

The Quiet Grammar of Domination: Symbolic Violence and the Gagauz Struggle for National Identity through a Bourdieusian Lens

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<https://doi.org/10.69760/aghel.026002017>

Abstract

This article develops a sociological reading of the Gagauz struggle for national identity through Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence, together with the cognate concepts of the linguistic market, linguistic capital and habitus. The Gagauz a Turkic-speaking, Orthodox Christian minority concentrated in southern Moldova occupy an instructive sociological position: they enjoy formal language rights and even territorial autonomy, yet their language continues to recede in favour of Russian. I argue that this paradox cannot be explained by overt coercion, which is largely absent, but only by the subtler mechanism Bourdieu calls symbolic violence: the process whereby a dominated group comes to perceive its own subordination as natural, reasonable and even freely chosen. Drawing on peer-reviewed scholarship in particular Dağdeviren-Kırmızı and İnan's work on linguistic insecurity, Kapaló's ethnography of Gagauz folk religion, and the extensive Polish-school literature on Gagauz statehood and autonomy by Kosienkowski and Hatłas the article shows how the low symbolic value of the Gagauz tongue has been historically produced and durably internalised. A central original contribution is a conceptual model (Figure 1) that maps Bourdieu's abstract circuit of symbolic violence onto the empirical Gagauz case. The conclusion argues that the success of Gagauz identity politics depends less on further legal recognition than on a reconstruction of the symbolic value of linguistic capital itself.

Keywords: *Pierre Bourdieu; symbolic violence; linguistic capital; habitus; Gagauz; national identity; linguistic insecurity; ethno-confessional identity; Gagauzia; Moldova*

1. Introduction

Few questions in the sociology of ethnicity are as deceptively simple as why some minority languages fade while their speakers profess to cherish them. The case of the Gagauz throws this puzzle into especially sharp relief. Here is a people that secured, in 1994, a form of territorial autonomy widely praised as a model of peaceful conflict accommodation; whose language holds

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co-official status within that autonomy; and who express, when surveyed, genuine emotional attachment to their mother tongue. And yet the Gagauz language steadily loses ground to Russian, generation after generation, in the very territory the Gagauz themselves administer. No law forbids Gagauz; no authority compels its abandonment. The retreat happens, as it were, of the speakers' own accord.

It is precisely this appearance of free, reasonable, self-authored choice that makes the Gagauz case a paradigmatic instance of what Pierre Bourdieu called symbolic violence. For Bourdieu, the most durable forms of domination are not those imposed by force, which provoke resistance and must constantly justify themselves, but those that operate through the very categories of perception and appreciation through which the dominated apprehend the social world. When subordination is misrecognised as the natural order of things, domination reproduces itself without coercion, lodged in the dispositions of the dominated themselves. A sociology attentive only to overt power — to laws, prohibitions, open conflict — will simply miss this mechanism. The Gagauz language does not retreat because it is banned; it retreats because, in the linguistic market that speakers have internalised, it is worth less.

The scholarly literature on the Gagauz, though comparatively small, is mature and falls into three broad streams. A sociolinguistic stream examines the vitality, attitudes and insecurity surrounding the Gagauz language; an ethnographic and historical stream investigates Gagauz ethnogenesis, the ethnonym, and above all the distinctive entanglement of Turkic speech with Orthodox Christianity; and a political-science stream, exemplified by the Polish school of Kosienkowski and Hatlas, analyses Gagauz autonomy, de facto statehood and external orientation. Each stream has accumulated valuable empirical material, yet they rarely converse, and almost none of them reads the Gagauz situation explicitly through the conceptual apparatus of Bourdieusian sociology. This article seeks to supply that missing synthesis.

The argument proceeds as follows. Section 2 sets out the Bourdieusian framework and presents an original conceptual model linking symbolic violence to the Gagauz case. Section 3 explains the analytical-synthesis method and the source base. Section 4 reconstructs the historical formation of the Gagauz linguistic market across three imperial regimes. Section 5 turns to the empirical evidence of internalised subordination in language-attitude and insecurity research. Section 6 examines Orthodox Christianity as a second, partly competing form of symbolic capital. Section 7 asks whether the 1994 autonomy has altered the symbolic balance. Sections 8 and 9 discuss implications and conclude. Four questions organise the analysis: Through what institutional mechanisms was the low symbolic value of Gagauz historically produced? How is that value internalised in speakers' habitus, and how do insecurity studies evidence it? What role does Orthodox Christianity play in the Gagauz economy of symbolic capital? and to what extent has territorial autonomy mitigated symbolic violence?



