

Aleksey ROMANCHUK,
Galina MUTAF

“Multilingual education” and the Romanian language in ATU Gagauzia, 2022–2025: some lessons and conclusions*

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Rezumat

„Educația multilingvă” și limba română în UTA Găgăuzia în perioada 2022–2025: câteva rezultate și concluzii

Articolul analizează rezultatele implementării experimentului privind educația multilingvă în UTA Gagauzia în perioada 2022–2025. Se arată că, în ciuda tuturor succeselor înregistrate în ultimii ani, există și probleme semnificative. O dovadă elocventă în acest sens o constituie datele privind promovarea examenelor de gimnaziu (adică de către absolvenții clasei a IX-a) pentru anul școlar 2024–2025 la „Limba română” în școlile din UTA Găgăuzia. Conform acestor date, la disciplina „Limba și literatura română”, media la examen a fost de 6,19 puncte în școlile alolingve și de 6,05 în școlile cu limba de predare română. După cum se poate observa, în școlile cu limba de predare română acest indicator este chiar puțin mai scăzut decât în cele alolingve. Cel mai important este că vorbim despre un indicator foarte scăzut – limita inferioară a notei „satisfăcător”. Și, trebuie subliniat, că în acest caz avem de-a face cu rezultatele absolvenților care au crescut și au primit educație în cadrul experimentului de educație multilingvă derulat în UTA Găgăuzia, începând cu 2015. Există, evident, motive obiective pentru astfel de rezultate. După cum arată analiza noastră, acestea se referă atât la nivel micro (și se explică prin diferențele de calitate a educației în diferite instituții de învățământ), cât și la nivel macro – decurgând din situația generală din regiune și chiar din Republica Moldova. Aceste probleme sunt, se pare, evident subestimate și nici măcar nu sunt observate. Și, în cazul unei încercări de a forța procesul de dezvoltare a educației multilingve, ele vor fi, după părerea noastră, doar din ce în ce mai numeroase și mai intense.

Cuvinte-cheie: „Limba și literatura română”, școlile alolingve, UTA Gagauzia, educație multilingvă

Резюме

«Многоязычное образование» и румынский язык в АТО Гагаузия в 2022–2025 гг.: некоторые уроки и выводы

В статье анализируются результаты реализации эксперимента по многоязычному образованию в АТО Гагаузия в 2022–2025 гг. Показано, что при всех успехах, достигнутых за прошедшие годы, имеют место и существенные проблемы. Наглядным свидетельством этого являются данные о сдаче экзаменов за гимназический курс (то есть, выпускниками 9 класса) по румынскому языку в школах АТО Гагаузия за 2024–2025 учебный год. Согласно этим данным, по

предмету «Румынский язык и литература» средняя оценка за экзамен составила 6,19 в аллолингвальных школах и 6,05 баллов – в школах с румынским языком обучения. Как видим, в школах с румынским языком обучения этот показатель даже чуть ниже, чем в аллолингвальных. Самое же главное, что речь идет о весьма низком показателе – нижней границе оценки «удовлетворительно». Следует подчеркнуть, что в данном случае мы имеем дело с результатами выпускников, выросших и получивших образование в ходе действовавшего в АТО Гагаузия с 2015 года эксперимента по многоязычному образованию. Имеются, очевидно, объективные причины подобных результатов. Как показывает наш анализ, они относятся как к микроуровню (и объясняются различиями в качестве образования в разных учебных заведениях), так и макроуровню – проистекая из общей ситуации в регионе и даже в Республике Молдова. Проблемы эти, по всей видимости, недооцениваются, и даже не замечаются. При попытке форсировать процесс развития многоязычного образования они будут, вероятно, только нарастать и усиливаться.

