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Research Articles

From Bajo to Sokullu Mehmed Pasha: An Analysis of a Devshirme's Networks^{*}

Beytullah Mısır

Abstract: Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's life, which began in a village near Višegrad, culminated in the highest position attainable by someone outside the Ottoman dynasty. Rooted in the gulâm tradition, the devshirme system transformed Bajo into Sokullu Mehmed Pasha, integrating him into the core structures of the state and providing the foundation for his rise as a statesman. While he was not the only prominent figure produced by this system, he possessed distinctive qualities that set him apart from other devshirmes. Among these, his uninterrupted fourteen-year tenure as grand vizier under three sultans -Suleiman the Magnificent, Selim II, and Murad III- stands out as particularly remarkable. This achievement cannot be attributed to a single factor; in addition to his personal abilities, the networks of relationships he cultivated and the experience he gained significantly contributed to his own advancement as well as that of his family. In this article analyze his interactions with various institutions and social groups in samples. The findings indicate that these networks were neither superficial nor incidental; they played a decisive role in

^{*} This article is an abridged English translation of the author's doctoral dissertation, *Devşirme Bağlamında Sokullu Mehmed Paşa'nın İlişki Ağı Analizi*, completed in 2026 in the Department of Islamic History at Marmara University.

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his ascent to the office of grand vizier, his stable maintenance of authority, and his effectiveness in action. Nevertheless, his success extended beyond these relationships, as his historical record demonstrates his capability as a crisis manager and a farsighted, stable statesman. Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's enduring legacy rests not only on his political position and personal talents but also on his charitable foundations and his engagement with scholarly and literary circles.

Keywords: Ottoman Empire, Devshirme System, Grand Vizier, Sokullu Mehmed Pasha

Introduction

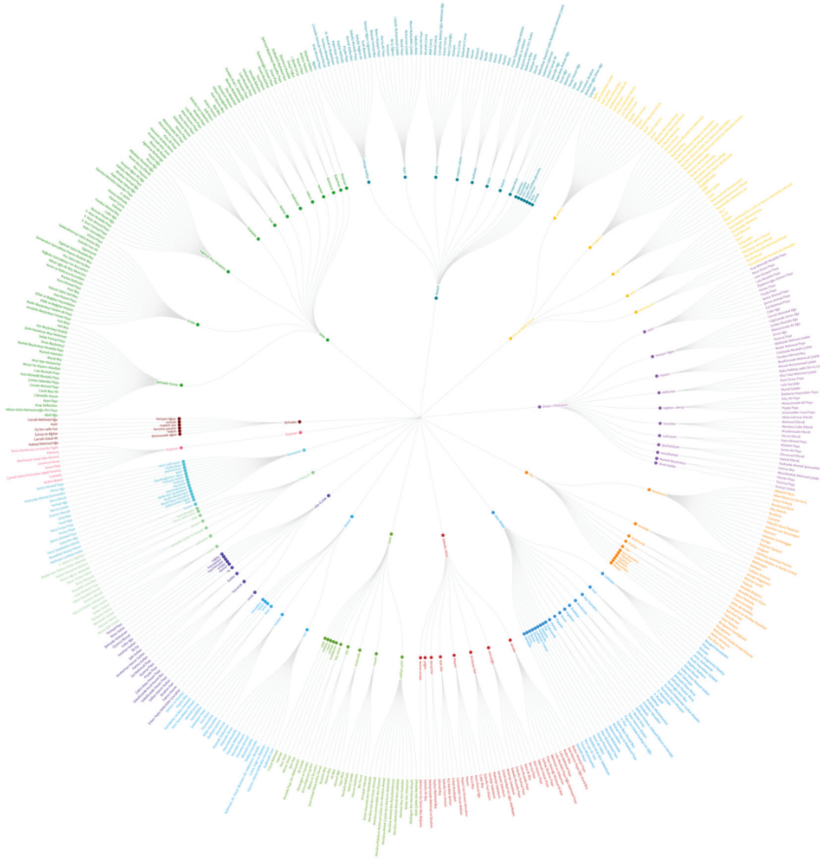
Among the two hundred and fifteen individuals who served as Grand Vizier in the Ottoman Empire, Sokullu Mehmed Pasha (d. 1579) occupies a distinctive position. His life, which began as a Christian boy in the village of Sokolovići, ultimately culminated at the highest office attainable by anyone outside the Ottoman dynasty. Born under the name Bajo in the village of Sokolovići near Višegrad, Sokullu Mehmed Pasha was recruited through the Ottoman *devshirme* system and went on to hold a series of prominent positions within the imperial administration. Following his education in the Enderun, he served in various capacities at the imperial court before being appointed *Kapudan Pasha*. After serving as *Beylerbeyi* of Rumelia and attaining the rank of vizier, he was elevated to the grand vizierate, becoming one of the most distinguished statesmen produced by the *devshirme* system.

Sokullu Mehmed Pasha served continuously as Grand Vizier for fourteen years during the reigns of Süleyman I (d. 1566), Selim II (d. 1574), and Murad III (d. 1595), an unprecedented tenure in Ottoman history. In addition to his personal abilities, several factors contributed to his political ascendancy, including his effective management of the succession crisis at Szigetvár following the death of Süleyman I, his marital alliance with the Ottoman dynasty, and the personal disposition of the reigning sultan. Consequently, throughout the eight-year reign of Selim II, he occupied an exceptionally influential position within the imperial decision-making apparatus. During the reign of Murad III, however, the changing dynamics of political authority and the emergence of new factions gradually eroded his influence, ultimately culminating in his assassination.

The emergence of such an eminent historical figure as Sokullu Mehmed Pasha cannot be attributed solely to the historical context in which he lived or to his individual talents. Throughout Islamic history, institutions and administrative structures generally functioned in close interaction with one another. In this regard, upward social and political mobility—from the lower strata of society to the highest levels of state administration—was a recurring phenomenon across many periods of Islamic history, notwithstanding certain exceptions. This pattern, which manifested itself particularly through the *gulām* system in the Turkic-Islamic states, acquired a distinctive and more institutionalized form in the Ottoman Empire through the *devshirme* system. Sokullu Mehmed Pasha emerged from this system. Nevertheless, the *devshirme* institution and the way of life it entailed profoundly shaped the course of his life.

One of the most effective ways to understand an individual's life, ideas, actions, career, and social environment is through the analysis of their networks of relationships. Network analysis not only provides valuable insights into an individual's social world but also contributes to a broader understanding of the historical context in which that individual operated. From this perspective, Sokullu Mehmed Pasha possessed an exceptionally extensive and diverse network of relationships. His life, which began as a member of the Sokullu family in Višegrad, assumed an entirely different trajectory after his recruitment by Yeşilce Mehmed Bey through the *devshirme* system. Over time, he established influential connections spanning a broad spectrum of Ottoman society, ranging from sultans and slaves to ambassadors, *sufis*, members of the *Dīvān-ı Hümāyūn*, and poets. Demonstrating remarkable skill in cultivating and maintaining such relationships, the Grand Vizier consolidated his political authority over an extended period. These networks, however, were not artificial constructs; rather, they developed organically through the natural course of his personal and political life.

Figure 1. *The Relationship Networks of Sokullu Mehmed Pasha*



Source: (MısıR, 2026, p. 270)

As shown in the graph above, Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's contacts with approximately five hundred individuals from different social classes have been identified. However, examining all of these relationships is not the subject of this article. This article is derived from the author's PhD dissertation (MısıR, 2026). It has been revised, condensed, and reorganized to meet the scope and requirements of a journal article. The article presents the principal findings of the dissertation in a more concise and focused form, highlighting the depth and diversity of Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's relationship networks. It highlights how

these networks evolved throughout his lifetime. Through this approach, the study demonstrates, using the example of Sokullu Mehmed Pasha, how the social relationships of a devshirme evolved, expanded, and transformed throughout the different stages of his life. His social network was both multidimensional and organically formed over time. Viewed from this perspective, it becomes evident that he possessed an extensive network of affiliations whose scope was far from being confined to a single social or political circle. Rather, his relationships encompassed a broad spectrum of Ottoman society, ranging from slaves and sultans to family members, diplomats, and numerous other actors. To illustrate this diversity more clearly, the article examines representative examples drawn from Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's social networks. It argues that these connections were neither random nor homogeneous; instead, their multidimensional nature played a decisive role in both his political ascent and his ability to preserve the office of grand vizier over an extended period.

Methodology

Social Network Analysis (SNA) has been defined as “an approach that seeks to reveal the social relationships among individuals and groups, the structure of these relationships, and their effects on social behavior, attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge” (Abacı, 2013, pp. 33–35). This methodological approach facilitates an understanding of the structures that emerge through interpersonal interactions and the various influences shaping them (Ağcasulu, 2018, p. 1916). Although the foundations of SNA were laid earlier, it began to be employed systematically within the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, and psychology during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The rapid development of computer technologies subsequently led to the creation of analytical tools that significantly enhanced both the application and effectiveness of this method. As a result, Social Network Analysis has evolved into an interdisciplinary research methodology. Today, it is employed across a wide range of fields, including the study of disease transmission, product distribution and marketing, friendship networks, the diffusion of ideas and concepts, and even the transmission networks of *hadith* narrators (Abacı, 2013, pp. 36–37; Ünlü, 2020, pp. 5–6). Its

application to historical research became established after the mid-1970s. While initially implemented in studies concerning newspapers, journals, and provincial associations, Social Network Analysis has only more recently begun to be applied to Ottoman history (Abacı, 2013, pp. 39–40; Ünlü, 2020, pp. 5–6).

Within the field of historical research, Social Network Analysis constitutes an effective methodological framework for interpreting interpersonal relationships and understanding historical processes. Indeed, relationships among individuals frequently influenced institutional developments as well as broader political and diplomatic interactions. The capacity of this method to map relationships provides historians with a valuable means of visualizing and interpreting complex social structures. Identifying the configuration and intensity of interpersonal ties, as well as recognizing central actors and loci of power, contributes significantly to a deeper understanding of a given historical period. Furthermore, when applied to long-term relationships, Social Network Analysis reveals the transformation of social connections over time. The present study adopts an ego network approach by placing Sokullu Mehmed Pasha at the center of the analysis and examining both the individuals connected to him and the nature of these relationships (Ağcasulu, 2018, p. 1917; Gürsakal, 2018, p. 21). In doing so, it employs a qualitative methodology, as qualitative data allow for a more nuanced interpretation of the meaning, character, and dynamics of interpersonal relationships (Demircioğlu, 2022, pp. 289–290).

Family

Family of Origin

Sokullu Mehmed Pasha was not the first member of the Sokullu family to be recruited through the *devshirme* system. Hüsrev Pasha (d. 1544), known by the sobriquets Dîvâne or Deli, who was born before 1495, was the first member of the Sokullu family to be recruited by the Ottoman administration and to rise to the highest ranks of state service. Although Deli Hüsrev Pasha belonged to the same family, two different views exist regarding his precise relationship with

Sokullu Mehmed Pasha (d. 1580). According to the first, he was Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's cousin, being the brother of Lala Mustafa Pasha. The second simply states that the two were relatives, without specifying the exact degree of kinship. Regardless of which interpretation is accepted, it is evident that Deli Hüsrev Pasha belonging to the Sokullu family, was the first member of that family to enter the Ottoman administration through the *devshirme* system, and was related to Sokullu Mehmed Pasha. Although Deli Hüsrev Pasha later arranged for the recruitment of his brother Lala Mustafa Pasha, there is no evidence of his direct involvement in Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's recruitment. Nevertheless, his status as the first member of the Sokullu family to enter Ottoman service through the *devshirme* system is significant. This demonstrates that the Sokullu family was by no means unfamiliar with the institution of *devshirme*; rather, both the family and the village had already experienced and become acquainted with the system before Sokullu Mehmed Pasha himself was recruited (Özcan, 1999, p. 40; Gelibolulu Mustafa Âli, 2019, p. 611; Danişmend, 1971, vol. 2, pp. 247, 310; Samarcic, 1995, pp. 3–4, 9; Zararsız, 2021, pp. 323–324; Peçevî, 1981, p. 23; Lütü Paşa, 2001, p. 300).

During the reign of Süleyman I, Yeşilce Mehmed Bey was dispatched to Bosnia to recruit capable boys from distinguished families to the *devshirme* system. Indeed, Sokullu Mehmed Pasha is reported to have claimed that he was descended from the Serbian despots (Samarcic, 1995, pp. 81, 200). When Yeşilce Mehmed Bey arrived at the village of Sokolovići on the banks of the Lim River, he recognized the exceptional potential of the young Bajo (Bajica) and decided to recruit him. According to the study conducted by Yılmaz, the average age of boys recruited between 1493 and 1502 was approximately 13.5 years, while the average had risen to 16.6 years by 1604–1605 (Yılmaz, 2021, pp. 249–250). Although Bajo, who was approximately sixteen to eighteen years old, was relatively older than the typical *devshirme*, it appears that Yeşilce Mehmed Bey was persuaded by his exceptional abilities and therefore selected him despite his age. The chronology also appears consistent when considered alongside the population survey conducted in Bosnia in 1519–1520 and the Ottoman campaign against Hungary in 1521. Furthermore, in 1576 Sokullu Mehmed

Pasha reportedly told the Venetian ambassador Marc-Antonio Tiepolo that he had been eighteen years old when recruited and had sung hymns during church services prior to his removal from his family (Samarctic, 1995, pp. 8–10).

Initially, Bajo's family resisted surrendering their son and even concealed him from the Ottoman officials. His maternal uncle reportedly attempted to bribe Yeşilce Mehmed Bey in an effort to prevent Bajo's recruitment. Yeşilce Mehmed Bey, however, appears to have been highly experienced in carrying out his duties. Explaining persuasively that boys recruited to the *devshirme* system could eventually attain high office and bring honor and benefit to their families, he ultimately convinced them that resistance was futile. Consequently, Bajo was brought out of hiding and entrusted to the Ottoman official (Nahîfî Mehmed Efendi, 2019, pp. 46, 145, 449; Samarctic, 1995, pp. 8–10).