2. Theoretical Framework: Symbolic Violence and the Linguistic Field

2.1. *Symbolic violence and misrecognition*

Symbolic violence, in Bourdieu's usage, denotes the imposition of systems of meaning that legitimate relations of domination by causing them to be perceived as natural. Its defining feature is that it is exercised with the tacit complicity of those who suffer it. Unlike physical coercion, symbolic violence does not announce itself; it works through categories of taste, of competence, of correctness that the dominated share with the dominant. The result is what Bourdieu terms misrecognition (*méconnaissance*): the social arbitrariness of a given hierarchy is forgotten, and the hierarchy appears instead as simply the way things are.

For the sociologist this concept has a crucial methodological consequence: it relocates the site of domination from the institutions of overt power to the embodied perceptions of ordinary actors. The interesting datum is no longer the decree but the disposition — not what speakers are forbidden to do, but what they spontaneously feel to be appropriate, comfortable, or shameful. Symbolic violence, paradoxically, is most effective precisely where overt constraint is absent, because there the domination is most fully naturalised and least available as an object of protest. This is why the Gagauz case, with its near-total absence of formal linguistic prohibition, is not a weak instance of domination but, on the contrary, a particularly pure one.

It is worth underscoring what distinguishes symbolic violence from the cruder notions of ideology or false consciousness with which it is sometimes confused. Bourdieu does not claim that the dominated are simply deceived, nor that some manipulating agent deliberately implants false beliefs in them. The mechanism is at once more impersonal and more intimate. It operates through the ordinary functioning of institutions — schools, churches, labour markets, media — each of which quietly rewards the legitimate competence and penalises its absence, until the resulting hierarchy is sedimented in the body as a second nature. The dominated participate in their own domination not because they are duped but because the categories through which they perceive and evaluate are the very categories the dominant order has instilled. This is what gives symbolic violence its peculiar stability: there is no obvious adversary to resist, only a world that feels self-evidently as it should be.

2.2. *The linguistic market and linguistic capital*

Bourdieu reconceives every linguistic exchange as an exchange on a market. Utterances are not merely communicative acts but products that receive a value, and that value depends not on intrinsic linguistic properties but on the position of the speaker and the tongue within a structured field. The legitimate language — the one consecrated by the state, the school and the high cultural domains — functions as the standard against which all other tongues and dialects are measured and, inevitably, found wanting. Competence in the legitimate language thus constitutes a form of capital, convertible into educational success, employment and social mobility.



Applied to the Gagauz, the model is almost diagrammatically clear. The Gagauz language is a fully functional Western Oghuz Turkic tongue, rich in folklore and expressive resource; linguistically it lacks nothing. But on the market that its speakers actually inhabit, Russian commands the higher value — not because it is a ‘better’ language, but because it opens onto a vastly larger field of schooling, employment, administration and, increasingly, digital life. Gagauz, by contrast, is confined largely to the household, the village and informal religious practice. The key sociological point is that the resulting language shift presents itself to speakers as a rational choice, when in fact the rationality is wholly internal to a market whose terms were set elsewhere. Parents who raise children in Russian are not betraying their heritage; they are acting sensibly within a structure that has already devalued the alternative.

2.3. Habitus and the embodiment of subordination

If the market supplies the objective structure, the habitus supplies its subjective counterpart. Habitus, for Bourdieu, is the durable yet transposable system of dispositions through which social structures inscribe themselves in bodies and minds, generating perceptions and practices that tend, without conscious calculation, to reproduce those same structures. The linguistic habitus is the practical sense of which tongue is fitting in which setting — a sense registered not as a reasoned judgement but as ease or unease, comfort or embarrassment.