Ключевые слова: «Румынский язык и литература», аллолингвальные школы, АТО Гагаузия, многоязычное образование

Summary

“Multilingual Education” and the Romanian Language in ATU Gagauzia, 2022–2025: Some Lessons and Conclusions

This article analyzes the results of a multilingual education pilot program implemented in ATU Gagauzia from 2022 to 2025. It demonstrates that, despite the successes achieved in recent years, significant challenges remain. Clear evidence of this is provided by data on the results of the Romanian language exams taken by 9th-grade graduates in ATU Gagauzia during the 2024–2025 school year. According to this data, for the subject “Romanian Language and Literature”, the average exam score was 6.19 points in allolingual schools and 6.05 in schools with Romanian as the language of instruction. As we can see, in schools with Romanian as the language of instruction, this figure is even slightly lower than in allolingual schools. Most importantly, this is a very low score – the lower limit of the “satisfactory” grade. And it should be emphasized that in this case, we are dealing with the results of graduates who grew up and received their education during the multilingual education experiment that has been in effect in ATU Gagauzia since 2015. There are, obviously, objec-

tive reasons for such results. As our analysis shows, they relate to both the micro-level (and are explained by differences in the quality of education across various educational institutions) and the macro-level – stemming from the overall situation in the region and even in the Republic of Moldova. These problems are, in all likelihood, clearly underestimated and even overlooked. And if attempts are made to force the development of multilingual education, we believe they will only grow and intensify.

Key words: “Romanian language and Literature”, allolingual schools, ATU Gagauzia, multilingual education

Last year, a development plan for multilingual education in allolingual schools (i.e., schools where the primary language of instruction is not Romanian but another language; in practice, in the vast majority of cases, Russian) in the Republic of Moldova for 2025–2030 was adopted (Ordin 2025). The goals and objectives set forth in it allow us to view it as a very serious and decisive step. One that, obviously, is expected to bring about significant changes not only in the field of education, but also in the country and society as a whole.

It is important to note, however, that this step is by no means the first; rather, it continues a series of measures already taken. Specifically, in accordance with Decision No. 115/2023 of the Government of the Republic of Moldova, it “ensures continuity with the ‘Program for the Study of the Romanian Language by Ethnic Minorities for 2022–2025’<...>”.

Overall, this step was preceded by a fairly lengthy (about ten years) experiment in multilingual education (as part of the “National Program to Improve the Quality of Romanian Language Instruction in General Education Institutions Teaching in the Languages of National Minorities”, approved by Government Decree 904/2015), which was implemented, in particular, in ATU Gagauzia.

Specifically, starting in 2015, the National Association of European Trainers of Moldova (ANTEM, according to the accepted Romanian abbreviation) initiated the project “Integration Based on Respect for Diversity” – the essence of which was the dual study of the state language and the Gagauz language in ATU Gagauzia. Initially, 20 early childhood education institutions (i.e., kindergartens) in ATU Gagauzia participated in this project – children in the older age groups and, importantly, their parents (Решение_АC_6.21_от_21.06.2022).

Another program implemented during this period that is worth noting is “Sociolinguistic Integration of Students from Ethnic Minorities through the Expansion of School Subjects Taught in Romanian», in which 47 of the 208 educational institutions

in the Republic of Moldova participated. As part of this program, the curriculum for the parallel study of Romanian and Gagauz was revised, and a teaching guide titled “Let’s Learn Romanian Together” was developed for preschool institutions. Methodological materials based on the CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) method were also developed, and teachers were trained to implement these teaching strategies.

The multilingual education pilot program entered its decisive phase at the very beginning of this decade. In accordance with “Executive Committee Resolution No. 29/12 of October 30, 2020”, as of 2021, all early childhood education institutions in ATU Gagauzia have transitioned to the dual study of Romanian and Gagauz (Решение_АC_6.21_от_21.06.2022). Furthermore, starting in the 2021–2022 school year, a multilingual education program is being implemented (on a voluntary basis) in 20 of ATU Gagauzia’s 46 pilot schools. In this context, one of the target languages is Romanian (while the language of instruction in all cases remains Russian).

According to statistics provided by the State Education Administration of ATU Gagauzia, “beginning with the 2021–2022 school year, a pilot program for multilingual education was launched in the Autonomous Territorial Unit (ATU) of ATU Gagauzia, starting at the primary and secondary general education levels. More than 50% of schools in the ATU of ATU Gagauzia are participating in the program. <...> Monitoring of multilingual education models in educational institutions during the 2022–2023 academic year revealed that: Of 27 educational institutions, 1 school implements a multilingual education model based on 4 languages, 6 schools on 3 languages, and 20 schools on 2 languages. The target languages in the pilot schools are: Gagauz, Romanian, Bulgarian, and foreign languages. The language of instruction is Russian. <...> There are 263 pilot classes, with 5,858 students enrolled. A total of 187 teachers are directly involved in the pilot program. (Решение_KC_I2_от_05.04.2024).