Together with forty other boys selected for recruitment, Bajo was escorted under official supervision to Edirne, where they were presented before Sultan Süleyman I. After receiving preliminary training at the Edirne Palace, Mehmed—who would later become known by the epithets Tavil, Sokullu, and Şehid—was transferred to the Enderun Palace School within Topkapı Palace (Nahîfî Mehmed Efendi, 2019, pp. 46–47). Following the completion of his education, he successively served as *rikâbdar*, *çuhadar*, *silâhdar*, *çaşnigîrbaşı*, and *kapıcıbaşı*. In these positions, he held the stirrup of the sultan's horse, became responsible for the ruler's garments, weapons, and meals, and served as chief gatekeeper. His administrative career subsequently continued with appointments as *Kapudan Pasha*, *Beylerbeyi* of Rumelia, vizier, and ultimately Grand Vizier. Throughout these successive stages of his career during the reign of Süleyman I, Sokullu Mehmed Pasha remained in close proximity to the sultan, owing to the responsibilities entrusted to him.

Regardless of whether the claim that he originated from a noble lineage is accepted, Sokullu Mehmed Pasha undoubtedly elevated the social standing of the Sokullu family. While serving as *silâhdar*, he summoned Ahmed Bey, who

was responsible for collecting the Bosnian tribute, and ask him to bring his family to Istanbul. Equally significant is the absence of any negative reaction to a *devshirme*-born statesman bringing his relatives to the imperial capital after attaining high office. This circumstance invites a reconsideration of the commonly held assumption that the *devshirme* system completely severed familial ties. Although Sokullu Mehmed Pasha appears to have had no contact with his family during his years of education, he later arranged for them to join him in Istanbul. Moreover, after presenting his newly arrived brothers before Sultan Süleyman I, he secured the sultan's approval for their admission to the *Galata Sarayı* (Nahîfî Mehmed Efendi, 2019, p. 48). Had such an action been prohibited by law or regarded as contrary to established Ottoman practice, it would undoubtedly have resulted in sanctions. Instead, the sultan explicitly approved the arrangement and issued favorable instructions concerning their education.

When Ahmed Bey travelled to the village of Sokolovići to carry out Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's request, Sokullu's mother declined the invitation to relocate to Istanbul. Consequently, his father departed for the capital accompanied by Sokullu's middle brother and, in place of his youngest son, Sokullu's paternal cousin. His mother remained in Bosnia with the youngest brother. Thus, the cousin effectively assumed the place of Sokullu's youngest brother and was introduced to him as though he were his own sibling (Zararsız, 2021, p. 325). After arriving in Istanbul, Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's father, whose original name was Dimitrije, converted to Islam and adopted the name Cemaleddin Sinan. In the years that followed, he was granted land and appointed as the administrator (*mutawalli*) of one of the pious foundations (*waqfs*) established by Sokullu Mehmed Pasha in Bosnia. Following his death, Sokullu endowed an *imaret* in his native village and stipulated in its endowment deed that five individuals capable of reciting the Qur'an should each receive a daily wage of two *akçes* in return for reciting five *juz'* of the Qur'an every day and dedicating the spiritual reward to the soul of his father, Sinan Bey. Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's mother also came to Istanbul after her husband, embraced Islam, and was buried in accordance with Islamic rites (Veinstein, 2012, p. 1; Danişmend, 1971, vol. 2, p. 335; Samarcic,

1995, pp. 22, 389; Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü, 2016, vol. 4, pp. 1751, 1791). Viewed from this perspective, the family not only Islamization but also embraced and practiced religion in accordance with Ottoman interpretations and expressions of Islamic belief.

The exact number of Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's siblings remains uncertain. Although some sources suggest that he had between two and four siblings, the available evidence most convincingly indicates that he had two brothers and one sister (Dakić, 2012, p. 36; Ahmed Refik, 2017, p. 7). These were his younger brother, who initially remained with their mother; another brother who travelled to Istanbul with their father; and his sister, Şemsa. The middle brother who accompanied Cemaleddin Sinan to Istanbul was named Mustafa. By order of Sultan Süleyman I, he began his education at the Galata Palace School but died before completing his studies. Subsequently, the name Mustafa was given to the individual whom Sokullu believed to be his younger brother but who was, in reality, his paternal cousin and would later become known as Sokullu Mustafa Pasha (d. 1578). Sokullu Mehmed Pasha also arranged for the younger brother who had remained in Bosnia with their mother to be brought to Istanbul and enrolled in the İbrahim Pasha Palace for his education. Like his elder brother, however, he died at a young age (Ahmed Refik, 2017, pp. 11–12; Samarcic, 1995, p. 23). According to Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's endowment deed, this brother's name was İbrahim. The deed further stipulates that, of the thirty *juz*' of the Qur'an to be recited in the mosque each morning after the dawn prayer, ten *juz*' were to be dedicated to the souls of his brothers Mustafa and İbrahim, who were buried in Kasımpaşa, as well as to their descendants (Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü, 2016, vol. 4, p. 1783).

Sokullu Mehmed Pasha eventually learned that Sokullu Mustafa Pasha was not his biological brother but rather his paternal cousin. He confronted him about why this fact had never been disclosed. At the conclusion of their conversation, Sokullu assured his cousin that he had always regarded him as a brother and that he would continue to protect and support him (Ahmed Refik, 2017, pp. 12–14). Subsequently, Sokullu Mustafa Pasha visited his native region and, taking

advantage of his official duty of collecting the *jizya* tax, invited his relatives to embrace Islam. They accepted his invitation and converted. Much like Sokullu Mehmed Pasha himself, Sokullu Mustafa Pasha's preservation of his familial origins and his efforts to facilitate the Islamization of his relatives are significant for understanding how the *devshirme* experience and familial identity effect to shape the Sokullu family across generations (Nahîfî, 2019, p. 50; Ahmed Refik, 2017, pp. 25–26, 144–145).

Sokullu Mustafa Pasha was one of the individuals serving within Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's household and among those in whom he placed the greatest confidence. Sokullu played a decisive role both in his recruitment to the *devshirme* system and in his subsequent advancement to prominent offices, most notably the governorship of Budin. Indeed, Sokullu Mustafa Pasha served as *Beylerbeyi* of Budin for approximately thirteen years, during which he defended and expanded the Ottoman frontier through military campaigns, participated in major expeditions, played a significant role in diplomatic relations with Austria, promoted commerce within the province, protected merchants, and made substantial contributions to the urban development of Budin (Peçevî, 1982, pp. 23–24; Özçelik, 2020, p. 15; Cezar, 2011, pp. 1164, 1201; Altaylı, 2009, p. 157; Feridun Ahmed Bey, 2012, p. 256). Their relationship was reciprocal. Sokullu Mustafa Pasha reportedly celebrated Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's appointment as Grand Vizier by distributing alms and sacrificing animals in thanksgiving. Furthermore, several pieces of advice offered by Sokullu Mehmed Pasha to Mustafa Pasha while serving first as Second Vizier and later as Grand Vizier have been preserved. These may also be interpreted as an instance of the transmission of experience and political wisdom within the family (Nahîfî, 2019, p. 62).

Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's sister was named Şemsa. Şemsa Hatun is chiefly known for the bridge she commissioned in Banja Luka and for her marriage to Sinan Bey Boljanić (d. 1582). Having served as *sanjak-bey* of Herzegovina between 1563 and 1567, Sinan Bey Boljanić enjoyed the patronage of Sokullu Mehmed Pasha. By marrying Sokullu's sister, he became the Grand Vizier's

brother-in-law and went on to establish one of the wealthiest *waqf* foundations in the Balkans. Through the construction of mosques, bridges, and madrasas, he contributed significantly to the architectural and charitable development of the region, much like other members of the Sokullu family. The mosque at Čajniče, in particular, acquired considerable symbolic significance. It was destroyed by Serbian forces in 1992, later reconstructed by the Turkish General Directorate of Foundations, and reopened for worship in 2024. The graves of Sinan Bey, Sokullu's sister Şemsa Hatun, and their descendants are located adjacent to the mosque (Korić, 2015, pp. 413–414; Kiel, 2009, p. 580; Dakić, 2012, p. 60; Dakić, 2018, p. 140; Korić, 2017, p. 70; Kapic & Özdemir, 2024; Özdemir, 2024; Balkan News, 2024b).

Nor was Sinan Pasha Boljanić the only member of the family to engage in charitable construction. His brother, Hüseyin Pasha Boljanić, also founded numerous *imarets* (Korić, 2015, p. 413). Better known as Bodur Hüseyin Pasha, he was recruited into the *devshirme* system at a young age and admitted to the *Enderun* through the patronage of Sokullu Mehmed Pasha, a privilege made possible by their kinship. During his career, he served successively as *sanjak-bey* of Herzegovina and as *Beylerbeyi* of Bosnia, Budin, Diyarbakır, Egypt, Baghdad, Anatolia, and Damascus, eventually attaining the rank of vizier. He also established several charitable foundations in Taşlıca (Keleş & Can, 2018, p. 1291; Mehmed Süreyya, 1996, p. 719).

Among the most prominent figures to emerge from the Sokullu family was Lala Mustafa Pasha. He was the younger brother of Deli Hüsrev Pasha—the first member of the Sokullu family to be recruited through the *devshirme* system and to attain the rank of vizier—and the paternal cousin of Sokullu Mehmed Pasha. Although Lala Mustafa Pasha and Sokullu Mehmed Pasha shared many common experiences, the nature of their relationship appears to have been complex and, at times, ambiguous. These two distinguished cousins lived during the same period, served under the same sultans, and both rose to the highest echelons of the Ottoman administration. Nevertheless, between Deli Hüsrev Pasha and Sokullu Mehmed Pasha the close familial bond one might expect is not readily

discernible at the outset. Rather, the available evidence suggests that their relationship evolved considerably over time.

Several scholars have argued that Sokullu Mehmed Pasha and Lala Mustafa Pasha regarded one another as political rivals and that many of their actions should be interpreted within the context of this rivalry. Thus, despite their kinship, they simultaneously viewed each other as competitors for influence within the Ottoman political elite (Danişmend, 1972, vol. 3, pp. 18, 264). It has been suggested that Sokullu Mehmed Pasha deliberately appointed Lala Mustafa Pasha as *serdar* (commander-in-chief) in order to remove him from the imperial center, fearing that a successful military campaign might strengthen his prospects for the grand vizierate (Lamartine, 1991, pp. 507–508, 526; Afyoncu, 2014, p. 214). When Selim II ascended the throne, Sokullu Mehmed Pasha, who had become the sultan's son-in-law, appointed Lala Mustafa Pasha—formerly the prince's tutor (*lala*)—as commander of the Yemen campaign, thereby seeking to distance him from the capital. During the preparations, however, Lala Mustafa Pasha was removed from this command following the intervention of influential advisers, and Koca Sinan Pasha was appointed in his place (Gelibolulu Mustafa Âli, 2019, pp. 857, 899; Hasanbeyzâde, vol. 2, p. 228; Kütükoğlu, 2003a, p. 73; Uzunçarşılı, 1988, vol. 3, pp. 28, 41). According to Mustafa Âli's well-known characterization, Sokullu sought to «kill two birds with one stone» by setting Koca Sinan Pasha and Lala Mustafa Pasha against one another (Demir, 2016, p. 46; Zararsız, 2021, p. 335). Contemporary Western sources portrayed the relationship in even stronger terms. According to Stephan Gerlach, Lala Mustafa Pasha was Sokullu's mortal enemy, while the Venetian *bailo* Antonio Tiepolo, in his report of 1576, described the capable Lala Mustafa Pasha as Sokullu's most dangerous rival among the viziers because of the special favor he enjoyed from the sultan (Gerlach, 2007, p. 252; Demir, 2016, p. 36; Samarcic, 1995, p. 304).

The relationship between Sokullu Mehmed Pasha and Lala Mustafa Pasha clearly demonstrates that kinship was not the sole determinant of interpersonal relations within the Ottoman ruling elite. Alongside the evidence of rivalry

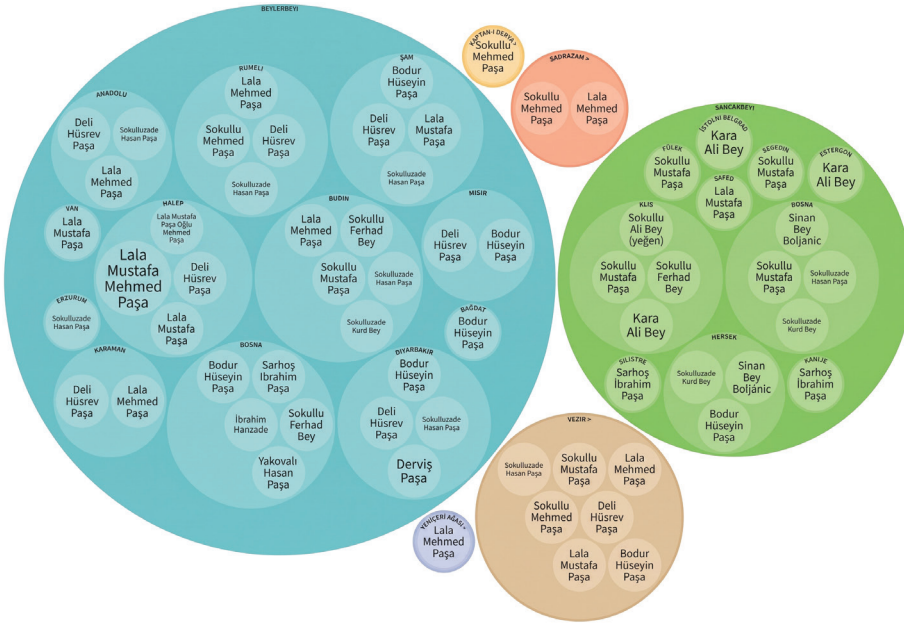
discussed above, there are also numerous indications of cooperation and mutual support. Consequently, it may be argued that what initially appears to have been a predominantly antagonistic relationship gradually evolved into a more constructive and collaborative one. The improvement in their relations became particularly evident after Lala Mustafa Pasha attained the rank of vizier. Upon his return to Istanbul, he strengthened his political position against Koca Sinan Pasha (d. 1596) with the support of Sokullu Mehmed Pasha. Indeed, some sources suggest that Sokullu came to regret his earlier support for Sinan Pasha and subsequently formed an alliance with Lala Mustafa Pasha (Kütükoğlu, 2003a, pp. 73–74; Demir, 2016, p. 102). Fleischer likewise argues that, because of Selim II's deep affection for Lala Mustafa Pasha, Sokullu deliberately cultivated amicable relations with him, while Lala Mustafa Pasha, for his part, accepted Sokullu's preeminent political position and refrained from challenging his authority, thereby paving the way for a political accommodation between the two (Demir, 2016, pp. 34–35).