It is at this level that symbolic violence becomes visible to empirical sociology. Linguistic insecurity — the speaker’s sense that her own tongue is deficient, improper, not ‘good enough’ — is the embodied signature of a dominant norm turned against the self. When a Gagauz adolescent feels safer in Russian and uneasy in Gagauz, she is not reporting a preference so much as enacting a disposition laid down over decades. Crucially, Bourdieu insists that the habitus, though durable, is not immutable: when objective conditions change — when new economic opportunities or new sources of prestige appear — dispositions can, slowly, be reformed. This qualification matters, for it keeps the analysis from collapsing into fatalism and locates the possibility of revitalisation in a transformation of the market itself.

2.4. The state and the centralisation of symbolic capital

Bourdieu accords the state a special place as the central bank of symbolic capital: it is the institution that consecrates the legitimate language, confers titles and credentials, and thereby regulates the entire system of symbolic exchange. The making of a national language is, historically, inseparable from the making of a state, which standardises one tongue and diffuses it through compulsory schooling while relegating all others to subordinate status.

The Gagauz have repeatedly stood on the wrong side of this process. Three successive state projects — the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and independent Moldova — each propagated its own legitimate tongue, and in none was Gagauz that tongue. As Kosienkowski’s detailed reconstruction of the short-lived Gagauz Republic (1990–1995) shows, the Gagauz leadership did



not even pursue full independence; their goal was autonomism — a measure of self-governance within a parent state rather than a sovereign apparatus capable of consecrating Gagauz as a fully legitimate language. The 1994 autonomy granted Gagauz a kind of semi-state status, but within a small, resource-poor unit. The principal ‘bank’ of symbolic capital — the Moldovan central state, and behind it the wider Russophone cultural sphere — has remained external to Gagauz control.

Kosienkowski’s evidence is sociologically revealing on precisely this point. The Gagauz entity, he shows, sought from Moldova the very apparatus of statehood it lacked — universities, media, banks, bureaucratic structures — and its population continued, strikingly, to pay taxes to Chişinău rather than to any independent Gagauz authority. This is not the behaviour of a community bidding for sovereign control over its own symbolic capital; it is the behaviour of a community seeking a protected niche within someone else’s field of power. From a Bourdieusian standpoint the implication is far-reaching: the Gagauz movement contested the distribution of recognition within the Moldovan state without ever contesting that state’s monopoly on consecration. The autonomy thus secured a place at the table while leaving the rules of the table — including the hierarchy of languages — substantially intact.