Significant progress has been made during this period. The most evident manifestation of this progress is the statistical data obtained during the monitoring of language proficiency levels among children in preparatory groups at early childhood education institutions during the 2021–2022 academic year. According to these data, “The following children demonstrate ‘very good’ and ‘good’ language proficiency in Romanian: children in middle groups – 927/70%; children in senior groups – 1,243/77%; children in preparatory groups – 1,075/77%” (Решение_АC_6.9_от_21.06.2022).

In schools, the picture also looks quite optimistic, according to the monitoring data. Thus, “<...> 1,189 students are studying Romanian in schools where instruction is conducted in Romanian. 788 students have a ‘Very Good’ command of Romanian, 271 have a ‘Good’ command, 88 have a ‘Satisfactory’ command, and 42 have an ‘Unsatisfactory’ command”. And further: “<...> 14,133 students study Romanian in schools with Russian as the language of instruction. 1,985 students have a “Very Good” command of Romanian, 5,135 have a “Good” command, 6,010 have a “Satisfactory” command, and 1,004 have an “Unsatisfactory” command” (Решение_Координац_Совета__1.4_05.04.24).

This also inspires optimism regarding the implementation of subsequent steps currently being planned. However, it seems that before moving forward, it would be useful and appropriate to look back a little. And to take a closer look at what was achieved and how during the previous steps.

This is precisely the aim of this study. To achieve this goal, as part of a research project examining the issue of Romanian language acquisition among the Russian-speaking population of the Republic of Moldova (Research topic: “Russian-speaking population of the Republic of Moldova and the Romanian language: the current situation, main challenges, and possible solutions”); implemented as part of Research Program 170101 (“Research and Valorization of the Built, Ethnographic, Archaeological, and Artistic Cultural Heritage of the Republic of Moldova in the Context of European Integration”), we conducted a targeted study of multilingual education programs in ATU Gagauzia during 2024–2025.

The main methods of this study were in-depth interviews with teachers involved in the project, as well as with some students; observation; and materials from the monitoring of the multilingual education program conducted by the Main Department of Education of ATU Gagauzia (hereinafter – MDE of ATU Gagauzia), posted on its official website (<https://guogagauzii.md/olimpiady-2020>).

It should also be noted that one of the authors of this article, G. N. Mutaф, head of the Department of Gagauz Philology at Comrat State University, is in fact one of the key figures involved in implementing the multilingual education program in ATU Gagauzia. As such, she has had – and continues to have – the opportunity to observe this process from the inside. That is, in this case, we can speak of participant observation.

Separately, regarding the research process, it should be mentioned that the teachers and officials participating in the program were very reluctant to

engage, insisted in every way on remaining anonymous, and even asked “not to be quoted”.

A notable incident occurred when one of the potential respondents, an official from the ATU Gagauzia Department of Education, initially agreed to an interview, then evaded it for several days under various pretexts, and finally admitted honestly that she was afraid to participate in the survey out of fear, to quote her, “that something might come of it”.

All of these facts speak for themselves, reflecting the general atmosphere not only regarding the formation of ATU Gagauzia but also within the autonomous region as a whole. However, we will refrain from commenting on this matter, as it is not directly related to the objectives of our study.

So, what did our study reveal? First and foremost, it is striking that despite all the achievements and undeniable successes, the situation is still far from rosy.

Clear evidence of this is provided by data on the results of the Romanian language exams for the 2024–2025 academic year among 9th-grade graduates in ATU Gagauzia’s schools. It is worth emphasizing that this applies to both all-language schools and schools with Romanian as the language of instruction.

Specifically, according to this data, for the subject “Romanian Language and Literature”, the average exam score was 6.19 in all-language schools and 6.05 (!) in schools with Romanian as the language of instruction (ИТОГИ_2024–2025). In other words, the results for non-Romanian-language schools and schools with Romanian as the language of instruction are virtually identical – which is strange in itself. One would normally expect the scores of schools with Romanian as the language of instruction in the subject “Romanian Language and Literature” to be significantly higher. In reality, as we can see, this score is even slightly lower in schools with Romanian as the language of instruction than in all-language schools. Most importantly, in both cases, the scores are very low – practically at the lower end of the “satisfactory” range.

