentation of 19th century "authentic" peasant life convincingly nestled within modern landmarks denoting contemporary Gagauzia as an autonomous ethnopolitical configuration. As such, the mural creates an imagining of a cohesive Gagauzia with a unified history, which, in turn, serves to construct and legitimize contemporary imaginings of autonomous Gagauzia.

Gagauz Sofrasi's website (2020b) promises that "every guest . . . will be not merely a visitor of a touristic complex, but will feel like a 'native' [*korennoi* – again, an arborescent metaphor invoking rootedness (Malkki 1992)] resident of this village." It also makes clear that the complex, including its "designer, exclusive hotel" is open only by reservation. When I inquired about the number and type of visitors, my guides listed various diplomatic delegations and foreign tourists who frequently faulted Gagauzia's capital, Comrat, as not having an "authentic" atmosphere. They made it clear that Gagauz Sofrasi was filling a gap in the market: prior to its existence, foreigners wanting to experience "exotic" Gagauzia had often been disappointed by the region's Soviet-style hotels and

restaurants. Now, though, as evidenced by the Gagauz Sofrasi Facebook page (2020a) showing their array of international guests, it is the go-to destination for any high-profile visitors to the region. Local tourist agency Discover Gagauzia (2020) features Gagauz Sofrasi in all of its excursions, including “In the Footprints of [Our] Ancestors” (*po sledam predkov*), which evokes notions of ancestry and genetic ties to glorify the “old.” However, the same Discover Gagauzia adopts other approaches in appealing to diverse tourists. Its “Back to the USSR” package capitalizes on Gagauzia’s ubiquitous Lenin statues and decided lack of renovations to Soviet-era buildings in offering tourists the opportunity to experience the remains of an empire that no longer exists. It even draws on the region’s fractured status and controversy over territory through its “Five Capitals of Moldavia” tour: Chişinău, Tiraspol’, and Comrat (capitals of the Republic of Moldova, Transnistria, and Gagauzia, respectively), Soroca (a predominantly Roma-populated city that the agency refers to as “the European capital of the Gypsies”), and Iaşi (the center of the province of Moldavia in Romania). Cultures that “brand best” often enjoy a “competitive edge” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009, 18). Gagauz Sofrasi and its inclusion in various tourist packages shows that Gagauzia is quite “brand-able” for outsiders, with its “exotic” mix of connections to Soviet, Orthodox, and Turkic worlds.

Dünürçülük: The First Gagauzian Film

In February 2018, my friend Nadia and I waited for a bus in Comrat at a stop covered in posters advertising an upcoming local showing of *Dünürçülük*, touted as the first Gagauzian film. The basic black-and-white posters list the showing time and place in Russian, with the title and “*ilk Gagauz filmi*” (first Gagauzian film) written in Gagauzian, and I ask Nadia whether the screenings are with subtitles. She assures me that they should be, but she adds that in her view, they are not entirely necessary: “If you remember the plot of *Romeo and Juliet*, you’ll understand without subtitles!” She goes on to explain that the key reason for watching it is that it is the first and only Gagauzian film. What my friend seemed to be implying was that the content is secondary, even unimportant, but that what gives the film value is its “Gagauzian-ness”: it is in Gagauzian language and depicts an era when Gagauzians had supposedly distinct, “authentic” cultural practices. To refer to Babushka Pasha’s commentary above, the film is set in an era when, in contrast with modern times, there were “real” Gagauzians.

The plot follows the story of young lovers from families of different social statuses, forbidden to be together and ultimately both killed in their efforts to elope and escape arranged marriages. The film was awarded a “best costumes” distinction at a 2020 Moldovan film festival, which suggests that Moldova, as the nation-state within which autonomous Gagauzia operates, was an intended audience of this articulation of Gagauzian-ness. In a recent interview, commenting on this award, director Ivan Patraman asserted, “This is a wonderful award for all the Gagauzian people [*ves’ gagauzskiy narod*]. The primary goal was to popularize Gagauzian language and the culture of the Gagauzian people. So that with time, Gagauzian language, culture, the mentality of the Gagauzian people will be preserved” (GRT 2020).