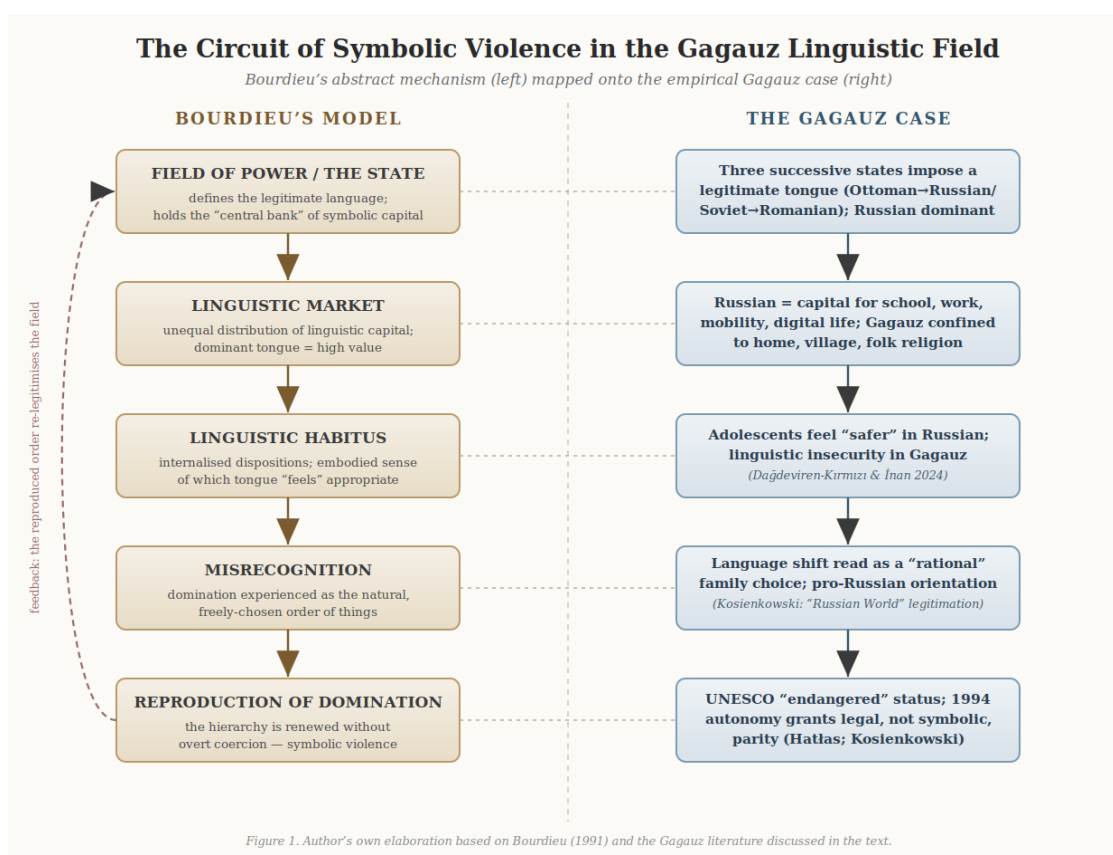


Figure 1. *The circuit of symbolic violence in the Gagauz linguistic field: Bourdieu’s abstract mechanism mapped onto the empirical case (author’s own elaboration).*



Figure 1 represents the argument in compressed form. The left-hand column reproduces Bourdieu's general circuit: the field of power defines the legitimate language; the linguistic market distributes capital unequally; the habitus internalises this distribution as embodied disposition; misrecognition recasts domination as natural choice; and the whole cycle reproduces the hierarchy without overt coercion, feeding back to re-legitimate the field. The right-hand column populates each moment with the Gagauz material discussed below. The dashed feedback arrow is essential to the model: symbolic violence is not a linear sequence but a self-renewing loop, in which each reproduced outcome silently restores the conditions of its own continuation.

3. Method and Sources

This is a theoretically driven, qualitative study. It generates no primary fieldwork data; instead it performs an analytical synthesis — a theoretical re-reading in which empirical findings gathered under other frameworks (sociolinguistics, ethnography, political science) are reinterpreted through a single sociological lens. Such re-reading is a recognised mode of conceptual contribution: its value lies not in new data but in the new intelligibility it confers on existing data.

The source base has three layers. The first is Bourdieu's own corpus, principally *Language and Symbolic Power*, from which the concepts of symbolic violence, the linguistic market and habitus are drawn. The second is the peer-reviewed scholarship on Gagauz language and identity: Dağdeviren-Kırmızı and İnan's large-sample study of linguistic insecurity in the *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, their related work on language attitudes and digital vitality, and Kapaló's Brill monograph on Gagauz folk religion. The third layer is the political-sociological literature on Gagauz autonomy and statehood, where the Polish school is indispensable: Kosienkowski's analyses of the Gagauz Republic as an autonomism-driven de facto state and of the 'Russian World' as an external legitimation strategy, and Hatłas's historical and ethnographic studies of the Gagauz across Bessarabia, Bulgaria and Ukraine, including his joint work with Żyromski on power, administration and ethnic minorities in the Gagauz autonomy.

One methodological limitation must be stated plainly. Bourdieu never wrote about the Gagauz, and Gagauz specialists have seldom invoked Bourdieu. The bridge between the two is therefore the article's own construction. This lends the study originality but imposes a discipline: the interpretation must remain anchored in what the empirical literature actually reports, rather than bending the evidence to fit the theory. Throughout, I have tried to let the Bourdieusian reading illuminate findings that the original authors documented on independent grounds.

4. The Historical Formation of the Gagauz Linguistic Market

4.1. A people of uncertain origin and subordinate speech



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Acta Globalis Humanitatis et Linguarum
ISSN 3030-1718

To understand the present, one must follow the trajectory. The ancestors of the Gagauz migrated, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, from the Black Sea coast of present-day Bulgaria into the southern reaches of Bessarabia, then within the Russian Empire. As Hatlas emphasises, their very origin is sociologically consequential: the ethnogenesis of the Gagauz remains genuinely contested, the historical sources are thin, and the question is heavily overdetermined by politics. A people whose foundational narrative is uncertain possesses, in Bourdieusian terms, a weaker stock of the symbolic capital that myths of origin and shared memory ordinarily supply to a nation.