Meanwhile, as is evident, these graduates are children who grew up and received their secondary education as part of the process of introducing multilingual education in kindergartens and schools in ATU Gagauzia.

Undoubtedly, there must be objective reasons for these results. What are these reasons? Should we look for them at the micro-level (that is, at the level of individual educational institutions), or at the macro-level – the level of the situation in ATU Gagauzia as a whole?

By all accounts, both levels are significant. At the micro level, there is a clear and significant difference between the various early childhood education institutions (ECEIs) in ATU Gagauzia (Решение_Координац_Совета__1.3_от_05.04.24). Thus, on the one hand, we have ECE institutions where 72% to 85% of children demonstrate “very good” proficiency in Romanian (ECE No. 1 Kongaz; ECE No. 4 Vulcanesti; Cismichioi; Etulia). On the other hand, there are 26 ECE institutions where this figure is less than 33%, and another ten where the corresponding column shows a value of “zero”.

What exactly accounts for such striking differences is a question requiring a separate study and one that goes beyond the scope of this article. However, it can be assumed that at least some of these reasons stem from the general situation in the region, the situation at the macro level.

One of the key factors determining the situation at the macro level is, first, a general shortage of Romanian language teachers and, second, the obvious lack of proficiency in Romanian among those who are available. It should be emphasized separately that the majority of them are not native speakers of Romanian; it is not their native language.

In the monitoring reports of the ATU Gagauzia Department of Education, the issue is framed quite delicately: “Thus, 60% of teachers are proficient in a second language. However, there is no objective assessment of teachers’ language proficiency, which makes it impossible to determine their level of language proficiency <...>” (Решение_КЦ_І2_от_05.04.2024). However, it can be assumed that the situation is actually more acute.

This is also due to the overall situation regarding teachers in the Republic of Moldova. Here are some data from the National Bureau of Statistics: “The breakdown of teaching and administrative staff by age group shows that a significant proportion are aged 50–59 (26.6%), a figure that remains unchanged for the 2024–2025 academic year. At the same time, the proportion of young teachers and administrators under the age of 30 was 7.5%, remaining unchanged from the previous academic year, while the proportion of those aged 60 and older increased by 0.4 percentage points, accounting for 22.3% (Figure 5) <...>. More than half of the teaching and administrative staff have 20 or more years of teaching experience (57.3%) (Table 10 in the Appendix)” (Activitatea 2025/26).

In other words, nearly 50% of the country’s teachers are over 50 years old. Meanwhile, the proportion of teachers under 30 has remained consistently below 7.5% for several years now.

A closer look at these statistics reveals, first, that the number of teachers in the country is steadily declining – from 27,426 in the 2019–2020 school year to 25,818 in the current 2025–2026 school year. And second, at present, nearly 60% of teachers are individuals who have already worked in the profession for 20 years or more. This signifies not only substantial teaching experience but also either retirement age or pre-retirement age, or the imminent approach to such ages.

Moreover, according to data from February 2026, over 1,360 teaching positions remain vacant in educational institutions across the Republic of Moldova. Of these, 1,156 vacancies are specifically in schools where instruction is conducted in Romanian.

In other words, the country is not only facing an acute shortage of teaching staff overall; this shortage is particularly acute when it comes to teachers who teach in Romanian.

All of this leads to a very important conclusion and recommendation: before pushing for the development of knowledge and use of the Romanian language among the population of ATU Gagauzia (and, more broadly, among the ethnic minorities of the Republic of Moldova), the central government should significantly intensify its efforts to create the necessary conditions for such a task to be feasible in the first place. That is, among other things, to increase investment in the training of relevant teaching staff – Romanian language teachers (ideally native speakers of Romanian, for whom Romanian is their mother tongue). It is precisely this, in the end, that will allow for a sharp increase in the desired outcome – the knowledge and spread of the Romanian language among ethnic minorities.

Otherwise, we will face a situation where the costs of the process (which are all the more significant the more the process is forced by the authorities) will be shifted by the central government onto the population. Which, as one might expect, will by no means increase that very population’s affection for the authorities.