Patraman uses the notion of *narod* three times in this excerpt, discursively creating a cohesive, named group with a distinctive culture and mentality. *Dünürçülük* portrays a quite standard picture of Eastern European village life of the early twentieth century, and it is uncertain exactly what sort of culture is supposedly uniquely Gagauzian, and, by extension, worthy of preservation. The ritual and social consumption of wine – especially among men – and the predominance of Orthodoxy are salient “cultural” aspects of the film, which are common to much of the region of Eastern and Southern Europe (and beyond). Another recurring element in the film is the *hora*, a traditional folk dance that during fieldwork I often heard claimed as both definitively Gagauzian and conclusively Moldovan. One handbook on dance (Lane and Langhout 1998, 4–5) lists the *hora* as the “national dance of Israel” that “probably originated in Hungary or Greece” but is performed “around the world,” with “variations being created by many countries.” The film’s claiming of a national folk

dance is an effort to create the “content” of a national culture or identity, and such cultural objectification or “attempts to construct bounded cultural objects” constitute “*a process that paradoxically demonstrates the absence of such objects*” (Handler 1988, 27 – emphasis original). That is, in endeavoring to delineate specifically Gagauzian culture, the film establishes the futility of linking any practice with a single national/ethnic category or of trying to endow a nation or culture with definitive “traits” (Handler 1988, 14).

An instance during fieldwork when I began reflecting on this problematic creation of national “content” occurred over lunch in Comrat’s *stolovaia* (cafeteria) Iug with my friend Viktoria. I was wearing a blouse with an Estonian national pattern, which Viktoria complemented, saying, “that Estonian national pattern looks just like the Gagauzian national patterns!” While we both laughed that neither of us are experts on national designs, I was struck by her innocent observation, reflecting on how, yes, this sort of content matter of national cultures can be strikingly similar, despite claiming specialness in connection to an ethnic or national label. Folk patterns tend to be related to nature, which can be common to many regions, regardless of national borders. They originated in a world that was not neatly divided into nation-states, clashing with their contemporary usage as supposed distinctive symbolism of nation-states. The same can be said, for instance, about the *hora* depicted in *Dünürçülük*. While it certainly had local (and beyond) historical salience, its contemporary wedding to an ethnic or national category – “the Gagauzian national folk dance” – is a way to “check the box” in meeting the criteria (such as “possessing” national language, cuisine, dress) to qualify as a nation – for insiders and outsiders, reciprocally. During fieldwork, I observed the *hora* often performed at weddings and other celebrations in Gagauzia. However, as addressed by an interviewee quoted below, it was typically performed alongside various other types of dances, and I also saw its performance in many other non-Gagauzian parts of Moldova.

As one interviewee put it, “When we come together for our *hora*, this is our collective *hora*. You can’t tell the difference – whether you’re Gagauzian or Moldovan.”⁷ So, although these elements upheld in the film as specifically Gagauzian do have a prominent place in local practices, they cannot be linked to only one nation, nor can they be said to be representative of the diverse experiences of Gagauzian-ness. Similarly, while Orthodoxy is certainly prominent in the region, James Kapaló’s (2011) work on folk religion in Gagauzia sheds light on diverse aspects of local practices, going beyond simple categorization as Orthodox. Further, many of my field partners identified as agnostic, Baptist, and other religious (non)belongings. So, can these individuals still be Gagauzian, even if not Orthodox? In addressing the politics of belonging, Nira Yuval-Davis (2011, 10) similarly, asks whether Jews can be considered German or abortion-advocates can be considered Catholics. These questions are rhetorical, meant to prompt contemplation of how, why, and by whom normative borders of belonging are constructed – borders that often clash with lived, dynamic, intersectional ways of identifying and being. In short, the Gagauzian-ness portrayed and normalized by Patraman’s film makes no room for intersectional experiences of belonging, but rather advances ethnic or national stereotypes and tropes with an agenda of creating “content” of national culture to match the recently created toponym.