Across this trajectory the Gagauz tongue never once occupied the position of a legitimate, high-status language. Under Ottoman rule, Greek and Church Slavonic dominated the religious sphere and Ottoman Turkish the administrative one; under the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, Russian held sway; during the interwar Romanian administration, Romanian was the prestige tongue. Gagauz was, throughout, positioned as a low vernacular, a language of the home and the village — in Bourdieu's terms, a tongue chronically carrying low capital on every market it entered. Hatlas notes, tellingly, that the Gagauz of southern Moldova nonetheless attained a better position than their kin in Ukraine or Bulgaria, where dispersal and an international border cutting through villages, families and even gardens further fragmented the community.

This last observation deserves sociological emphasis, for it reveals that symbolic capital is not distributed evenly even within a single ethnic group. The concentration of the Gagauz in southern Moldova produced a critical mass sufficient to sustain a claim to autonomy, whereas the dispersed Budjak communities studied by Hatlas — strung across the Moldovan–Ukrainian frontier, intermingled with Bulgarian settlers — lacked the demographic density on which collective symbolic mobilisation depends. Territory, in other words, is itself a condition of symbolic capital: a compact settlement can support institutions, a press, a political class, while a scattered one cannot. The Gagauz movement's achievements were thus underwritten by a geographical fact, and the comparative weakness of the diaspora communities throws the Moldovan core's relative success into relief. A Bourdieusian sociology of the Gagauz must therefore be a sociology of place as much as of language.

4.2. Mihail Çakir and the paradox of consecration

The written history of Gagauz turns on the figure of Mihail Çakir (Ciachir), an Orthodox priest who, in the early twentieth century, became the first native speaker to commit the language seriously to writing — translating religious texts and composing a history of his people, first in Romanian and then in Gagauz. Scholars describe this as the 'canonisation' of the Gagauz language: the attempt to lend it status and a written existence through the prestige of the sacred sphere.



Bourdieu's notion of the rite of institution clarifies what was at stake. To furnish a language with an alphabet, a grammar and a corpus of sacred texts is never a merely technical act; it is a symbolic one that consecrates the tongue, lifting it from the flux of oral practice into the dignity of a legitimate cultural object. Yet Çakır's effort also exposed a tension that runs to the heart of Gagauz identity. To raise the language by stressing its Turkic character risked unsettling the Orthodox loyalty on which Gagauz distinctiveness equally rested — the more so as a Turkish-language religious literature offered, at one historical moment, an opening to Protestant missionaries among an Orthodox population whose services were conducted in Romanian or Russian. The very act meant to augment linguistic capital thus threatened the community's other principal asset, its religious capital. The two pillars of Gagauz identity, language and faith, were from the outset in a relation of both alliance and rivalry.

4.3. Soviet nationality policy: recognition as devaluation

The year 1957 is the hinge of the modern story: by decree of the Moldavian SSR a Cyrillic-based alphabet was adopted for Gagauz, and the language gained recognition within the Soviet scheme of nationalities. At first glance this is consecration. But Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power exposes the double character of such official acts.

Soviet nationality policy formally recognised minority languages — furnishing alphabets, grammars, even national territorial units — under the formula 'national in form, socialist in content' while in practice maintaining Russian as the language of inter-ethnic communication, indispensable for higher education, professional advancement and union-wide mobility. Recognition, in other words, did not disturb the subordinate position of minority tongues on the real market; it legitimated that position by dressing inequality in the garb of fairness. Gagauz fared especially poorly, for it was not even the titular language of a union republic but the speech of a small minority. The census record traces the cumulative effect: across the Soviet decades, command of Russian among the Gagauz rose steadily while the social space of Gagauz contracted toward the domestic sphere. No prohibition produced this outcome; the structure of the market and the dispositions of the habitus produced it — the long, quiet work of symbolic violence.

5. Internalised Domination: The Evidence of Linguistic Insecurity

The strongest empirical confirmation of the Bourdieusian reading comes from research on how Gagauz speakers regard their own language. Dağdeviren-Kırmızı and İnan's study, published in the SSCI-indexed *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, administered a language-use questionnaire and a linguistic-insecurity scale to 674 adolescent Gagauz speakers, supplemented by interviews. Its central finding aligns exactly with what the theory predicts: respondents felt more secure using Russian, and there was a strong correlation between family language practice and the linguistic insecurity the adolescents experienced.