The fact that the process is being rushed – and, like any rushed process, is already creating additional complications – is once again clearly evident from the data provided by the ATU Gagauzia State Education Administration. To quote: “<...> review the performance of teachers of the Romanian language, <...> ensure the implementation of measures to hold accountable teachers of the Gagauz and Romanian languages, the majority of whose students do not master the Romanian or Gagauz languages at the required level” (Решение_АЦ_6.9_от_21.06.2022).

It seems obvious that in a normally developing situation, there is no need for such formulations and measures.

The second important factor, which is very evident at the macro level, is the degree to which ATU Gagauzian society is predisposed to creating an appropriate (in the case at hand, Romanian-speaking; but, in fact, this is also true for Gagauz-speaking) linguistic environment. Monitoring data from the ATU Gagauzia State Administration demonstrate the significance of this factor quite clearly.

According to the findings of the monitoring report, “Although the native language of 1,790 mothers is Gagauz, Gagauz is spoken in only 475 families of children attending early childhood education institutions in ATU Gagauzia. 249 mothers of preschoolers indicated that their native language is Romanian, but this language is used for communication in only 49 of these families. 1,966 fathers indicated that their native language is Gagauz, but this factor does not contribute to communication in Gagauz within the families. Language of communication in the families of children attending early childhood education institutions in ATU Gagauzia: Russian – 78% (1,863); Gagauz – 20% (475); Romanian – 2% (49)” (Decision_of_the_Coordinating_Council__1.4_05.04.24).

In other words, in ATU Gagauzia today there is a general “need to determine the level of proficiency parents have in their native language. Do they have a sufficient command of their native Gagauz language to create a Gagauz-language environment and support their children in acquiring Gagauz language skills?” (Решение_Координац_Совета__1.4_05.04.24).

Accordingly, the authors of the report reach a highly revealing and entirely justified conclusion: “These data indicate that families of preschoolers give greater preference to the Russian language. Consequently, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to create a communication environment in Romanian or Gagauz” (Решение_Координац_Совета__1.4_05.04.24).

In fact, many researchers have already drawn attention to this situation, and on multiple occasions (Romanchuk 2025: 22-24). And from it, as we have sought to demonstrate earlier (Romanchuk 2025; Romanchuk 2025a), one fact emerges that has not yet been sufficiently recognized by the research community. Namely, it is evident that in the Republic of Moldova, by the early 1990s, a new ethno-linguistic (or, at the very least, linguistic) minority – the “Russian-speaking” group – had emerged based on the coalescence of ethnic minorities around the Russian language and culture. And in ATU Gagauzia,

its key – even central – component consists precisely of Russian-speaking Gagauz. But it also includes Ukrainians, Bulgarians, and even Russian-speaking Moldovans (to quote again: “249 mothers of preschoolers indicated that their native language is Romanian, but only 49 families of preschoolers communicate in this language” (Решение_Координац_Совета__1.4_05.04.24) – that is, in 20% of families where the mothers’ native language is Romanian).

This is precisely the reality today (though it is by no means certain that it will be the same tomorrow) not only in ATU Gagauzia, but throughout the Republic of Moldova as a whole (Romanchuk 2025a).

The authorities of the Republic of Moldova appear to be trying to ignore this reality. However, “ignore” is perhaps not quite the right word. Rather, they are aware of it, but view it as a highly undesirable factor – since it leads to the political consolidation of ethnic minorities, and around a political program that sharply differs from that of the pro-government political forces. And, apparently, many of the central government of the Republic of Moldova’s actions regarding the development of both the Gagauz language and the languages of other ethnic minorities (primarily Ukrainians and Bulgarians) are motivated not so much by concern for these minorities as by a desire to blur and, ideally, annihilate the country’s Russian-speaking minority as a cohesive phenomenon striving for further constitutional recognition.

While fully understanding these motives, we nevertheless believe that a more balanced policy would be wiser here. One that, while focused on enhancing the role of both the Romanian language and the languages of ethnic minorities (Gagauz, Bulgarians, Ukrainians), would nevertheless not attempt to deny or ignore the already existing, long-established ethno-linguistic reality in the country. And it would be based, if not primarily, then at least in part, on the actual interests of these ethnic minorities.

This implies, among other things, refraining from forcing the spread of the Romanian language through policies aimed at eroding the Russian-speaking minority. This is especially true if such policies actually result in increased social and economic burdens on members of this minority.