In a similar vein, *Dünürçülük* portrays acts and mindsets – among them, forced marriage and violence as a means to handle differing worldviews – unacceptable according to modern discourses of human rights and tolerance. However, they are still claimed as traditionally Gagauzian within the framework of invoking a historic past, of proving that Gagauzians existed as a *narod* historically, thereby legitimizing current national claims and narratives. “The language of heritage refigures backwardness as authenticity” (Hafstein 2012, 510). *Dünürçülük* suggests that Gagauzians not only existed cohesively historically, but that they have overcome a backwards past in emerging as a mature nation. Here is evident the Janus-faced, ambiguous nature of narrations of nation (Bhabha 1990, 3), as the past is utilized to legitimize the present, but in specific, even contradictory ways. The toponym “Gagauzia” did not exist until 1990, and it is doubtful whether in the early twentieth century, the inhabitants of what is today southern Moldova saw themselves as Gagauzian or referred to their own speech practices as Gagauzian. Early ethnographer Valentin Moshkov

([1900–1902]) 2004, 19), for instance, recorded locals – people he envisioned as Gagauzians – in Bessarabia referring to their own language as Turkish, even highlighting that it was unheard of for them to use the glotonym – the language name – Gagauzian: “If two Gagauzians are conversing, and one, for whatever reason, does not understand the other, then the other may reproach him ‘Don’t you understand Turkish?’ [*po-turetski-to ty, ponimaesh’ li?*]. But he would *never* say: ‘Don’t you understand Gagauzian?’” (my emphasis).

Moshkov goes on to assert that “officially, Gagauzians do not exist,” as they were recorded in the Russian Empire’s documents as “Bulgarians, who speak Turkish” (10). He also recounts (6) that locals used various and multiple ethnonyms – Bulgarian and Greek, for example – in describing themselves, telling not only in regards to local diversity, but as to the unfixed-ness of ethnic or national identity categorizations. Identities prior to the Soviet Union’s “spectacularly successful attempt at a state-sponsored conflation of language, ‘culture,’ territory and quota-fed bureaucracy” (Slezkine 1994, 414), through which populations learned to use the “language of nationality” to gain access to entitlement (Hirsch 2005, 145), were largely regional, familial, occupational, or confessional, rather than ethnic or national (Brown 2004; Kappeler 2001, 141–142). Through performance of continuity with the past, *Dünürçülük* works to legitimate present-day notions of a Gagauzian ethnic or national identity, and, through this depiction of a purely Gagauzian space, others are narrated out of the picture. As Regina Bendix (2000, 38) puts it, a prominent aspect of heritage is “its capacity to hide the complexities of history and politics.” While Bessarabia was settled throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century by diverse migrants – including Austrian Rusyns, Romanians, Podolsk Little Russians (*podolskie malorossy*), Old Believer Great Russians (*starobriadtsy-velikorossy*), Germans, and Jews, according to Moskov ([1900–1902] 2004, 8) – *Dünürçülük*, as any performative representation of heritage, presents only a selective version of past-ness that includes and excludes according to contemporary objectives. In this way, *Dünürçülük* shows that national cinema can act as “internal cultural colonialism,” with its function being “to pull together diverse and contradictory discourses, to articulate a contradictory unity, to play a part in the hegemonic process of achieving consensus, and containing difference and contradiction” (Higson 1989, 44).