Sokullu Mehmed Pasha provided Lala Mustafa Pasha with all the necessary support during the Cyprus campaign, ensuring that logistical and strategic assistance was delivered in a timely manner. An often-cited episode illustrates the nature of this cooperation. When Lala Mustafa Pasha was to be invested with a *hil'at* in recognition of the conquest, he reportedly declared before the sultan: «*My glorious sovereign, although I carried out the conquest, these victories were achieved through the prudence and assistance of His Excellency the Grand Vizier. Therefore, it is only fitting that he should first be invested with the robe of honor.*» (Demir, 2016, p. 36). Similarly, following the great fire in Istanbul, when the sultan directed criticism toward Sokullu Mehmed Pasha, Lala Mustafa Pasha defended him by explaining that the densely built Jewish quarter and the strength of the wind had rendered extinguishing the fire exceedingly difficult, thereby accounting for the delay in bringing it under control (Demir, 2016, p. 35; Özçelik, 2020, p. 35).

Lala Mustafa Pasha died approximately ten months after Sokullu Mehmed Pasha. Like his cousin, he was buried in the vicinity of the Eyüp Sultan Mosque.

In a symbolic sense, two members of the Sokullu family who had been born in the same village of Sokolovići and had risen to the highest offices of the Ottoman Empire ultimately came to rest in the same sacred quarter of Istanbul.

Numerous other members of the Sokullu family also occupied important positions within the Ottoman administration, and many of them maintained direct personal or familial ties with Sokullu Mehmed Pasha. A comprehensive examination of each individual, however, lies beyond the scope of the present study. Nevertheless, while Sokullu Mehmed Pasha undoubtedly represented the family's most influential figure, an overview of the offices held by his relatives is sufficient to demonstrate the remarkable political prominence achieved by the family as a whole. Based on the available evidence, seventeen individuals who belonged to the Sokullu family either by blood or through marriage collectively occupied thirty-five major state offices. In compiling these figures, palace appointments such as *çaşnigîrbaşı* , *berberbaşı* , and *kapıcıbaşı* have intentionally been excluded. Among these seventeen individuals, ten served as *sanjak-beys*, fourteen as *beylerbeyis*, one as Agha of the Janissaries, one as *Kapudan Pasha* , seven attained the rank of vizier, and two ultimately became Grand Viziers. The accompanying table records the successive offices occupied by these individuals as they advanced through the Ottoman administrative hierarchy. Thus, Sokullu Mehmed Pasha appears separately under the offices of *Kapudan Pasha*, *beylerbeyi*, vizier, and Grand Vizier, while Sokullu Mustafa Pasha is listed under the ranks of *sanjak-bey*, *beylerbeyi*, and vizier. Although Sokullu Mustafa Pasha served as *sanjak-bey* in four different provinces, these appointments are counted as a single office for the purposes of this analysis. It should also be emphasized that the members of the Sokullu family discussed here do not constitute an exhaustive list. Undoubtedly, other relatives whose careers have not survived in the available sources or whose identities remain unknown also held positions within the Ottoman administrative system.

Figure 2. Offices Held by Seventeen Members of the Sokullu Family

Sources Used in Preparing Figure 2: (Afyoncu, 2009, pp. 354–357; Özcan, 1999, pp. 40–41; Kütükoğlu, 2003a, pp. 73–74; Peçevî, 1982, pp. 23–24; Afyoncu, 2009a, pp. 366–368; Şahin, 2020, pp. 252–253; Zararsız, 2021, pp. 321–354; Emecen, 2000, pp. 316–317; Samarcic, 1995, pp. 261–262; Sezer, 2022, pp. 352–379; Dakić, 2012, p. 140; Ak, 2003, pp. 71–73; Şahin, 2019, p. 268; Keleş & Can, 2018, pp. 1289–1296; Hammer, vol. 7, p. 29)

When the classical Ottoman chronicles are examined, particularly with respect to their assessments and criticisms of Sokullu Mehmed Pasha, the observations of Gelibolulu Mustafa Âli (d. 1600) and Peçevî (d. 1645) deserve special attention. The former was a contemporary of Sokullu, while the latter, writing in the following generation, was also related to the Sokullu family. Concerning Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's appointment of his relatives to high office, Gelibolulu Mustafa Âli states: “akraba ve taallukatını menasib-ı aliye nasb itdi. Lakin ekseri müstehakk-i riayet olmagla ol vaz-ı uluvvi himmetine haml olunup ma'zur tutuldu.” (Gelibolulu, 2019, p. 897). In other words, Gelibolulu acknowledged that although Sokullu promoted

members of his family and personal network, those individuals were generally considered competent and deserving of the positions they received.

Peçevî likewise describes Sokullu Mehmed Pasha as «just and equitable,» asserting that even his political adversaries «could find no fault in him other than elevating his own relatives and close associates to high office.» Accordingly, Sokullu was criticized for favoring «his own men» and for «depriving many deserving individuals of the positions to which they were entitled.» Nevertheless, Peçevî ultimately reaches a conclusion consistent with that of Gelibolulu Mustafa Âli, arguing that those appointed to public office were, in terms of both their personal abilities and the conditions of the period, genuinely qualified individuals who adequately fulfilled the responsibilities entrusted to them. Indeed, he maintains that even Sokullu's opponents would have acknowledged this fact (Peçevî, 1981, pp. 7, 308).

The Christian Branch of the Sokullu Family

Not all members of the Sokullu family embraced Islam. A branch of the family remained Christian and came to occupy an influential position within the Orthodox Christian communities of the Balkans. Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's maternal uncle, for example, was a priest renowned for both his learning and his wealth. Serving at the Mileševa Monastery, he took his nephew—who had previously worked as a shepherd—into the monastery under his supervision (Gökbilgin, 1957). When Yeşilce Mehmed Bey sought to recruit the young Bajo through the *devshirme* system, this uncle reportedly attempted to prevent his removal by offering the Ottoman official a bribe, an offer that was firmly rejected (Nahîfî, 2021, pp. 46, 146; Samarcic, 1995, p. 11).

One of the principal ways in which Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's relationship with his familial origins has been interpreted is through his connection with the re-establishment of the Serbian Patriarchate (Nazlar, 2017, p. 57). The central figure in this context was Makarije Sokolović, who has variously been identified as Sokullu's brother, cousin (Dakić, 2017, p. 138), or nephew (Gerlach, 2007, pp.

41–42). According to a note recorded by Stephan Gerlach on 27 November 1575, Makarije was the brother of the vizier responsible for restoring the Patriarchate. At a much later date, the chronicler of the Tronoša Monastery likewise described him as the brother of the contemporary Grand Vizier, whereas the Venetian diplomat Cavalli identified him as Mehmed Pasha's nephew. Makarije is portrayed as a physically imposing man who carried a mace, rode horses skillfully, and wore a distinctive «camel-hair coat» (Dakić, 2018, pp. 33–34).

There is no evidence that Makarije Sokolović visited Istanbul before the restoration of the Patriarchate. It has, however, been suggested that he later travelled to the imperial capital in connection with ecclesiastical ceremonies or matters relating to the Patriarchate and met with Sokullu Mehmed Pasha during these visits (Gerlach, 2007, pp. 553–555; Samarcic, 1995, pp. 75–76). By contrast, the frequently repeated claim that whenever Makarije came to Istanbul he and Sokullu Mehmed Pasha would visit the Patriarchate in the Phanar together to pray appears historically implausible (Goffman, 2004, p. 76). Nevertheless, the available evidence indicates that the doors of Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's household remained open to his Christian relatives and that he never compelled them to convert to Islam (Samarcic, 1995, p. 78).

Makarije Sokolović was not the only member of the Sokullu family to occupy the patriarchal throne. Following his tenure as Serbian Patriarch (1557–1571), he was succeeded successively by his nephew Antonije Sokolović (1571–1575), Gerasim Sokolović (1575–1586)—who had previously served, most probably, as Archbishop of Ohrid and Metropolitan of Herzegovina—and finally by Savatije Sokolović (1586–1587), Makarije's cousin and Metropolitan of Herzegovina. Each served as Serbian Patriarch at Peć and exercised ecclesiastical authority over the churches of the region. Stephan Gerlach also notes that Adelfopes, whom he identifies as Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's nephew, was appointed Archbishop of Ohrid (Gerlach, 2007, p. 149). The fact that the patriarchs who succeeded Makarije simultaneously occupied prominent ecclesiastical offices such as the Metropolitanate of Herzegovina and the Archbishopric of Ohrid suggests that the Christian branch of the Sokullu family likewise established a strong

institutional presence within the Orthodox Church (Dakić, 2018, p. 30; Jorga, p. 1021; Samarcic, 1995, p. 78).

Although two visits by Gerasim Sokolović to Istanbul are mentioned in the sources, no direct evidence confirms that he met with Sokullu Mehmed Pasha. Some scholars have argued that the visitor referred to in the relevant accounts was in fact Makarije rather than Gerasim, while others maintain the opposite interpretation (Dakić, 2018, p. 31; Gerlach, 2007, pp. 553–555). Regardless of these uncertainties, it is evident that the Serbian Patriarchate remained under the leadership of members of the Sokullu family, with the support of the Ottoman state, for approximately thirty years (Dakić, 2018, p. 32). The family's dominance over the Patriarchate came to an end shortly after the accession of Savatije Sokolović, whose death soon after becoming patriarch brought the Sokolović era within the Serbian Patriarchate to a close (Samarcic, 1995, p. 78).

A distinctly partisan interpretation of Sokullu Mehmed Pasha has been constructed around the restoration of the Serbian Patriarchate of Peć and the question of his ethnic origins. According to this perspective, Sokullu, whose ties to the Orthodox Church were allegedly strong prior to his recruitment to the *devshirme* system, preserved his original identity after entering Ottoman service, remained emotionally attached to his Christian roots, and manifested this attachment by restoring the Serbian Patriarchate. The re-established Patriarchate is consequently portrayed as having played a decisive role in preserving Serbian national identity (Dakić, 2012, p. 46; Öztürk Yılmaz, 2019, vol. I, p. 133; Samarcic, 1995, p. 81). Within this framework, Sokullu Mehmed Pasha has been incorporated into a national historiographical narrative, emphasizing accounts of his alleged forced recruitment, his enduring loyalty to his Christian heritage, and his purported contribution to the future of the Serbian nation. His political power and extraordinary success have further reinforced attempts to appropriate him as a national historical figure.

Such an interpretation, however, appears to be both one-sided and historically problematic. In the case of Sokullu Mehmed Pasha, the restoration of the

Serbian Patriarchate can be explained not only through questions of personal identity but also within the broader political and social realities of the sixteenth-century Ottoman Empire (Samarctic, 1995, p. 74).

The Serbian Patriarchate was restored in 1557, while Sokullu Mehmed Pasha was serving as Third Vizier (Dakić, 2012, p. 46). Implemented during the reign of Süleyman I, this measure primarily aimed at pacifying the Serbian population (Kia, 2011, p. 115). At a time when Ottoman warfare against the Habsburg Monarchy remained particularly intense, securing the loyalty of the Serbian population and appointing a trustworthy ecclesiastical leader significantly enhanced the security of the strategic corridor between Istanbul and Budin. Indeed, just as Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's Christian relative Makarije was appointed Patriarch of Peć, his Muslim cousin Sokullu Mustafa Pasha was appointed Governor-General of Budin, where he played a crucial role in defending the Ottoman frontier against the Christian Habsburgs (Anscombe, 2014, p. 151). Serbian support likewise contributed to Ottoman military campaigns conducted throughout the region (Veinstein, 2012, p. 2; Samarctic, 1995, p. 38). Consequently, interpreting these appointments solely through the lens of ethnic or familial solidarity produces an incomplete and potentially misleading understanding of the issue.

The restoration of the Patriarchate strengthened the integration of the Serbian Orthodox population into the Ottoman administrative system by recognizing them as a distinct *reaya* community rather than leaving them entirely under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. At the same time, the limited success of Ottoman settlement policies in the region provided an additional incentive for cultivating Serbian loyalty. Beyond demonstrating the empire's policy of religious accommodation, the restoration also contributed to the economic revitalization of the Peć region (Öztürk Yılmaz, 2019, pp. 33, 133). Furthermore, the gradual demographic decline of the Muslim population in territories acquired through the Ottoman advance toward Central Europe increased the military and political importance of granting such religious privileges to the Serbian population (Samarctic, 1995, p. 80).

More broadly, the Ottoman Empire consistently sought to integrate local elites and institutions into the imperial structure in both its eastern and western provinces, whether through religious institutions or influential families. The restoration of the Serbian Patriarchate should therefore be understood within this broader administrative strategy. When considered alongside policies of Islamization, the *devshirme* system, and various fiscal and economic measures, the privileges granted to the Serbian Orthodox community clearly served the overarching objective of consolidating Ottoman authority in the Balkans. To attribute such a significant imperial concession—implemented by means of a sultanic decree—solely to the personal preferences or ethnic background of the Third Vizier would overlook the institutional logic of the Ottoman state. Indeed, the contemporary *Şeyhülislâm* Ebussuud Efendi (d. 1574) is also reported to have supported the restoration of the Patriarchate at Peć. Moreover, the establishment of the Serbian Patriarchate diminished the ecclesiastical monopoly previously exercised by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate (Samaric, 1995, pp. 80–82). Although the restored Patriarchate undoubtedly contributed to the preservation of Serbian identity in the long term, this outcome should not be interpreted as evidence that such preservation constituted Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's primary objective. Rather, the incorporation of peripheral communities into the imperial system should be regarded as a deliberate policy of the Ottoman state.

Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's Marriage and Children

Sokullu Mehmed Pasha married İsmihan Sultan (d. 1585), the daughter of Selim II. The earliest clear indication of his close relationship with his future father-in-law dates to the period when he was dispatched as an adviser to *Şehzade* Selim. During the dynastic conflict between *Şehzade* Selim and *Şehzade* Bayezid, Sokullu Mehmed Pasha, then serving as Third Vizier, was assigned to counsel *Şehzade* Selim, while the Fourth Vizier Pertev Pasha (d. 1572) was sent to advise *Şehzade* Bayezid (Peçevî, 1981, p. 243; Seyyid Lokmân, 2022, pp. 248–249). Whereas *Şehzade* Selim accepted Sokullu's counsel, the advice offered to Bayezid proved unsuccessful. The dispute ultimately culminated in the decisive Battle of Konya between the two princes.

During this conflict, Sokullu Mehmed Pasha participated with a force of three thousand Janissaries and ten thousand provincial troops, playing a decisive role in securing Şehzade Selim's victory (Seyyid Lokmân, 2022, pp. 255–256). Following the defeat, Prince Bayezid fled to Safavid Iran. By order of Süleyman I, Şehzade Selim and Sokullu Mehmed Pasha subsequently spent the winter together in Aleppo (TS.MA.e, 967, 749-34; Peçevî, 1981, p. 278). Sharing the same residence for an extended period undoubtedly enabled the prince and his trusted adviser to develop a closer personal relationship.

Following his prominent role in the War of the Şehzade, Sokullu Mehmed Pasha married Şehzade Selim's daughter, İsmihan Sultan, in 1562, upon returning from Konya, thereby becoming a member of the Ottoman dynasty through marriage. The victory of the faction he had supported during the dynastic struggle, followed by this prestigious dynastic alliance, significantly accelerated his political ascent. In conjunction with his successful management of the succession crisis following the Siege of Szigetvár and Selim II's accession to the throne, these developments elevated Sokullu Mehmed Pasha to an exceptionally influential position within the Ottoman government (Kızılkaya, 2024, pp. 6–10; Seyyid Lokmân, 2022, p. 263; Danişmend, 1972, vol. 3, p. 46).

According to Ottoman dynastic custom, individuals who married women of the imperial family were required to divorce any existing wives (Peirce, 1993, p. 69). Nevertheless, the available sources provide no explicit information regarding Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's wife or concubines prior to his marriage to İsmihan Sultan. His son Sokulluzâde Hasan Pasha (d. 1602) was born to an earlier wife (Afyoncu, 2009, p. 357). Hammer, by contrast, states that two of Sokullu's children were born to two different concubines. His account notes that, following the death of one son who had been appointed governor of Aleppo, another son—then serving as *sanjak-bey* of Bosnia—was appointed to succeed him in Aleppo. From this information, it may be inferred that these two sons were Kurd Kasım Bey and Hasan Pasha. Uluçay, on the other hand, argues that Sokullu Mehmed Pasha had two wives before his marriage to İsmihan Sultan and divorced them in accordance with dynastic protocol upon entering the imperial family (Uluçay,

2011, p. 69; Parlaz, 2013, p. 83). Regardless of these differing interpretations, it is evident that Sokullu Mehmed Pasha had established a family and had children prior to his marriage to İsmihan Sultan. However, the identities of the mother—or mothers—of these children remain unknown.

Marriage alliances with members of the Ottoman dynasty constituted one of the mechanisms through which *devshirme*-origin statesmen advanced within the imperial hierarchy and consolidated their political positions (İpşirli Argıt, 2017, p. 165). Such marriages were generally arranged as rewards for distinguished service or in anticipation of future contributions to the state. From this perspective, the War of the Şehzade represented a decisive turning point in Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's career. His success during this conflict considerably strengthened Sultan Süleyman's confidence in him. His appointment as adviser to Prince Selim enabled him to establish a close personal relationship with the future sultan, who gradually came to trust him. Their prolonged stay together in Aleppo further reinforced this relationship, allowing Sokullu to become intimately acquainted with the şehzade. As the culmination of these developments, he married Şehzade Selim's daughter, İsmihan Sultan (Seyyid Lokmân, 2022, p. 263; Samarcic, 1995, p. 70). Collectively, these developments greatly facilitated Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's political advancement and, upon Selim II's accession to the throne, secured his position at the center of imperial government.

The children born to Sokullu Mehmed Pasha and İsmihan Sultan who survived into adulthood were İbrahim Han (d. 1622), Safiye Hanım Sultan, and Fatma Hanım. However, Sokulluzâde Hasan Pasha, who rose until the rank of vizier, and Kurd Kasım Bey were both born before with İsmihan Sultan marriage. The precise number of children who died in infancy or childhood remains uncertain. Some sources indicate that six children died at an early age and further relate that, following these successive bereavements, the family abandoned their palace residence at Kadirga, believing it to be associated with these tragedies (Kızılkaya, 2024, pp. 10–11).

The presentation of descendants of Bajo, who was brought to Istanbul as a *devshirme*, as an alternative to the Ottoman dynasty is a significant indicator of the transformation in Sokullu's world. Following the deposition of Mustafa II (d. 1703), the Crimean Khan and the Ibrahim Hanzade family were mentioned as alternatives to the dynasty. In 1703, the forces sent from Istanbul to Edirne to overthrow the Sultan proposed the Crimean Khan and the Ibrahim Hanzade family as candidates for the throne at a meeting held in Silivri. Indeed, this meeting and the discussions lasted more than thirty days. This shows that the matter was seriously debated for days (Emecen, 2001, pp. 73-74). The nomination of the Hanzades 124 years after the death of Sokullu Mehmed Pasha is clear proof that the family strongly maintained its influence. Of course, there are specific reasons for mentioning them as alternatives. The fact that the Hanzades, descendants of İbrahim Han, the son of Sokullu Mehmed Pasha and İsmihan Sultan (daughter of Selim II), are directly related to the dynasty, and their wealth and influence, seem to have been influential in their being mentioned as alternatives (Emecen, 2000, pp. 316-317; Emecen, 2001, pp. 73-74).

Sokullu Mehmed Pasha rewarded and protected those who demonstrated loyalty during periods of political crisis. A notable example is Cafer Ağa, who played a crucial role in concealing the death of Sultan Süleyman during the Siege of Szigetvár and facilitating the accession of the new sultan. In recognition of these services, Sokullu married one of his daughters to Cafer Ağa. The latter's support during the succession crisis also contributed significantly to his own advancement, ultimately leading to his appointment as Agha of the Janissaries. Yet the reverse was equally true: negligence or incompetence was not tolerated, even among Sokullu's closest associates. While Cafer Ağa was serving as Janissary Agha, a devastating fire broke out in Istanbul. Beginning in the Jewish quarter of Eminönü on 19 September 1569, the fire raged for seven days, destroying thousands of houses and shops in one of the greatest urban disasters in the city's history. Sokullu Mehmed Pasha personally participated in the firefighting efforts, narrowly escaping death, and played an important role in bringing the blaze under control (Samarcic, 1995, pp. 226-228; Lamartine, p. 494; Solak & Doğan, 2017, p. 14; Peçevî, 1981, p. 342). Following this catastrophe, however, he

dismissed his own son-in-law, Cafer Ağa—one of his closest confidants—from the office of Janissary Agha. This episode clearly demonstrates that, where affairs of state were concerned, Sokullu approached his responsibilities with uncompromising seriousness and showed little tolerance for negligence or inadequate performance, even on the part of members of his own family.

Patronage Relationships of Sokullu Mehmed Pasha

Political

Sokullu Mehmed Pasha became a member of the *Dīvān-ı Hümāyūn* upon his appointment as *Beylerbeyi* of Rumelia in 956/1549 and remained a member continuously until his death in 987/1579, serving within the council for a total of thirty years. He was promoted to the rank of Fourth Vizier in 1554 and became grand vizier in 1565. Consequently, he served actively in the *Dīvān-ı Hümāyūn* for five years as beylerbeyi of Rumelia, eleven years as vizier, and fourteen years as grand vizier. This remarkable career demonstrates the extraordinary administrative and political experience he accumulated over three decades at the very center of Ottoman governance. No other statesman in Ottoman history occupied a comparable position: Sokullu Mehmed Pasha remained continuously within the *Dīvān-ı Hümāyūn* for thirty years and held the office of Grand Vizier for fourteen years, exercising what may be described as near-absolute political authority for approximately eight of those years. In this respect, his career remains unparalleled in Ottoman history. The following table is therefore particularly valuable, as it identifies the principal statesmen with whom he served throughout his tenure as Grand Vizier.

Sokullu Mehmed Pasha began establishing his patronage network during his tenure as *Silâhdar*, when he brought members of his family to Istanbul and introduced his brothers into the palace system. Throughout his subsequent career, this evolved into a comprehensive network of patronage (*intisap*), which not only facilitated the advancement of individuals loyal to him but also consolidated his own political position within the Ottoman administration

Table 1. Members of the *Dīvān-ı Hümâyûn*, 1565–1578.

	Sadrâzam	2. Vezir	3. Vezir	4. Vezir	5. Vezir	6. Vezir	7. Vezir	Yeniçeri Ağası	Defterdar	Nişancı	Şeyhişlâm
1565-67	Sokullu Mehmed Paşa	Pertev Paşa	Ferhad Paşa	Ahmed Paşa	Kızıl Ahmedli Mustafâ Paşa	-	-	Ali Ağa	Abdîzâde Muhammed Çelebi	Celâlzâde Mustafâ Çelebi	Ebussuud Efendi
1568	Sokullu Mehmed Paşa	Pertev Paşa	Piyâle Paşa	Ahmed Paşa	Zal Mahmud Paşa	Lala Mustafâ Paşa	-	Câfer Ağa	Abdîzâde Muhammed Çelebi	Boyalı Mehmed Paşa	Ebussuud Efendi
1570-71	Sokullu Mehmed Paşa	Pertev Paşa	Piyâle Paşa	Ahmed Paşa	Zal Mahmud Paşa	Lala Mustafâ Paşa	Sinan Paşa	Siyâvuş Ağa	Baba Nakkaş-zâde Dervîş Çelebi	-	Ebussuud Efendi
1574	Sokullu Mehmed Paşa	Piyâle Paşa	Ahmed Paşa	Zal Mahmud Paşa	Lala Mustafâ Paşa	Sinan Paşa	-	Hasan Ağa-Mustafâ Ağa	Lala İzzâzâde	Feridun Ahmed Bey	Hamid Efendi
1577	Sokullu Mehmed Paşa	Ahmed Paşa	Zal Mahmud Paşa	Lala Mustafâ Paşa	Şemsi Paşa	Sinan Paşa	Siyavuş Paşa?	Cigalâzâde Sinan Ağa	Kara Üveys Paşa	Muallimzâde Mahmud Çelebi, Murad Çelebi	Kadırzâde Ahmed Şemseddin

Source: Mehmed Süreyya, 1996, p. 1743; Gelibolulu, 2019, p. 697; Danişmend, 1971, vol. 2, p. 378; Peçevî, 1981, p. 342; Kaplan, 1998, p. 45; Çevik, 2024, pp. 198–199.

(Veinstein, 2012, p. 4). Consideration of the points of connection between Sokullu Mehmed Pasha and those within his immediate circle reveals a discernible historical pattern. In particular, periods of political crisis played a crucial role in the formation and strengthening of these personal and political relationships.

By virtue of the authority vested in the office of the grand vizierate, Sokullu Mehmed Pasha naturally exercised considerable influence over appointments and dismissals. Although it is impossible to identify every appointment in which he played a decisive role or to establish the precise nature of his relationship with every officeholder, the issue can be examined through the careers of several prominent individuals whose advancement was closely associated with their affiliation to him. In particular, an analysis of appointments and dismissals within the framework of patronage provides valuable insight into the operation of Sokullu's political network.

One such figure was Derviş Ali Pasha, beylerbeyi of Basra, who was initially described as "*a common sailor from among the populace (avamdan bir levent)*". After serving under several provincial governors, he rose through the ranks of the Ottoman administration by entering Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's patronage network. During his career he served successively as Governor-General of Lahsa, Basra, and Baghdad (Gelibolulu, 2019, p. 902; Feridun Ahmed Bey, 2012, pp. 383- 403; Ahmed Refik, 2017, p. 141). Similarly, Botur Hüseyin Pasha, who originated from Herzegovina near Sokullu's native region, advanced through Sokullu's patronage after attaining the office of Çaşnigâr, subsequently serving as Governor-General of Van, Baghdad, Egypt, and Damascus (Ahmed Refik, 2017, p. 141).

The significance of Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's political relationships became evident not only in appointments but also during the purge that unfolded under Murad III. Following the death of Selim II and the accession of Murad III, the balance of power shifted decisively against Sokullu Mehmed Pasha. Feridun Ahmed Bey (d. 1583) was dismissed from the office of Nişancı; Sokullu's cousin, Sokullu Mustafa Pasha, beylerbeyi of Budin, was executed on the pretext that he had

been responsible for an explosion caused by lightning striking a gunpowder magazine; Arab Ahmed Pasha (d. 1578), who had served under Sokullu's patronage as beylerbeyi of Rhodes, Algiers, and Cyprus, was killed and dismembered by soldiers who stormed his residence; and Cıġalazâde Yusuf Sinan Pasha (d. 1606), then serving as Janissary Agha, was dismissed on the grounds that his close association with Sokullu (Nahîfî Mehmed Efendi, 2019, pp. 13, 62, 82, 99–100; Peçevî, 1982, p. 24; Samarcic, 1995, pp. 386, 390; Cezar, 1959, p. 1258; Gerlach, 2007, pp. 771–772; Hammer, vol. 7, p. 43; Ahmed Refik, 2017, pp. 361–362).

A similar process unfolded within the palace itself, where Sokullu's immediate entourage was systematically dismantled. Sultan Murad III ordered Sokullu to dismiss Hüsrev Kethüdâ and his *kapıcıbaşı* Sinan Ağa from the grand vizier's household, and the revenues from their estates were transferred to the sultan's own domain. According to Gerlach, these two close associates of Sokullu were subsequently arrested and imprisoned in the Yedikule Fortress. Kaytas Kethüdâ, the steward of Feridun Ahmed Bey, was executed, while the revenues of twenty-four individuals closely associated with Sokullu were confiscated and in return, they were assigned less productive lands (Gelibolulu Mustafa Âli, 2019, pp. 960–961; Peçevî, 1981, pp. 6, 20; Uzunçarşılı, 1988, vol. 3, p. 53; Hasanbeyzâde, 2004, vol. 2, pp. 253–259; Gerlach, 2007, pp. 598–599; Zararsız, 2021, p. 331).