And the fact that such an increased burden is indeed taking place is evident in many respects. This includes data from the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Moldova itself.

Thus, “by comparing the number of hours per week in different grades and in different languages of instruction, we can observe significant differences in the number of hours/instructional time for students. <...> In schools with Romanian as the language of

instruction, the number of hours per week varies between 20 and 30 hours, depending on the grade. On the other hand, in Russian-language schools, the number of hours per week varies between 24 and 33 hours. This indicates a difference in the academic workload between the two languages of instruction, with the number of hours being higher in Russian-language schools. <...> The weekly academic workload in Russian-language schools is, on average, 20% higher than in Romanian-language schools” (Приказ_МОИ_788_от_31.05.2024).

In the case of ATU Gagauzia, this means, in particular, that its Russian-speaking population – which, as we can see from the statistics, constitutes a clear majority in the region – including Russian-speaking Gagauz people, is forced to learn, in addition to their native (Russian) language, Romanian, a foreign language, and Gagauz.

Despite the obvious and undeniable benefits of multilingualism, it is also clear that this situation entails a sharp increase in the burden (and not only the academic one) on the Russian-speaking population of ATU Gagauzia.

It should also be noted that since the primary method in the “Multilingualism” project involves the artificial creation of a corresponding linguistic environment, this has certain psychological consequences. This can be judged, in particular, by data provided by some recent emigrants to Europe from Ukraine and Russia. Some of them, who seem to have adapted successfully and even entered into interethnic marriages with members of the local population, nevertheless note a sharp – and even increasing over time – psychological discomfort arising from the forced necessity of communicating primarily in a language that is not their native tongue. Even if they speak it perfectly.

Here is a very telling confession from one such migrant in Germany: “<...> we’ve been together for over seven years now. He hasn’t really learned my language, but I have to speak his language day and night. For a long time, this caused arguments between us: why are you ignoring an important part of my identity? Can two people with different native languages live together? <...> My boyfriend and I are standing in the kitchen making a salad. I’m silently cutting carrots and not in the mood to talk at all. After a long day of speaking, reading, and writing in German, I don’t have the energy to think again about which is correct: “gib mir dein Löffel” or “das Löffel”. I couldn’t care less about grammar. These are the very moments when a feeling similar to homesickness creeps in. Simple evenings when I just can’t truly relax because German always takes effort. Yes,

I’d also like to discuss Russian poetry with my boyfriend, but what’s far more important is simply being able to talk through the day that’s passed. To recount dozens of seemingly insignificant scenes, that “about nothing” conversation at home where you can let yourself go. It’s not just big words that keep people together. It’s the little ones, too” (Астафьева 2026).

As far as we can tell, no one has ever given any thought to this psychological and mental dimension of the “Multilingualism” project currently being implemented in the Republic of Moldova. Yet, in our view, it would be wrong to underestimate this dimension or consider it unimportant and unworthy of attention.

Thus, in summary, we can state that despite all the undoubted successes achieved over the past ten years in implementing the “Multilingualism” project, there are also numerous and extremely significant problems. These, it seems, are also clearly underestimated and even go unnoticed. And if we attempt to force the development of “Multilingualism”, these problems will, in our view, only grow and intensify. Therefore, it is essential not only to recognize them but also to acknowledge them – let alone solve them.

Note

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Alexei Romanciuc (Chişinău, Republica Moldova). Candidate în Culturologie, Institutul Patrimoniului Cultural.

Алексей Романчук (Кишинев, Республика Молдова). Кандидат культурологии, Институт культурного наследия.

Aleksey Romanchuk (Chisinau, Republic of Moldova). PhD in Culturology, Institute of Cultural Heritage.

E-mail: dierevo@mail.ru, dierevo5@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-2021-7958

Galina Mutaf (Comrat, Republica Moldova). Doctor în Pedagogie, Universitatea de Stat din Comrat.

Галина Мутаф (Комрат, Республика Молдова). Доктор педагогики, Комратский государственный университет.

Galina Mutaf (Comrat, Republic of Moldova). PhD in Pedagogy, Comrat State University.

E-mail: mutaf.galina@kdu.md

ORCID: 0000-0001-5656-8832