Film is an influential means of establishing imaginings of nation (Berezhnaya and Schmitt 2013); indeed, well-known is Lenin’s alleged referral to cinema as “the most important of all the arts” (Gak 1963) in recognition of its value as a propaganda tool, an attitude reflected in the establishment and nurturing of state-run film production throughout the republics in the Soviet era. Screened widely both locally in the culture houses throughout Gagauzia and internationally at film festivals, *Dünürçülük* attempts to delineate Gagauzian-ness for both insider and outsider audiences. However, its outcome in achieving the mentioned reciprocal dynamic of ethnicity of “being seen” and “seeing of self” is connected to audience resonance. Patraman’s film was his own initiative, funded by donations, without governmental support or financing. In interviews (Gagauzinfo 2019b), he often describes the project as challenging specifically for difficulty locating funding, and his second film, *Dimitraş & Pıtraş* (Serbest Film 2019), remains frozen for the same reason. While apt to argue that nation building is not merely top-down (Polese 2011, 37), I question how far-reaching ethno-political entrepreneurship can be without economic backing. Although Patraman has approached Gagauzian authorities for funding and is reportedly “being considered” (Gagauzinfo 2019b), a financial award seems unlikely as Gagauzia – dependent, as noted, upon remittances and aid funding – certainly has a multiplicity of concerns more pressing than national film production. The reach of the project is limited due to budget-related feasibility of production and promotion, making Patraman’s project a case of entrepreneurship without monetary profit. In explaining the success of Russian producer Nikita Mikhalkov’s 1998 *Sibirskiy tsiriul’nik* (Barber of Siberia), Susan Larsen (2003) argues that, in contrast with many similar national-themed Russian films, it reeled in audiences because it “looks like a blockbuster” (503, emphasis original). The reverse can be said about *Dünürçülük*, as a glaringly low-budget production that, while receiving attention thanks to its status as “first,” only questionably captivated local audiences. As Andrew Higson (1989, 46) points

out, “For what is a national cinema if it doesn’t have a national audience?” The next case shows that while all entrepreneurs are engaged in the creation of national narratives, such articulations are not necessarily institutionalized politically for larger nation-building efforts.

Discussion: Ethnopolitical Entrepreneurs as Nation Builders?

These three cases of elites’ endeavors to define and delimit Gagauzian-ness stands in contrast with nonelite articulations. Nation-building is elite-driven. Nationalistic narratives are unlikely to take root without governmental policy to institutionalize them. Individuals of the oft-evoked “people,” *narod*, have agency in interpreting elites’ national imaginings. The Gagauzian cases shows that “[intellectuals’] ideas do not always have consequence, much less win hegemony” (Suny and Kennedy 1999b, 408), and thereby, underscores the array of social actors involved in any nation-building activity.

While Marcin Kosienkowski (2017b, 128) aptly draws attention to the specifically Gagauzian elements, such as a flag, coat of arms, and anthem that were adopted in the 1990s, these are better described as instances of more broadly civic, rather than ethnically based, exclusionary nation building. The Gagauzian anthem, for instance, *Tarafım* (my land), is decidedly space and place-oriented, framing belonging based on having the same homeland, rather than shared ethnic/national heritage or linguistic practices. This contrasts sharply with Moldova’s anthem *Limba noastră* (our language) that unequivocally narrates language at the forefront of Moldovan national identity. Indeed, creating these elements of Gagauzian-ness had symbolic significance in the context of constructing concrete distinctions from Moldova, thereby legitimizing autonomy efforts, yet none translated into substantial changes for the prior order and functioning of daily Soviet life. Kosienkowski (2017b, 127–128) refers to Gagauzia’s pluralistic governance approach of the 1990s as “internationalism,” which is evident in its legal code, striking in its lack of exclusionist, nationalistic elements. It maintains pluralist policy of three official languages, with its legal codex referring to the population as “multiethnic” (*mnogonatsional’nyi narod*) (Halk Topluşu 2020b) and guaranteeing the use of other languages, alongside the official ones (*garantiruetsia funktsionirovanie i drugikh iazykov*) (Halk Topluşu 2020a). In a 2018 publication, Irina Vlach, Gagauzia’s *başkan* (governor)⁸ frames Gagauzian identity or consciousness (*samosoznanie*) in relation to linguistic tolerance, upholding local spirit of respect (*dukh vzaimouvazheniia*) for diverse language practices (Vlach 2018, 6–7).