The article's title — capturing young speakers being asked why they are speaking Gagauz at all — condenses the sociology of the situation. To speak one's mother tongue has become a marked, accountable act, something requiring explanation; the unmarked, default, 'normal' choice is Russian. In Bourdieu's terms, the dominant norm has so thoroughly colonised the field that the minority tongue figures as a deviation to be justified. The insecurity is not idiosyncratic embarrassment but the embodied trace of an objective hierarchy.

Equally telling is the emotional–functional split documented across this body of work, including studies of speaker attitudes and of the language's precarious digital vitality. Gagauz speakers report strong sentimental and identitarian attachment to their language — it is the emblem of who they are — while assigning it low functional value for the practical business of life, for which they prefer Russian. Sociologically this dissociation is the very signature of internalised symbolic violence: the tongue survives as a badge of belonging precisely because it has been emptied of market power. One may love a language and still, without contradiction, decline to live one's public life in it — and it is this gap between affective loyalty and practical abandonment that, accumulated across families and generations, drives the shift.

The same dynamic appears in the spatial and digital registers. Linguistic-landscape research notes that public signage in Gagauzia is predominantly Romanian or Russian, so that the written, visible, public face of the territory rarely speaks Gagauz; and the language is markedly under-represented online. For a young speaker, a tongue absent from screens and street signs quietly transmits the message that it is neither modern nor a language with a future — the reproduction of an old hierarchy in new technological form. Each of these everyday absences is a small act of symbolic violence, and their sum is a habitus calibrated against the mother tongue.

It is important, sociologically, to read these findings as evidence of a relation rather than of a deficiency in Gagauz speakers themselves. The insecurity reported in the surveys is not a psychological frailty of individuals but the subjective face of an objective structure; it is what the linguistic market feels like from the position of its dominated participants. This is the analytical payoff of Bourdieu's refusal to separate structure from disposition: the same hierarchy that can be read off census figures and signage audits can also be read off the hesitation in an adolescent's voice. The micro and the macro are two registers of a single fact. A purely attitudinal account would treat the insecurity as a variable to be correlated; a Bourdieusian account treats it as the very medium through which the social structure perpetuates itself, which is why intervention pitched at attitudes alone — telling speakers to value their language — so reliably fails. One cannot exhort away a disposition that the structure continuously regenerates.

6. Orthodox Christianity as Competing Symbolic Capital

To analyse Gagauz identity through language alone would be to miss half the picture, for the second pillar of Gagauz distinctiveness is Orthodox Christianity. The Gagauz are that



sociological rarity, a Turkic-speaking yet Orthodox people — set apart at once from the largely Muslim Turkic world and from their Slavic and Romance-speaking Orthodox neighbours. Kapaló's ethnography of Gagauz folk religion shows how thoroughly lay religious practice has shaped, and been shaped by, ethnic identity, and argues that even the scholarly category of 'folk religion' has been instrumental in constructing Gagauz religious identity.

In Bourdieusian terms, Orthodoxy functions as a form of symbolic capital that is, unlike the language, relatively high in value. It places the Gagauz within the same religious field as the region's dominant Orthodox populations and thereby spares them the minority predicament of the Muslim Turkic peoples. The result is the structural paradox of Gagauz identity: by language they belong to the Turkic world, by faith to the Slavic-Orthodox one. Hatlas and Żyromski's studies of Orthodox churches in the Gagauz villages of southern Bessarabia document how central this religious life is to communal cohesion.

This duality has direct strategic consequences, and it helps explain a fact that the political-science literature has documented at length. As Kosienkowski argues, the Gagauz orientation has been markedly pro-Russian, and the 'Russian World' (*Russkiy Mir*) has operated as an external legitimation strategy in Gagauzia — a supply of symbolic capital from beyond the region's borders. Comparative work on the Gagauz and the Crimean Tatars sharpens the point: two Turkic minorities with broadly similar imperial histories diverged politically, the Muslim Crimean Tatars toward an anti-Russian stance and the Orthodox Gagauz toward a pro-Russian one. Religion, a form of symbolic capital, thus decisively shaped each group's relation to the surrounding centres of power.