An examination of the deaths that occurred during the purge of Sokullu Mehmed Pasha and his supporters further reveals that this period witnessed not merely political dismissals but a broader transformation of the Ottoman ruling elite. The years 1577–1580 were characterized by a remarkable succession of deaths among leading statesmen. Zal Mahmud Pasha, Third Vizier and Sokullu's brother-in-law, died in 1577, followed by Piyâle Pasha, the Second Vizier, early in 1578. Sokullu's cousin Lala Mustafa Pasha, Semiz Ahmed Pasha, who succeeded Sokullu as Grand Vizier, both died in 1580. Derviş Pasha, another cousin of the grand vizier and former beylerbeyi of Diyarbakır, was killed during the Persian Campaign, while his nephew Ali Bey also lost his life in the same conflict. Beyond the members of the Imperial Council, Hamid Efendi, son-in-law of Şeyhülislâm Çivizâde and a close associate of Sokullu Mehmed Pasha,

died on 16 October 1577, after which the office of *Şeyhülislâm* passed to Kadızâde, a known opponent of Sokullu. Even Şemsi Ahmed Pasha, one of Sokullu's most political adversaries, died in 1580 (Ahmed Refik, 2017, pp. 290, 333; Cezar, 1959, p. 1311; Bostan, 2007b, vol. 34, pp. 296–297; Baltacı, 1997, pp. 460–461; Emecen, 2009, p. 494; Kütükoğlu, 2003a, pp. 73–74; Afyoncu, 2010, pp. 527–529; Hammer, 2007, vol. 7, p. 29; Samarcic, 1995, pp. 388, 394).

Accordingly, the transformation that took place between 1577 and 1580 cannot be explained solely by the accession of Murad III in 1574 or by the activities of factions opposed to Sokullu Mehmed Pasha. The deaths of numerous senior statesmen significantly accelerated the reconfiguration of the Ottoman political elite, while the assassination of Sokullu Mehmed Pasha in 1579 constituted the clearest indication that an era in Ottoman politics had come to an end.

The changing nature of political circumstances may also give rise to different interpretations when reconstructing networks of relationships. Regardless of personal loyalties, however, the primary allegiance of *devshirme*-origin statesmen and senior Ottoman officials remained directed toward the Ottoman dynasty and the state. Accordingly, the purge of those associated with Sokullu Mehmed Pasha unfolded in different ways for different individuals. His cousin Sokullu Mustafa Pasha was executed under the pretext of the explosion of a gunpowder magazine, whereas Feridun Ahmed Bey, the renowned *nişancı* and Sokullu's confidential secretary, was merely dismissed from office and subsequently reinstated once the influence of the Sokullu faction had diminished. At the same time, Sokulluzâde Hasan Pasha, Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's son, continued to serve as a beylerbeyi following his father's assassination and was later promoted to the rank of vizier.

Historians, Poets, and Sufis

Sokullu Mehmed Pasha cultivated significant relationships not only with members of his family and the Ottoman ruling elite but also with scholars, poets, and Sufi figures. The following examples illustrate the diversity and breadth of these intellectual and spiritual networks.

Seyyid Lokmân (d. 1601) entered Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's patronage through Feridun Ahmed Bey, making the grand vizier his principal patron. After serving in Diyarbakır, he was appointed as the imperial *şehnâmecî*. Having participated in the Sigetvár Campaign, Seyyid Lokmân composed a work on the expedition and presented it to Feridun Ahmed Bey, whose scholarly circle received it favorably. His subsequent works likewise enjoyed the support of the grand vizier. *Şehnâme-i Selim Han* contains both depictions of Sokullu Mehmed Pasha and a section offering prayers for him, while the text and miniatures of the *Zafernâme* portray the grand vizier as one of the central figures. Benefiting from Sokullu's patronage and the support of the palace milieu, Seyyid Lokmân collaborated closely with Nakkaş Osman and the imperial painters, whose miniatures became an integral part of his works. By contrast, although the *Hünernâme*—commissioned during the final years of Sokullu's life and completed approximately a decade after his death—still includes representations of the grand vizier, he no longer occupies the central position. Rather than appearing as the *padişah-ı manevî*, he is depicted as an official fulfilling his duties within a broader imperial framework. This transformation may be interpreted as a reflection of the changing balance of political power. Seyyid Lokmân also served as *serkâtip* alongside the grand vizier during the reception of Sultan Murad III. During the political purges, Seyyid Lokmân's close association with Sokullu adversely affected his career, and he fell from favor following the grand vizier's assassination. (Seyyid Lokmân, 2022, pp. 11–12, 26–31, 38–40; Woodhead, 2010, p. 457; Özçelik, 2020, p. 22; Ahadi, 2019, pp. 13–15, 44, 105–106; Kütükoğlu, 2003b, pp. 208–209; Kars, 2020, p. 976; Fetvacı, 2013, pp. 165–167, 171, 181–183, 193).

Sokullu Mehmed Pasha likewise supported the astronomical studies of Takiyüddin (d. 1585), introduced him to Sultan Murad III, and played a crucial role in the establishment of the imperial observatory. He endorsed Takiyüddin's proposal to found an observatory and facilitated its construction. Nevertheless, mounting opposition and subsequent political developments ultimately led to its destruction. Historians have frequently interpreted the demolition of the observatory as having had adverse consequences for the development of the positive sciences within the Ottoman Empire. (Topdemir, 2010, vol. 39, p. 455; Goodwin, 2008, p. 104).

Fevrî (d. 1571) was the author of *Ahlâk-ı Mehmed Paşa*, a work devoted entirely to Sokullu Mehmed Pasha. Structured into forty chapters, the text praises the grand vizier while highlighting his personal virtues. Combining moral reflection with panegyric, it represents an early example of monographic writing. Each chapter first defines a particular virtue, then discusses its significance through exemplary historical figures, and finally illustrates how Sokullu Mehmed Pasha embodied that quality. Written during the grand vizier's lifetime, the work was composed by Fevrî, a Croatian-born *devşirme* who maintained close connections with Sokullu. A *müderriş* by profession, Fevrî regularly appeared before the grand vizier and enjoyed his favor. The work is generally believed to have been written during the final years of the author's life, between 1566 and 1571. (Fevrî, 2019, pp. 9, 40, 42–43, 61–71; Karavelioğlu, 2019, pp. 207–210).

Bâkî (d. 1600) was another distinguished figure who benefited from Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's patronage, having entered his circle through Feridun Ahmed Bey. (Çavuşoğlu, 1991, p. 538). At the grand vizier's request, he translated *Me'âlimü'l-Yakîn fî Sîreti Seyyîdi'l-Mürselîn (al-Mawâhib al-Ladunniyya)* and *Fezâ'il-i Mekke* from Arabic into elegant Ottoman Turkish. In the introduction to *Fezâ'il-i Mekke*, completed while serving as the judge of Mecca, Bâkî offered extensive praise of Sokullu Mehmed Pasha (Kandemir, 2008, pp. 4, 12; Çavuşoğlu, 1991, p. 538; Algül, 2004, p. 421; Özmen, 2020, pp. 72–73). Following his poem celebrating the conquest of Sigetvár, Bâkî composed ten verses under the heading *Der-du'â-yı devlet-i hazret-i Vezîr-i a'zam Muhammed Paşa ebbeda'llâhu te'âlâ 'ömrühû ve devletühû*, praising the grand vizier. As has been noted, «Bâkî initially presented the elegy to Selim II; when he failed to obtain the desired reward, he added another stanza and rededicated it to Sokullu Mehmed Pasha.» (Aköz & Demireğen, 2019, p. 142). Feridun Ahmed Bey also records that Bâkî recited a *qasida* during Selim II's accession ceremony. (Feridun Ahmed Bey, 2012, p. 167). Likewise, the *Sigetvarnâme* incorporated into his translation *Fezâ'il-i Cihâd* contains further praise of Sokullu Mehmed Pasha (see Kaçar, 2015, pp. 27–46). Although Bâkî does not appear to have enjoyed as intimate a relationship with Sokullu as did Feridun Ahmed Bey or Seyyid Lokmân, it is evident that the grand vizier acted as his patron, commissioned his translations, and received favorable treatment in his literary works.

Beyond scholarly and literary circles, Sokullu Mehmed Pasha also maintained close connections with Sufi communities. He founded *tekkes* at Kadirga, Sigetvár, Havsa, and Hatay and became a *mürîd* of Nureddinzâde Mustafa Muslihuddin (d. 1574). These relationships demonstrate that the grand vizier cultivated extensive intellectual, literary, and spiritual networks extending well beyond the sphere of politics and administration.

Born in Filibe, the Halveti-Cemali shaykh Nureddinzâde Mustafa Muslihuddin (d. 1574) became Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's *sheikh*. Nureddinzâde's disciples included not only prominent political figures such as Sultan Süleyman I and Sokullu Mehmed Pasha but also influential Sufis of the following generation, most notably Aziz Mahmud Hüdâyî (d. 1628). (Öngören, 2019, pp. 360–361; Öztürk, 2017, pp. 83, 86). The fact that the lodges established by Sokullu at Kadirga and Sigetvár belonged to the Halveti order appears closely connected to his affiliation with Nureddinzâde. (Bölükbaşı, 2014, pp. 73–76, 85). It is also possible that Sultan Süleyman's own attachment to the order influenced Sokullu's decision to become his disciple. Nureddinzâde accompanied the funeral procession of Sultan Süleyman from Sigetvár to Istanbul. (Hasanbeyzâde, 2004, vol. 2, p. 154; Uzunçarşılı, 1988, vol. 3, p. 348; Öngören, 2019, pp. 360–361). Gelibolulu Mustafa Âli presented his *Heft Meclis* to the grand vizier through Nureddinzâde. (Eravcı, 2010). The Grand Vizier had the tekke in Kadirga built for him, but he passed away before the construction was completed, so according to his will, Kurd Mehmed Efendi (d. 1588) was became as the sheikh of the tekke in Kadirga. (Öngören, 2015, p. 76; Öngören, 2019, pp. 360–361; Öztürk, 2017, pp. 83, 86).

Other Examples of the Diversity of Relationships

Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's relationships extended far beyond the sultan, members of the Imperial Council, and matters of appointment. His extensive charitable foundations (*waqfs*) and architectural patronage likewise generated a broad network of direct and indirect relationships. The individual most closely associated with Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's architectural patronage is

undoubtedly Mimar Sinan. The külliyes at Kadirga, Eyüp, Lüleburgaz, Hava, and Payas, together with the mosques at Azapkapı and Büyükçekmece, as well as the bridges at Višegrad, Lüleburgaz, and Ergene, were all designed and constructed by Sinan. It may therefore be concluded that the majority of Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's charitable and architectural foundations were executed under the direction of the empire's chief architect.

Numerous other individuals likewise formed part of this network of construction and patronage, including Hüsrev Kethüdâ, Mustafa Kethüdâ, Mihail Çelebi, Taşçı Miço, road builders, carpenters, masons, water carriers, and the laborers employed on the Drina Bridge. One illustrative example concerns the procurement of stone for the Tomb of Selim II, Hagia Sophia, and the Sokullu Mehmed Pasha Mosque. For this purpose, an agreement was concluded with Taşçı Miço, a stonemason from the village of Levan near Belgrade. Although Miço received an advance payment of 5,000 akçes, he died before quarrying and delivering the promised stone. When the value of his estate in Istanbul proved insufficient to cover the outstanding debt, Ahmed Çavuş was dispatched to recover the remaining amount, and official decrees were subsequently issued to the Governor of Avlonya and the judge of Albanian Belgrade concerning the matter (Mühimme Defteri No. 31, h. 15).

The individuals within Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's own household likewise illustrate the diversity of his social network. One particularly striking example is his slave-at-arms (*silahşor*), whose public demonstrations in the At Meydanı impressed members of the Austrian diplomatic mission between 10 and 14 October 1576. According to contemporary accounts, he successfully shot an arrow through an iron ring approximately three fingers in thickness and demonstrated extraordinary balance by standing barefoot upon the sharpened edges of two swords.

Another noteworthy figure was one of Sokullu's learned slaves, described as being of German origin. This individual initially belonged to Hüsrev Pasha before entering Sokullu's household. After receiving a scholarly

education, he was manumitted and subsequently became a müderris. Although later dismissed from one of his appointments, he served as molla of Baghdad in 1575–1576 and died in 1589. Contemporary sources characterize him as stubborn by temperament, while one of his descendants later served as a *kadı* in Egypt (Mehmed Süreyya, 1996, p. 909).

Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's relationships with foreign diplomats provide another important perspective on the breadth of his social and political connections. Among these, his interaction with the Venetian Bailo over the question of imperial portraiture is particularly significant. Sokullu commissioned Seyyid Lokmân and Nakkaş Osman to prepare an illustrated history of the Ottoman sultans incorporating both historical accounts and their portraits. During the preparation of this work, the authors encountered difficulties because no authentic likenesses of the early Ottoman rulers were available. Their research eventually revealed that European artists had previously produced portraits of the early sultans, prompting them to request that Sokullu obtain copies. In response, Sokullu contacted the Venetian Bailo Niccolò Barbarigo, who arranged for copies of these Venetian portraits to be brought to Istanbul. Most of these portraits remain today in the collections of Topkapı Palace Museum (Tamcan, 2005, p. 20; İnalçık & Renda, 2004, pp. 905, 1101).

Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's artistic connection with the Venetian bailo Barbarigo is reflected in his request for an artist «to paint and decorate his new palace.» It has even been claimed that this artist induced Sokullu to have an oil portrait of himself painted. However, the artist subsequently returned to Venice and never came back. Thereupon, Barbarigo sought to appease the grand vizier by having «a young painter in his service paint Sokullu's portrait.» (Tamcan, 2005, p. 21) Among all foreign diplomatic missions, the one that most intrigued Sokullu Mehmed Pasha was the embassy from Muscovy. Contemporary accounts attribute to him the following remark: «Since I became pasha, ambassadors have arrived from every country. Only no one had come from Moscow. Now Allah has allowed me to see and hear the ambassador of Moscow as well.» (See Kamalov, 2011, pp. 40–65.)