Moreover, there is contemporary resistance, both popular and within factions of the ruling government, to large-scale change that would sweep aside Soviet heritage by creating something new and definitively, exclusively Gagauzian, as demonstrated by recent, unsuccessful efforts to rename Comrat’s Lenin Street. Shortly after the death of Stepan Topal, president of the unrecognized Gagauzian Republic from 1991 through 1994, former mayor of Comrat Leonid Dobrov proposed the renaming, and in November 2018 Comrat’s municipal council voted in favor of the change. This elicited objection among locals, with various initiative groups collecting signatures on petitions to protest the planned change (Gagauzinfo 2018c). Başkan Vlach critiqued the vote as an insensitive political move in the wake of Topal’s death, unpleasant for Topal’s family, and opined that the matter should be decided by the people, rather than political elite (Gagauzinfo 2018b). Comrat’s mayor, Sergei Anastasov, has called for a referendum before any decisive renaming action be taken (Gagauzinfo 2019c). In December 2018, news portal Gagauzinfo.md opened a vote on its Instagram page, in which 2,110 individuals reportedly took part, with 89 percent voting to keep Lenin Street (Gagauzinfo 2018c). Although small-scale, carried out unofficially by informal means, and reaching only those active on Instagram, at this point this is the only sort of polling among the people that has taken place. It cannot, of course, be considered representative, but it is telling in its own right, as the limited polling suggests that younger generations (those on Instagram) are in favor of keeping Soviet-era naming, whereas those pushing for the nationalistic change – the voting municipal council members – are select Soviet-generation political elite. According to Anastasov, a

referendum would cost one-hundred thousand lei, and he has made it clear that as the city has more pressing needs; Lenin Street will not be renamed in the near future (Gagauzinfo 2019c).

Along with popular resistance to renaming Lenin Street, I often encountered viewpoints generally opposing or doubtful about nationalist-oriented changes in Gagauzian society, with language policy a prominent example. For example, voicing his doubt about the possibility of the local educational system transitioning to instruction in Gagauzian language, Roman, a history teacher in Comrat, opined:

Maybe with time. If we don't fully convert to Russian or Romanian. It's the tragedy of small nations. I don't see, by the way, anything bad about it. The Russian nation, it soaked up many different nations that lived in the steppe or in forests. The French also, after all. The Gascon at one point were a separate nation. Today they're French. The French swallowed them, assimilated them. This is a normal historical process. Small nations always become parts of bigger nations. Gagauzians, well, it's unlikely that we can create some big Gagauzia. It's more likely that Gagauzians will become part of some big, great nation and repeat a normal historical process.⁹

Dominant ways of thinking about changing patterns of (ethnic, national, linguistic) identification often evoke the emotionally charged trope of loss (Block 2008), with heritagization efforts focused on circumventing this supposed loss through processes of adding value (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995). In contrast to such discourses of loss and preservation, though, Roman's decidedly matter-of-fact articulation regarding the world's power structures presents an alternate point of view. It challenges normative understandings of cultures and ethnic groups as distinct, bounded entities, highlighting rather their sundry nature, and also draws attention to the saliency of power asymmetries in any discussion of national identity. I frequently heard these sorts of "practical" narratives on nation, ethnicity, and identity while in the field, striking in their decided lack of sentimentalism or affect for some imagined community and in sharp contrast with the case studies offered here. This pragmatic stance speaks to Gagauzia's lack of top-down, institutionalized, nationalistic narratives on belonging or identity. Without ethnically oriented "banal nationalism" (Billig 1995) employed to teach individuals (subliminally and otherwise) that they *should* have affect for a national or ethnic category, people often are more attuned to the less romantic aspects of national identity such as the involved power plays of geopolitical configurations or the interlinked practical concerns of how to make a living. Although in the Gagauzian case, ethnopolitical entrepreneurs actively utilize the ethnic or national category for their initiatives, these projects have not been accompanied to a great extent by "groupness crystallizing" (Brubaker 2002, 168) or the categories being invested with groupness, as has been the case in many other post-Soviet regions.