There is a further, sharper irony. The religious sphere that anchors Gagauz pride has itself been a conduit of Russian influence: Gagauz parishes fall under the Moscow Patriarchate, and services were long conducted in Russian or Romanian rather than Gagauz. The community's strongest symbolic asset has therefore doubled as a channel for the dominant language's prestige. Yet Kapaló's attention to lay practice reveals a countervailing tendency: in the informal register of folk prayer, household ritual and the invocation of saints, Gagauz endures. The language driven from the high, official domains finds a refuge in the sacred and intimate — but this very refuge confirms its marginality, for it survives as the language of the heart rather than the language of public power. Whether faith can become an engine of revitalisation, through the translation of liturgy into Gagauz, or whether it merely freezes the tongue in a residual niche, remains one of the open strategic questions of Gagauz identity.

7. Territorial Autonomy: Does Legal Recognition Undo Symbolic Violence?

The signal institutional achievement of the Gagauz movement is the 1994 Law on the Special Legal Status of Gagauzia, in force from 1995, which granted territorial autonomy, an elected legislature and executive, and co-official status to three languages: Gagauz, Russian and



Moldovan (Romanian). The political-science literature, including Kosienkowski's reconstruction of the autonomism that drove the earlier Gagauz Republic, generally treats the case as a success of peaceful accommodation, conspicuously unlike the violent Transnistrian secession.

Viewed through Bourdieu, however, the distinction between legal-institutional recognition and symbolic recognition becomes decisive. Autonomy conferred formal status on the Gagauz language without altering its real value on the linguistic market. The evidence of the gap is abundant: even within the autonomy, Russian remains dominant in administration, public life and education; Gagauz is taught not as the medium of instruction but as a 'native language' subject for a few hours a week; and surveys report that a large majority prefer Russian as the language of schooling. That the People's Assembly felt obliged in 2018 to legislate Gagauz-language competence for officials, and that UNESCO in 2010 classified the language as endangered, are themselves admissions of the chasm between official status and actual use.

Here the durability of symbolic violence is laid bare: even in an autonomous unit governed by the Gagauz themselves, the supremacy of Russian persists. Domination no longer depends on any external power; it is reproduced from within — in the habitus, in school choices, in family language policy. Indeed, autonomy can render symbolic violence more invisible still, for once a group enjoys formal language rights and self-government, the continuing retreat of its tongue looks entirely like 'their own choice', and any charge of structural injustice loses its purchase. Formal equality can thus mask substantive symbolic inequality — a general limitation of the liberal rights framework, which can equalise legal statuses while leaving untouched the unequal symbolic values that lie behind them.

It would nonetheless be a mistake to dismiss autonomy as symbolically inert. In Bourdieusian terms, institutional recognition is a necessary, if insufficient, precondition for long-term symbolic change. Official status, the possibility of education in Gagauz, and competence requirements for officials lay the groundwork on which the symbolic value of the language might eventually be rebuilt; they are first steps in returning the tongue to the public, legitimate sphere. The question is whether they are strong, sustained and far-reaching enough. The present evidence suggests that, so far, they have not sufficed to shift the symbolic balance.

8. Discussion

The analysis suggests that the Gagauz struggle for national identity unfolds simultaneously on two fields that should not be conflated. On the legal-political field the Gagauz have won real victories — territorial autonomy, co-official language status, institutional recognition. On the symbolic field — the field of the perceived value of the language, of speakers' self-assurance, of the linguistic habitus — the contest remains profoundly unequal. Bourdieu's framework explains why the two need not move together: the most durable domination resides in the categories of perception, and these are not rewritten by statute.



A second comparison sharpens the sociological stakes still further. Hashimov (2025), analysing the national identity of the Azeri Turks of Iran, frames their situation as a linguistic problem requiring a sociological solution: a numerically substantial Turkic population whose mother tongue is subordinated to a dominant state language (Persian) in education and public life. The structural parallel with the Gagauz is striking — in both cases a Turkic-speaking community confronts a prestige language consecrated by the state, and in both the retreat of the mother tongue is misperceived as a matter of individual convenience rather than of market structure. Yet the divergence is equally instructive: where the Azeri case turns on demographic weight and the absence of any territorial-linguistic institutions, the Gagauz possess precisely such institutions yet still experience symbolic devaluation. The comparison thus confirms a central claim of this article — that institutional recognition, while necessary, does not by itself reconstruct the symbolic value of a subordinated tongue.