Conclusion

The Ottoman Empire possessed a systematic administrative approach that enabled it to make efficient use of its human resources. The state developed mechanisms to transform individuals, utilize their abilities in accordance with imperial objectives, and integrate them into the central administrative structure. As long as this system functioned effectively, it ensured that capable individuals were placed in appropriate positions within the state apparatus, thereby maintaining institutional balance and political stability. The devshirme system and the career of Sokullu Mehmed Pasha constitute clear examples of this process. His rise to power and long-lasting political authority were shaped by the offices he held, his connection with the Ottoman dynasty, his family, the patronage network he established, and his personal qualities.

The single most influential figure in Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's political career was Sultan Selim II. During the conflict between the Ottoman princes, Sokullu was first dispatched as an advisor to Prince Selim and subsequently played a decisive role in securing his victory. This brought him into close proximity with the dynasty, while his marriage to Selim's daughter, İsmihan Sultan, further strengthened this relationship. His dynastic marriage consolidated both his political position and his capacity to exercise authority. His successful management of the succession crisis following Sultan Süleyman's death during the Sigetvár Campaign and his role in securing the accession of his father-in-law further reinforced his power. Moreover, Selim II's governing style, characterized by delegating a significant portion of state affairs to the grand vizier, substantially enhanced Sokullu's authority. Despite wielding extraordinary influence, however, Sokullu never presented himself as an alternative sovereign; as a product of the devshirme system, he remained conscious of the limits of his office and acted within the established framework of Ottoman political culture.

One of the principal features distinguishing Sokullu Mehmed Pasha from other devshirme statesmen was the position of his family. Following the conquest of Constantinople, the increasing political prominence of devshirme

administrators as a counterweight within the governing elite eventually enabled them to establish their own patronage networks. The Sokullu family represents perhaps the clearest example of this development. According to Peçevî, the Sokullu family produced two grand viziers, five viziers, and ten *beylerbeyi*, in addition to numerous other figures who held military and administrative offices. Whereas the devshirme system generally weakened or severed recruits' ties with their families of origin, Sokullu brought his relatives to Istanbul, facilitated their conversion to Islam, and elevated his family to an exceptional position within the Ottoman elite.

The Christian branch of the Sokullu family likewise established a significant presence within the Serbian Patriarchate, with members of the family occupying the patriarchal office for an extended period. Nevertheless, interpretations that disregard the historical context and instead portray this development as evidence of Sokullu's enduring Christian identity are reductionist and misleading. Some nationalist narratives have suggested that Sokullu preserved his pre-devshirme religious and ethnic identity and subsequently re-established the Serbian Patriarchate when the opportunity arose. Such interpretations overlook the broader political and social circumstances of the period. The restoration of the Serbian Patriarchate in 1557, during Sokullu's tenure as third vizier, should instead be understood within the framework of Ottoman imperial policy, which sought to pacify the Serbian population, secure their loyalty, and reinforce state authority in strategically important frontier regions.

The extensive network of relationships that Sokullu Mehmed Pasha cultivated across different social groups significantly contributed to both his rise to the grand vizierate and his ability to preserve his position with remarkable stability and authority. These networks were not artificial constructions but developed gradually throughout the course of his life. His family background, recruitment through the devshirme system, administrative experience, personal character, and appointments all shaped the formation and expansion of his connections. This study has examined numerous individuals within the framework of their relationships with Sokullu Mehmed Pasha, demonstrating the breadth and

multidimensional nature of his social and political networks. One of the defining characteristics of Sokullu was his remarkable ability to manage these networks effectively. Rather than reinforcing only a single sphere of influence, he cultivated relationships extending from his family and military-administrative circles to scholars, historians, poets, and religious figures. By successfully translating the experience gained through these diverse relationships into state administration, he established himself as one of the most capable, farsighted, and influential statesmen in Ottoman history.

The emergence of a new political center during the reign of Murad III, accompanied by changing power dynamics and the formation of new patronage networks, appears to have been the principal factor behind the gradual decline of Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's influence. A sustained campaign against him, while many of his close associates were removed from office, paving the way for a new administrative elite. Ultimately, after serving as grand vizier under three successive sultans for fourteen years -eight of which were marked by exceptional political authority- Sokullu Mehmed Pasha died as the victim of an assassination whose instigators have never been conclusively identified.

In addition to cultivating close ties with political and military circles, Sokullu Mehmed Pasha established strong connections with scholarly, literary, and Sufi milieus. As a grand vizier who patronized intellectual and literary circles and supported their production, he was presented with numerous works, while poems in his praise were composed. These works, together with the writings devoted to him, contributed to the formation of his reputation among subsequent generations. Likewise, the numerous waqfs and charitable complexes (*imarets*) that Sokullu Mehmed Pasha founded in various parts of the empire, from Bosnia to the Hejaz, may be understood in a similar light, as they likewise ensured the perpetuation of his memory. The name of Sokullu Mehmed Pasha continues to survive through his distinguished achievements recorded, the continuation of his family line, and the charitable institutions he founded.

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Outlying the Lie: Narrative Exaggeration, Comic Performance, and Folk Intelligence in the Serbian Tale *Laž za opkladu*

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Abstract: This article explores the Serbian folktale *Laž za opkladu* ('A Lie for a Wager') as a representative of ATU 1920, the internationally attested tale type known as the 'Contest in Lying.' Via close analysis of narrative structure, cultural context, and oral performance, the study argues that the tale employs absurd exaggeration as a strategic form of wit and social commentary. Drawing on folkloristic theory and comparative materials from Europe, the Middle East, and North America, it examines how tall tales reflect communal values, subvert authority, and negotiate the boundaries between fiction and belief. Particular attention is given to the role of comic escalation, verbal performance, and storytelling as a culturally sanctioned arena for reversing hierarchies. The tale's preservation in Vuk Karadžić's collections affirms its historical and ethnographic value, as its structure continues to resonate in contemporary narrative forms, suggesting rich potential for further research in traditional and digital folklore.

Keywords: folktale, exaggeration, Serbian oral tradition, lying contests, folk narrative theory

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Introduction

In the wide terrain of European folktale traditions, certain narrative types repeat with such insistence and geographical reach that they seem to spring from a common folk impulse rather than a single origin. One such type is the so-called ‘lying contest’ tale. Known in the Aarne–Thompson–Uther classification as ATU 1920, ‘The Contest in Lying’ (Uther 2011, 148, 160, even though it could be classified as ATU 852 as well), these stories centre on two characters who attempt to outmatch one another by inventing ever more implausible boasts. The Serbian folktale *Laž za opkladu* (‘A Lie for a Wager’) belongs to this group. It is, at first glance, a comic tale about a boy and a beardless man (*ćoso*, a man with no facial hair, a beardless man) who wager over a hot loaf of bread. Yet the story quickly transcends its modest frame: the boy, having been warned by his father never to grind flour in a mill where a beardless man is present, finds the ineluctable *ćoso* everywhere he goes, and eventually surrenders to the company and agrees to bake a loaf with him. When the loaf is ready, the man proposes they lie, and whoever outlies the other shall keep the bread. The man’s lies are tame; the boy’s are astonishing. He speaks of riding a rooster, growing millet tall enough to reach the heavens, and borrowing water from God after climbing skyward on a stalk that grew from a grain spilled into the sea (Samardžija 1987, 2004). His story concludes with him kicking a fox that is eating his brain out of his own forgotten head. A register book falls out of the startled fox (*sic!*), and in it is written the story’s punchline: ‘meni pogača, a ćosi g...o’ (‘the loaf for me, and s...t for the beardless man’).

The tale, humorous and deceptively simple, represents a narrative tradition found across the Slavic world, and indeed across much of Eurasia. Variants occur from Russia to Scandinavia, from the Scottish Highlands to India. In Vuk Stefanović Karadžić’s 19th century collections of Serbian oral literature, such stories are preserved and framed as part of a broader ethnographic project: a national soul expressed in speech, wit, and memory (Vučković and Bratić 2020, Suvajdžić 2022). Karadžić recorded this tale as a piece of spoken Serbian genius, rendered in the idiom of the countryside and preserved in its full absurdity. The

boy's final claim, ludicrous as it may be, contains all the necessary elements of comic reversal, verbal agility, and symbolic triumph over a dull adult.

The ATU 1920 tale type has long been recognised for its peculiar quality, as a story genre in which lying, usually condemned, becomes a legitimate contest of imagination (Uther 2009, Stotter 1996). Lying here is not deception in the ethical sense, and can better be understood as invention. The purpose is to astonish, and the contest rewards creativity. According to Uther, such tales belong to a wider group of trickster narratives in which success is determined by narrative superiority rather than physical or moral strength (Uther 2011, p. 148). In Serbian tradition, the motif acquires a particularly performative dimension. The winner is the one who stretches the boundaries of oral plausibility to the very point of collapse, and yet remains within the internal logic of the spoken world.

This article proposes that *Laž za opkladu*, when read carefully, reveals more than an appetite for exaggeration. It encodes a set of rural Serbian values and anxieties. The folktale elevates a child who listens to his father, avoids danger, but finally triumphs through imagination. It quietly critiques hierarchy, mocks the elderly figure, and reserves admiration for the boy's verbal resourcefulness. In this, it preserves older functions of the folk tale: as social commentary (Ingwersen 1995), moral testing ground (Harrison, 2016), and entertainment (Marić, Dragić, and Plavša 2021). Yet it also speaks to the Serbian tradition of oral performance, where the capacity for narrative invention often substitutes for social power.

The present study uses several methodological lenses to approach this tale. First, a structuralist reading based on Propp's morphology will establish how the tale follows and then subverts the basic sequence of folktale functions (Propp 1968). Following this, a comparative folkloristic analysis will place *Laž za opkladu* alongside similar ATU 1920 variants from neighbouring Slavic and non-Slavic traditions, attending to differences in character types, tone, and resolution. Next, performance theory will be used to understand the tale as a performed act, one meant to elicit response and awe through the manipulation of oral

expectation. This is particularly vital given the tale's roots in a largely illiterate culture in which memory and orality were the chief media of transmission.

Ultimately, the article asks: what does it mean to lie well in folklore? And why would a culture reward that lying with a loaf of bread? The tale's humour lies in its escalation, but its deeper value lies in how it encodes wisdom in nonsense. In the boy's lies, we find vision.

Folktale Background and Classification

The tale *Laž za opkladu* ('A Lie for a Wager') survives today as one of the most vivid and richly absurd examples of oral humor in the Serbian tradition. Its premise is deceptively simple: a father sends his son to the mill with explicit instructions not to grind flour anywhere he finds a *ćoso*: a beardless man. The boy, obedient at first, travels from one mill to the next, only to find the same *ćoso* waiting at each. The beardless man, cunning and fast, always manages to arrive before him. Eventually, the boy gives in and decides to grind his flour in the presence of the persistent stranger. When the flour is milled, the *ćoso* proposes a wager: they will bake a *pogača* (flatbread), and instead of splitting it, they shall lie, and whoever outlies the other shall claim the whole loaf.

At the heart of the tale, as mentioned, is the motif of a *lying contest*, a narrative theme formally codified as ATU 1920 in the Aarne-Thompson-Uther classification system. The defining characteristic of this tale type is the competitive escalation of impossible claims, often between a boastful youth and an older, ostensibly wiser opponent. The winner is the most inventive.

In Serbian oral tradition, this form of humorous exaggeration is known as *lagarije*, tall tales told for entertainment and prestige. The Serbian oral tradition of *lagarije* refers to the art of telling tall tales, characterized by humorous exaggeration for entertainment and prestige (Kekez 1986, 8). This form of storytelling is deeply embedded in Serbian culture, serving as a means of social interaction and cultural expression. The tradition of *lagarije* shares similarities

with the American tall tale, which also thrives on exaggeration and humor, often focusing on themes like hunting, fishing, and domestic life (McEntire 2009). In Serbia, these tales were indeed a form of entertainment but also a way to convey cultural values and social norms. These stories often appeared in semi-public storytelling contexts such as *prela* (evening gatherings), where verbal wit served as a form of social currency. The concept of 'inverted behavior' seen in the tale, in South Slavic rituals, as explored recently by Maria Vivod, involves actions that defy conventional norms. This behavior is a form of magic and social commentary, often used in narratives to humorously subvert authority and tradition (Vivod 2023). The *ćoso*, as a figure, often represents such authority (such as age, experience, physical maturity) while the boy embodies a carnivalesque inversion of power, using absurdity as a weapon (a distant similarity we might find in Chekov's vaudevilles, Gromov 2023).

Variants of ATU 1920 are found throughout the Slavic-speaking world. In Russian folklore, the tale *Бпал* ('The Boaster') similarly features a character who regales his listeners with increasingly ludicrous feats. The Boaster tells a cascade of exaggerated, surreal, and intentionally absurd stories, each more incredible than the last, in a verbal contest to outlie his opponents. The goal is performative mastery of language, imagination, and comic effect. These tales appear prominently in the 19th-century collections of Alexander Afanasyev, who preserved dozens of such examples in his *Narodnye russkie skazki* (Afanasyev 1985).

In the Scandinavian corpus, especially in Norwegian folklore, the motif appears in tales like *Askeladden som fikk prinsessen til å løgste seg*, recorded by Asbjørnsen and Moe. It is a Norwegian folktale in which the clever underdog Askeladden, often dismissed as a fool or a layabout, enters a royal contest where suitors must spin such outrageous lies that they provoke the princess (renowned for her disbelief and pride) to exclaim "You're lying!". Through a steadily escalating series of fantastical absurdities and verbal inventions, Askeladden ultimately succeeds in tricking her into uttering the phrase, thereby winning her hand in marriage and overturning the social order through cunning narrative play

rather than force or status. (Asbjørnsen and Moe 1982). The comic purpose remains the same: to entertain through the increasingly impossible.

Across the Atlantic, American folklore offers a robust tradition of tall tales, especially in the Appalachian and frontier contexts. The legendary Davy Crockett, for instance, is said to have grinned a bear into submission or leapt across entire states. These stories, orally transmitted and often published in 19th-century almanacs and broadsides, functioned similarly to *Laž za opkladu*: as rhetorical contests where imagination, not truth, determined prestige.