When asked what aspects of her culture are important for her, twenty-eight-year-old Viktoria lists folklore, dance, hospitality, cuisine, then adds:

But I can't say that I eat only Gagauzian food or listen only to Gagauzian music because nobody does so. Whatever the culture might be, however well preserved it might be, there is always some sort of mixing of cultures... for example, on our table can be found, I don't know, some new fashionable salad and our *kaurma* [meat dish, often touted as traditionally Gagauzian], as an example. Or at weddings, again, we have music starting from Western, ending with Bulgarian, Turkish, Gagauzian, and the entire set, so to say. I believe that, in fact, this is really good – diversity – it's great, I think.¹⁰

Indeed, as Viktoria points out, *nobody* lives within just one (national) culture because, despite the ubiquity in our world today of national labels implying the opposite, cultures do not exist as confined, definable, distinct things. Rather, any culture and any identity is a creolized assemblage continuously formed and reformed through bricolage (Malkki 1992: 37). In the Gagauzian context,

while ethnopolitical entrepreneurs advancing the notion of a distinct Gagauzian identity have emerged, their initiatives not only remain outside the realm of governmental policy and institutionalization – as most glaringly demonstrated by Lenin Street’s persistence – but also, as Roman’s and Viktoria’s thoughts suggest, they can be challenged or rejected by nonelite actors.

Conclusions

Heritage and innovation intertwine in efforts to reconfigure Gagauzian-ness through attempts to prove historic existence as a *narod* and thereby justify contemporary ethnopolitical claims. Ethnopolitical entrepreneurship is not unique, and it is consistent with the trend of worldwide initiatives that create frameworks of heritage to commodify ethnicity or culture to capitalize on modern demand for “authentic” experiences. What does make the Gagauzian case fairly distinct in the former Soviet space is the relative dearth of exclusionary top-down nation building that often accompanies such invocation and construction of national categories and narratives. Although some efforts exist, with Lenin Street’s renaming a prime example, their reach is restricted in large part by intertwined economic and political dependency as well as historic memory viewing Soviet “internationalism” favorably as contrasted with Moldovan nationalism of the 1990s (Kosienkowski 2017b, 127–128). While the category of Gagauzian is drawn upon and invested with groupness by ethnopolitical entrepreneurs, at the governmental level, policy remains pluralistic, thereby contrasting with general nation-building trends throughout the post-Soviet region during the last few decades (Smith et al. 1998; Suny and Kennedy 1999; Polese et al. 2018). Further, these cases illustrating intersectional and local experiences of belonging offer a critique “methodological nationalism” (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003), particularly within the growing body of literature on Gagauzian studies.

As I argue elsewhere (Holsapple 2020), local patterns of experiencing and articulating belonging remain open and ambiguous rather than exclusively nationalistic, with various identity categories often drawn upon simultaneously and situationally. These cases thus illustrate the discrepancies between (provincial) elite or intellectual efforts to articulate the nation and the actual national formation involving “production of the people” (Balibar 1991, 93–94). Nation-building is not strictly a top-down activity, but state backing, particularly economic support can be a salient factor in extending the reach of nationalist projects.

Financial Support. This work was supported by the Estonian Research Council (PSG48)

Disclosures. None.

Notes

- 1 All names pseudonyms.
- 2 Gagauzinfo, funded by advertising and grants, is a leading mass media portal in Gagauzia that on its homepage describes its mission as “honest and objective” reporting.
- 3 I focus on these three cases because they were the most conspicuous during my fieldwork, but by no means is this an exhaustive list of contemporary ethnopolitical entrepreneurship in Gagauzia. Another prominent case includes Todur Zanet’s recent compilation of Gagauzian folklore, which he published through the United States Ambassadors’ Fund for Cultural Preservation’s project Preservation of the Endangered Gagauz Language and Cultural Traditions in Moldova (Zanet 2017). When I corresponded with Zanet by email in 2019, he indicated that his current project, as is the case with Patraman’s second film, is frozen due to lack of funding.
- 4 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.
- 5 Nelya. 2018. Interviewed by author, March 27. Comrat.

- 6 A *sofrasi* is a low, round dining table.
- 7 Viktoria. 2018. Interviewed by author, February 20. Comrat.
- 8 Vlakh was reelected for a second term in June 2019.
- 9 Roman. 2018. Interviewed by author, April 11. Comrat.
- 10 Viktoria. 2018. Interviewed by author, February 20. Comrat.

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