This is, in the end, the sociological lesson of the case. The Gagauz speaker who reaches for Russian experiences the act as free, and it is exactly this sense of freedom that marks the success of symbolic violence. To save the language would require not merely laws but a transformation of these internalised structures — a re-perception of Gagauz as valuable, prestigious, a tongue with a future. Bourdieu's theory is not, for all that, a counsel of despair. The habitus is durable but transposable, and the linguistic market is not fixed but a field of struggle. Several developments could raise the symbolic value of Gagauz: deeper cultural and economic ties with Turkey, which might enlarge the market for the Turkic tongue; a stronger presence of the language in media and digital space; an expanded role in education; and the work of cultural entrepreneurs and language activists who labour to raise its prestige. Each is, in Bourdieusian terms, an attempt to restructure the market rather than merely to exhort individuals.

The comparative dimension enriches the point. Recent scholarship on ethno-political entrepreneurship in Gagauzia — building, as it notes, on the precedent of Çakir — examines how global frameworks of heritage and authenticity are mobilised in local identity initiatives. Such efforts are precisely struggles over symbolic capital: attempts to re-consecrate the language and the culture by linking them to valued external frames. Their uneven success illustrates Bourdieu's insight that symbolic value cannot simply be willed into being by a committed minority; it must be underwritten by the broader structure of the field, including the powerful external actors — Russia, Turkey, the European Union — whose competing influence Kosienkowski and others have charted.

8.1. Limitations and directions for further research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study is theoretical and synthetic rather than empirical; it reinterprets existing findings and does not test the Bourdieusian model against fresh data. Its evidentiary base leans toward language attitudes and insecurity, leaving the interaction of economic and political capital with symbolic dynamics less fully explored. And it



treats the Gagauz somewhat as a unit, whereas Bourdieu's framework is acutely sensitive to internal differentiation by generation, class and the urban–rural divide — differentiation that future work should foreground.

The most direct next step would be fieldwork designed explicitly around Bourdieusian categories: a mixed-methods study mapping the linguistic habitus of Gagauz speakers, their domain-specific language choices, and the symbolic value they attach to competing tongues. A second promising avenue is systematic comparison with other 'protected yet retreating' minority languages across the post-Soviet space, which would help distinguish what is universal in the mechanism of symbolic violence from what is specific to the Gagauz configuration of Turkic speech and Orthodox faith.

9. Conclusion

Reading the Gagauz case through Bourdieu yields a coherent account of an otherwise puzzling situation. The retreat of the Gagauz language is not the product of prohibition or simple demography but of a symbolic hierarchy, forged across three imperial regimes and durably lodged in the dispositions of speakers. Language-attitude and insecurity research confirms the theory's prediction with unusual directness: speakers feel safer in Russian and, while emotionally devoted to Gagauz, assign it low functional worth — the emotional–functional split that is the hallmark of internalised symbolic violence.

Orthodox Christianity supplies the Gagauz with a second, higher-valued form of symbolic capital, but one that both fractures the group's identity along a language–faith seam and has historically served as a channel for Russian prestige. And the 1994 autonomy, though a genuine legal achievement, has not dismantled the internalised machinery of symbolic violence; the gap between official status and lived practice endures. The conceptual model in Figure 1 captures this as a self-renewing loop rather than a one-way street.

The wider implication for the sociology of national identity is that minority emancipation cannot be measured by legal recognition alone. The decisive contest is symbolic: the reconstruction of the perceived value of the language and the linguistic self-confidence of its speakers. Bourdieu reminds us that the deepest struggles for freedom often begin by rendering visible what is invisible — the very categories of domination we carry within. For the Gagauz, to save the language is, before anything else, to transform it from a tongue one must account for into a tongue one may take pride in; and that, the analysis suggests, is a labour of symbolic, not merely legal, construction.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.



Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability: This study is based on publicly available published sources listed in the References section.

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Received: 05.02.2026

Revised: 05.25.2026

Accepted: 06.15.2026

Published: 06.20.2026



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Acta Globalis Humanitatis et Linguarum
ISSN 3030-1718