Despite these global parallels, the Serbian version bears specific cultural markers. The motif of the obedient but eventually improvisational child reflects longstanding regional values of respect for parental guidance, tempered by admiration for individual cleverness. The figure of the *ćoso*, found in multiple Serbian tales, carries both comic and symbolic weight, often appearing as a meddling figure who is ultimately outwitted by someone younger and quicker-tongued.

Laž za opkladu was preserved in the oral collections of Vuk Stefanović Karadžić. Karadžić's project of collecting oral literature was literary and political. He sought to canonise the speech of the people (*narod*), treating their tales as sources of wisdom and evidence of national identity. As Tufekčić wrote, 'narodne pjesme su stoga cijeli poetski i filozofski svijet. U njima je sama duša naroda.' ('Folk songs are therefore a whole poetic and philosophical world. In them is the very soul of the nation,' Tufekčić 2012) – a succinct description of the *Weltanschauung* within which Karadžić operated, as the same could be said for folk tales as well.

It is within this ethnonational framework that *Laž za opkladu* should be read. The tale is more than merely a funny story, as it can be understood as a record of how imagination, language, and comic absurdity converge in Serbian oral tradition to produce a particular kind of narrative pleasure; one that is both communal and competitive. As a story type, it echoes widely. As a cultural performance, it speaks most clearly in its own idiom.

The Structure of Exaggeration: Narrative and Logic

At the core of *Laž za opkladu* lies a sophisticated strategy of narrative escalation. What begins as a folk tale framed by a common-sense warning from a father – “да не меље нигђе у воденици, ће нађе ћосу” (‘not to grind in any mill where he finds the beardless man’) – quickly veers into a sustained performance of impossibility. This shift is neither accidental nor unstructured. On the contrary, the story’s comic force emerges precisely from its methodical accumulation of absurdity, executed in a rhythm that allows the audience to suspend disbelief while anticipating the next exaggeration.

The tale’s climax, the boy’s monologue, is a masterclass in oral inflation. He begins with the arresting paradox: “Кад ја бија у младо доба стари човек” (‘When I, in my youth, was an old man’). This line is the key that unlocks the tale’s logic. By reversing the natural order of time, the boy signals that we have now entered a realm where verbal invention takes precedence over empirical reality. From here, the exaggerations pile up in quick succession. He counts his bees daily, loses his best bee (*челац*), and rides a rooster to recover it. He crosses the sea, recovers the bee from a man who has it ploughing a field with a millet ploughshare, and is rewarded with the bee and with a full bag of millet flour.

The story intensifies. His bag bursts, scattering millet into the sea. The grains grow so tall that he climbs the stalks to the heavens. There, God is found eating porridge made from his millet and kindly gives him holy water. On his way back, his body suffers extreme misfortunes: rain floods the field, his hair becomes a climbing rope, a single sewing needle becomes firewood, and his head is used to crack ice; these acts are carefully sequenced episodes that push the narrative logic further into parody. What binds them together is continuity of imaginative transformation. Every problem, no matter how ludicrous, is met with an equally ludicrous solution.

This mode of storytelling has a structural underpinning. Vladimir Propp, in his *Morphology of the Folktale*, identifies thirty-one functions that govern the

progression of the Russian fairy tale. Most traditional fairy tales adhere to a chain of motifs: interdiction, violation, departure, testing, and return (Propp 1968, pp. 25–65). *Laž za opkladu* begins in line with this morphology. The father's prohibition (not to grind near a *ćoso*) is the initial function (Function 2: interdiction), followed by the child's violation of it (Function 3: violation). The boy departs from the ordinary world in pursuit of an unmolested mill (Function 11: departure).

However, as the tale enters its lying contest phase, it departs from Propp's model. Instead of pursuing a quest or rescuing a princess, the protagonist's goal becomes rhetorical supremacy. The functions collapse into one another, and the tale becomes recursive: each new image is an echo of the last, pushed further into the realm of surrealism. This deviation from classical tale logic does not weaken the narrative; rather, it transforms it into a comic spiral, where narrative progression is driven by the limits of imagination.

Importantly, the tale's internal consistency relies on escalation, where one might expect contradiction. Each lie builds upon the previous one. The rooster becomes a steed, the sea becomes a millet field, hair becomes a rope, and a fox (for lack of words) *produces* a legal document. One could argue here that there is a peculiar order in the bedlam. The logic is somewhat poetic, not empirical; it is this logic that enables the audience to follow along and suspend their disbelief (La Farge, 2014). As Albert Lord has shown in his work on oral epic, formulaic repetition and predictable sequencing are crucial to oral composition (Lord 1960, pp. 67–80). In *Laž za opkladu*, the predictability lies in the structure of one-upping absurdities.

The final twist, where the fox defecates a *tefter* (ledger) reading: “мени погача, а ћоси г...о” (‘the loaf for me, and shit for the beardless man’), serves both as comic release and as a rhetorical flourish. The joke, crude but final, affirms the boy's victory by narrative domination. He has told the better story; he has absorbed and exceeded the *ćoso*'s imagination. In the world of the tale, this is triumphant. Brunvand, for instance, wrote how humor and storytelling provide

narrative closure and symbolic resolution, victory achieved by outwitting, not overpowering the opponent (Brunvand, 1968).

But what are we to make of such a story, where lying is rewarded instead of punished, and absurdity is treated as evidence of merit? Here we arrive at one of the central paradoxes of the folk tradition: *truth through untruth*. The narrative's wild lies gesture toward deeper values. Wit, imagination, endurance, and mental agility are more valued than solemnity or age. The story reminds us that truth in folklore is often functional rather than factual. As Linda Dégh writes, it is not factuality that is the concern of the folk narrator, as his goal is to be artistically impressive and gain community approval (Dégh 1972, p. 62). In this tale, the boy earns both.

The *ćoso*, whose experience and presence dominate the early part of the story, is ultimately rendered impotent by verbal creativity. The tale thus echoes themes familiar in other cultures' trickster traditions. The young and weak defeat the old and strong by means of linguistic inventiveness. African American Brer Rabbit tales (Ruth Leslie 1997), Jewish *schlemiel* narratives (Pinsker 1991), and even Greek *mētis* (cunning intelligence) all participate in similar narrative structures, where the powerless succeed through narrative prowess rather than physical power (Ben-Amos 1969; Lévi-Strauss 1963).

The Serbian boy, in this sense, is a native trickster. The boy's lies are meant to dazzle. His success rests on his ability to animate the impossible in plausible-seeming sequences. Each absurd event is bound to the next by an if-then logic: if my bee crossed the sea, then I must follow; if the millet grew, I must climb it; if God gave me water, I must carry it down. The narrative has a structure (it is *about* something) even if that something is impossible.

Moreover, the tale's conclusion, where the ledger itself contains the verdict, offers a satire of institutional authority. Written proof (long the domain of the powerful, Goody, 1986) is here turned into a gag. The fox's *tefter* delivers a folk justice. The final act of kicking the fox until it voids a record book is grotesque

but thematically appropriate. Truth literally emerges from the rear end of absurdity.

In other words, the tale of *Laž za opkladu* is a carefully constructed exercise in narrative escalation. It mirrors the structure of traditional tales only to overturn them, using surreal exaggeration to explore deeper truths about wit, identity, and social value. In a world dominated by older, more experienced figures, the folk tale reserves its admiration for the young liar with a sharp tongue and an inexhaustible imagination.

Comic Performance and the Oral Tradition

The tale *Laž za opkladu* is a written record of a traditional Serbian folktale; it is, above all, a vestige of oral performance, embedded in a long-standing tradition of verbal contests, comic boasting, and situational playfulness within Balkan folk culture. To grasp the full impact of the story, it must be understood as a performed event, an exchange shaped by audience, occasion, and expectations. Its rhythm, escalation, absurdity, and punchline all reflect but *delivery* (as well as narrative design), rooted in performative storytelling practices that long predate literacy.

In Serbian oral tradition, verbal contests form a robust sub-genre of narrative activity. This includes *nadgornjavanje* (verbal duels), *lagarije* (tall tales), riddling sessions, and boast-based challenges commonly seen during *prela*, *posijela*, and other communal evening gatherings (Koljević 1991, p. 11). These forms of spoken folklore were less about content than delivery, with the performer's wit, pacing, and memory serving as measures of prestige. In this setting, a tale like *Laž za opkladu* is not recited solemnly; we could say it was *played*. Its humour would have emerged from the words themselves as well from gesture, tone, mimicry, and comic timing. In this sense, the tale belongs to a living, embodied tradition of folk drama.

At the centre of this verbal stage stands the *ćoso* (the beardless man) whose figure, recurrent in South Slavic oral narratives, carries layers of symbolic

and comic meaning. In folk tradition, *ćoso* often represents a mixture of mock authority and comic vulnerability. His beardlessness marks him physically and metaphorically: he is older, possibly impotent, possibly wise, but always marked out as 'other'. The *ćoso* frequently appears as a figure who attempts to assert authority but is undone by ridicule or trickery. In *Laž za opkladu*, the *ćoso* opens the narrative with apparent benevolence, offering the boy a turn at the mill and suggesting they share a loaf. But this generosity masks a trap: the *ćoso* proposes the contest to win the whole bread, confident he can outlie the child. His defeat is thus a ritual humiliation of the elder by the younger, played out through performance.

Key to the tale's impact is its careful use of repetition and build-up. The boy's journey through multiple mills, each of which inexplicably contains the same *ćoso*, sets the rhythm early. The repeated encounters establish a pattern that primes the listener for the punchline structure of the final lie. Each exaggeration in the boy's monologue follows the same model: an impossible event is introduced (riding a rooster, climbing millet to heaven), then resolved with an even more implausible detail (God baking *proja*, using hair as rope – a Serbian Rapunzel, perhaps?). The listener does not pause to question plausibility and is invited to follow the tale's cadence and imaginative leap. This aligns with what Milman Parry observed in his analysis of oral epic formula: repetition in oral narrative functions as a memory aid and a rhythm cue, guiding both teller and audience, as a 'special device for supplying the dramatic element' (Parry 1971, p. 289). Moreover, the tale's pacing obeys the principles of what Richard Bauman identifies as 'performance keys' (more exactly, the 'keying of performance', as it was originally put), discursive cues that distinguish storytelling from ordinary speech (Bauman 1975, p. 295). These include the adoption of formulaic openings or closings, shifts in tone, exaggerated gesture, or the assumption of character voices. In the case of *Laž za opkladu*, the boy's switch into the lie ('Кад ја бија у младо доба стари човек') likely serves such a function. It announces a transition from mimetic narrative into heightened verbal play. The statement, paradoxical by design, functions as a signal to the audience that the performer is now entering a game space governed by audacity.

Dell Hymes' theory of the SPEAKING model (setting, participants, ends, act sequence, key, instrumentalities, norms, and genre) offers a useful frame to understand this tale as performance (Hymes 2013). The setting is likely a communal domestic environment, such as a winter evening gathering. The participants include a knowing audience, possibly intergenerational. The *end* or purpose is comic entertainment and, perhaps, social commentary. The act sequence unfolds in structured absurdities, building to a grotesque punchline. The key is playful, ironic. The instrumentalities are oral, improvised, possibly supported by gesture and mimicry. The norms demand verbal ingenuity, and the genre is a contest-tale.

This framing helps explain why the tale's expletive punchline is crude but performatively satisfying. In a communal setting, this closing phrase would likely have elicited laughter for its content and for its inevitability. The audience has followed the rhythm, accepted the premise, and now receives the payoff. The sudden appearance of the *tefter*, the ledger that settles the wager in absurdly bureaucratic fashion, provides a final satirical jab. In a society where written law is distant or oppressive (illegible to the local population, in this case, Ottoman), the idea that even divine justice favours the liar reinforces the folk belief in cunning over hierarchy.

The motif of the verbal duel as social levelling device is not unique to Serbian culture. Comparative examples in Turkic, Persian, and Arabic folklore show similar patterns. The *Nasreddin Hodja* corpus, for instance, contains multiple tales in which absurd statements or clever reversals challenge the authority of scholars, merchants, or judges. In such tales, humour equalises as much as it entertains. It gives the powerless a rhetorical tool to resist. As Jack Goody has argued, oral cultures often develop elaborate forms of memorised verbal play to counterbalance their lack of institutional authority (Goody 1987, pp. 40–51). *Laž za opkladu* fits this pattern precisely. It is a folk parable in which performance determines justice. The truth does not.

Even the child's role in the tale confirms this performative dimension. The boy is both exceedingly clever and a brilliant *performer*. His lies are shaped for an

audience. He escalates deliberately, with a plan, choosing each impossible image to one-up his rival. In doing so, he enters into what Bauman calls a 'communicative competence', that is, a social contract with his listeners that affirms his authority within the rules of the storytelling moment (Bauman 1984, 38).

One can even imagine the performer of the tale, perhaps a grandfather or a young adult, assuming both roles in narration: the voice of the *ćoso*, slow and boastful; the voice of the boy, quick and absurd. The fox defecating a legal record becomes a theatrical gesture, told with flourish, perhaps even mimed. This dynamic is central to oral tradition: the tale is spoken and enacted.

The tale of *Laž za opkladu* must consequently be read as more than a static text but as a living event as well, as it is performed, shaped, and remembered within the frameworks of Serbian oral culture. Its effectiveness lies in its delivery. Its humour, its escalation, and its triumph are inseparable from the oral conditions of its telling. As such, it offers scholars a window into narrative form and into the performative genius of the folk mind.

Social Function and Cultural Values

The tale *Laž za opkladu* serves as more than a record of comic imagination or narrative virtuosity, since it also functions (like much traditional oral literature) as a mirror of social relationships and cultural values within the rural Serbian community from which it originates. Under the guise of humour, it dramatizes power, tension, and the imaginative possibilities of resistance. It offers its audience laughter, but also a subtle commentary on how to live and survive in a world where formal authority may not always serve justice, and where survival often depends less on strength or status than on quick thinking and verbal cunning.

At the centre of the tale is a contest of *wits*, framed by age difference and implicitly by social rank. The *ćoso*, whose figure in Serbian folklore has already been noted as a comic elder, enters the narrative with an apparent advantage. He is physically quicker (arriving before the boy at every mill) and rhetorically

confident, proposing the wager with assurance. The boy, meanwhile, is younger, on an errand of obedience, and initially hesitant. But by the end of the tale, it is the child who triumphs by imagination, where, in many a case, the protagonist would excel in strength and moral righteousness. The world is inverted. Age, which typically commands respect in patriarchal rural culture, is here rendered foolish. Youth, which is expected to obey, emerges victorious.

This inversion is central to the tale's function. It belongs to what Mikhail Bakhtin called the *carnivalesque*: a momentary overturning of norms, a licensed chaos through which social pressures are released and transformed (Bakhtin 1984). During *carnival*, fools wear crowns, kings wear rags, and the ridiculous becomes the new standard of truth. *Laž za opkladu* is precisely this sort of moment. The story is a temporary world in which the logic of everyday life is replaced by absurdity, and it is within this inversion that deeper cultural commentary is located.

Serbian rural communities, like many traditional societies, were structured by strong hierarchies: age, male authority, family order, religious tradition. Obedience and deference were the expected modes of behaviour, particularly from children to elders. Yet these expectations did not erase social tensions or frustrations. Folktales such as *Laž za opkladu* offered an outlet for these feelings. They allowed listeners to laugh at those who usually wielded power. The *ćoso*, here a stand-in for age, tradition, and even bureaucracy (recall the ledger at the end), is outmatched by the very child he might have expected to dominate.

The tale's mode of triumph – verbal exaggeration – is itself a folk ideal. In the absence of institutional power, rural communities often placed great value on *snalažljivost* (resourcefulness, adaptability, cleverness). The boy's success is the application of narrative ingenuity. He constructs an alternate world in which millet grows to heaven and foxes produce legal documents. These are stories, and in the oral culture of the Balkans, storytelling was itself a kind of power. As Slavica Ranković noted, Serbian oral tradition valued the *pričalac*, the storyteller, as a figure of prestige, whose command of language conferred authority in its

own right as a ‘custodian of traditions’ (Ranković 2006, p. 149; Albert B. Lord’s theory of the epic singer – though focused more broadly – applies strongly to Serbian oral culture as well, emphasizing how mastery of traditional formulaic language bestowed both aesthetic and social prestige; Lord 1960). The boy, by this standard, becomes a *pričalac* within the tale, and his victory is also a meta-narrative triumph. Laughter, in this context, serves a dual purpose. On the surface, it entertains. But it also *regulates*. As Henri Bergson argued in his essay *Laughter*, comic moments often function as correctives to social rigidity: ‘Laughter has a social meaning’ (Bergson 1911, Chapter I). In *Laž za opkladu*, laughter emerges from the absurdity of the boy’s claims as much as it does from the recognition of their purpose. The *ćoso* is punished by being the butt of a joke. He is rendered ridiculous, and his defeat is public and humiliating.

Similarly, Sigmund Freud, in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, proposed that comic narrative allows for the temporary expression of forbidden or repressed desires. Jokes, he argued, bypass censorship by couching their transgressions in humour (Freud 1905, 1805). In the case of *Laž za opkladu*, the taboo may be manifold: disrespect for elders, delight in scatology, mockery of legal authority. The final punchline is more than vulgarity. It is a linguistic release, a cathartic inversion of dignity. The loaf, symbol of nourishment and success, is awarded to the speaker; the *ćoso* receives filth. This punchline, especially when performed aloud, reclaims power for the weak, ridicules the strong, and allows the audience to experience a world turned inside out.

This mechanism is not unique to Serbian folklore, though its expression here is culturally specific. In rural Balkan culture, where bread was both staple and symbol, a contest over *pogača* resonates beyond the literal. To win the bread is to win the right to eat, to live, to speak. The *ćoso*’s loss is thus a symbolic removal from community respect. Moreover, the setting of the tale anchors it in the everyday world of the village. The story offers a fantastical rewriting of the familiar.

The grotesque image of the fox, the ledger, and the bodily release ties this emotional lesson together with comic closure. The world of the tale is complete.

The hierarchy has been inverted, order has been restored by disorder, and the loaf has been awarded to the rightful (if ridiculous) victor.

Laž za opkladu, then, is far more than a curiosity of Serbian oral literature. It is a vibrant instance of how humour functions as both *release* and *regulation*, as both *narrative form* and *social message*. It teaches that truth may not always triumph, but that cleverness can. It allows laughter to rebalance social tensions and offers its audience a moment of imaginative freedom. And in its final absurd image, it crystallises a core value of the culture that preserved it: that the storyteller, not the authority figure, deserves the last word.

Comparative Case Studies

The tale *Laž za opkladu* aligns closely with a widespread class of folktales in which characters engage in ludicrous contests of boasting and lying. Though classified as ATU 1920 in the international index, the motif is not limited to Slavic oral traditions. Analogous stories are found across Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas, each adapting the basic structure to fit local humour, cultural references, and modes of storytelling.

In British folk tradition, the Yorkshire and Scottish 'lying contests' often feature rustic men exaggerating the size of cabbages or the length of winter. Katharine Briggs, in her dictionary of British folklore, records tales where liars compete to convince each other of implausible harvests and weather events, with the winning lie frequently undercutting the logic of its predecessors (Briggs & Tongue, 1968). One Scottish variant, recorded in the Highlands, tells of a man who rides a flea to market and uses a thimble to water his field. As in the Serbian tale, the narrative escalates with surreal detail and absurd self-consistency, blurring the line between invention and parody.

German *Lügenmärchen*, or 'lying tales', are perhaps the most formally structured examples of this genre. *Lügenmärchen* are known for their formal structure, which is designed to systematically violate everyday logic. This is achieved by

creating a narrative that follows a consistent schema, similar to the structure of forgery tales, where the interactions between characters follow a dominant direction despite the illogical premises (Ziolkowski 2003, Lenain 2015). The absurdity, like in *Laž za opkladu*, lies in the premise and in the methodical delivery. This resemblance suggests a common underlying impulse: to test the limits of believability in oral performance.

A distant but conceptually related tradition emerges in the Turkish Nasreddin Hodja cycle. Though Hodja's tales tend to revolve around wit and paradox rather than boasting, several stories show the Hodja delivering comic exaggerations to mock pedantry or hypocrisy. In one tale, the Hodja claims he can see in the dark because he carries a lantern – when asked why he then needs light, he replies: 'So others won't bump into me.' These are not lies in the ATU 1920 sense, yet the logic-bending mechanism is shared. As scholarship has noted, Hodja's tales often reveal a peasant's answer to bureaucracy and empty authority (Bynum 1989), a dynamic that closely mirrors the Serbian boy outwitting the *ćoso*.

American frontier 'tall tales' carry this exaggeration to nationalistic proportions. The adventures of Davy Crockett or Pecos Bill often feature larger-than-life feats: riding tornadoes, lassoing rivers, cooking entire forests in a frying pan. As Richard Dorson argued in *Man and Beast in American Comic Legend*, these stories emerge from frontier conditions, where boasting became a communal form of entertainment and masculine bonding (Dorson 1982). Unlike the child hero in *Laž za opkladu*, however, American tall tale protagonists are often adult men representing human dominance over nature.

African-American folk traditions, particularly those shaped during slavery, also include 'lying tales, though they are often embedded in trickster cycles. In tales of High John de Conquer or Brer Rabbit, speech becomes a survival tool. According to Lawrence Levine, such tales allowed enslaved people to invert their social reality and temporarily escape subjugation through humour (Levine 1977, p. 14). While not direct analogues to the Serbian tale, the function (subversive, playful, and primarily communal) is strikingly similar.

Geography, literacy, and social function all shape the variations across traditions. In pre-literate or semi-literate societies, such as rural Serbia in the 19th century, memory and verbal improvisation were paramount (VijayaKumari 2018). The tale *Laž za opkladu* reflects this, with its elaborate, breathless structure that lends itself to performance. The story also depends on local idioms, such as the recurring motif of the *ćoso*, a figure recognisable and faintly ridiculous to Serbian audiences. In contrast, in societies with written traditions, like 19th century Germany, *Lügenmärchen* were often codified in collections, such as those by the Brothers Grimm, and stylised accordingly.

The social context further determines the tone. British and German lies are largely rustic and observational; American lies are heroic; Serbian lies are surreal and linguistically inventive. But across all variants, exaggeration becomes a mode of cultural expression. Margrethe Bruun Vaage, for instance, introduced the concept of ‘fictional relief’, where audiences of fictional works are temporarily relieved from moral obligations, allowing them to engage with narratives without the burden of real-world consequences (Vaage, 2013). Therefore, when the Serbian boy in *Laž za opkladu* recounts how he ‘took his head off to break ice’ (‘онда ја скинем моју главу, те њом пробијем лед’) or how he ‘rode a rooster across the sea’ (‘оседлам пијевца, па узјашем на њега’), he enters a universal tradition. Yet the manner, rhythm, and imagery remain distinctly Balkan. The tale is a culturally inflected performance of resistance and imagination.

Theoretical Considerations: Lying, Truth, and Folkloristics

At the centre of *Laž za opkladu* lies a fundamental paradox that has long preoccupied folklorists: the use of fictional or deliberately untrue statements to produce something culturally meaningful and, in a sense, truthful. The story, in which a boy defeats an elder in a contest of lies, draws its narrative power precisely from its transparent falsity. Yet the tale, far from being meaningless, resonates deeply within its tradition, affirming comic pleasure and a kind of communal logic grounded in performance, memory, and oral expectation.

Linda Dégh was among the first to articulate this dynamic systematically. In her pivotal study of legend and belief, she noted that truth in folklore is determined by credibility within the group ('every utterance that seeks credibility', Dégh 2001, p. 79). Even when audiences know a story to be "untrue" in a literal sense, they can invest in it emotionally, socially, and symbolically. In *Laž za opkladu*, the audience does not believe the boy truly removed his head to break the ice, nor that his millet grew high enough to reach the heavens ('оно моје просо, што се просуло у море... узрасло до неба'). Yet these are not failures of storytelling – they are its conditions.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett deepened this insight by asking how folklore functions as a medium of knowledge. 'Verbal art in performance,' she writes, 'exists at the intersection of the fictive and the real' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1989, p. 133). The boy's absurd lies in *Laž za opkladu* serve as demonstrations of imaginative power, linguistic dexterity, and narrative mastery. The punchline is thus above being simply comical. It resolves the tale's logic by confirming that verbal skill, not status, determines social outcome.

This reversal recalls what Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962) famously called 'bricolage': the use of available narrative fragments to construct a new, but coherent, world. The boy's impossible story is not entirely random. It is bound by internal consistency, narrative callbacks, and rhythmic pacing. The roasted millet in heaven, the frozen water, the missing head, the fox with the ledger: each motif reinforces the last, escalating the absurdity while maintaining the logic of folktale form. If the tale were truly random, it would collapse. Instead, it builds tension and release through exaggeration, climax, and resolution.

The story thus operates as a meta-narrative: a tale about tales, and the conditions under which they are told, judged, and remembered. The lie contest is a dramatization of oral tradition itself, where the power to fabricate, reshape, and redirect meaning is the mark of a true narrator. As Ruth Bottigheimer notes, folktales often include moments where storytelling itself becomes the object of the tale (Bottigheimer 1989, pp. 65–68). In this case, the boy wins by knowing how to tell the biggest, most consistent, and funniest lie.

This touches on performance theory in folkloristics. Richard Bauman's framing of storytelling as a 'communicative event' highlights the social calibration between narrator and audience. It is not enough to lie; one must lie in a way that meets audience expectations and maintains their suspension of disbelief, even when disbelief is central to the joke (Bauman 1975). The contest in *Laž za opkladu* reveals a shared understanding between speaker and listener: we both know this is untrue, but we are bound by the rules of telling and the pleasure of escalation.

Freud's interpretation of jokes as socially sanctioned outlets for repressed energies (Freud 1905) may also illuminate the tale's appeal. The absurdity is liberating because it exposes the arbitrariness of social convention. Lying, here, is not a vice. It is a sanctioned, even admired, form of cleverness. It permits the audience to laugh at the rules that make the world as it is.

Laž za opkladu is a story about stories; how they are made, how they function, and what they mean. It insists that truth is not a precondition for meaning. Instead, it proposes a folk epistemology in which exaggeration, absurdity, and comic excess become valid modes of insight. In the end, the tale reaffirms the power of fiction to reflect and to shape communal truths.

Conclusion

Laž za opkladu is a Serbian folktale that does more than amuse. It teaches, questions, and reshapes the listener's relationship to narrative, truth, and tradition. Through the ludic frame of a lying contest between an elder and a child, the tale reveals the enduring folkloric strategy of exaggeration. This is no mere stylistic flourish; it is a deeply embedded cognitive and cultural practice. As we have seen, the logic of *Laž za opkladu* emerges because of its absurdities. The serial episodes (millet growing into the sky, a rooster being saddled and ridden, a head used to break ice, a fox defecating a ledger) operate within a consistent, intensifying structure that honours narrative coherence even as it parodies it.

The tale's strength lies in how it balances nonsense with form. It understands, instinctively, what Vladimir Propp observed in the morphology of folktales: that a sequence of actions governed by recognisable functions provides the narrative engine, while the content can veer into the fantastical (Propp 1968). Yet herein are the functions themselves rendered comic. There are no trials for the boy in which he would need to slay dragons; instead, he outlies the elder, subverting the traditional heroic script through verbal wit. If Propp's hero travels across kingdoms, the hero of *Laž za opkladu* journeys through narrative logic itself, stretching it to its breaking point, only to find that it holds.

Equally vital is the story's function within oral tradition. It is a tale to be told aloud, shared between people who recognise its internal game. Richard Bauman's understanding of storytelling as a performance, shaped by audience expectations and social context, is essential here (Bauman 1975). The tale rewards listeners who recognise formula, rhythm, escalation, and punchline. Each successive absurdity is anticipated, and its arrival confirms the shared cultural contract between teller and audience. The final twist is the sealing of a story-world's logic, one that reverses status and affirms skill.

What makes *Laž za opkladu* particularly valuable in the folkloristic canon is its capacity to operate on several levels at once. It entertains. It disrupts. It invites reflection on who has the right to speak, to claim truth, and to win. The boy's victory is about taking the tools of tradition and using them in a new key. This is why the tale persists. It has the durability of all good oral literature: an ability to change without losing its bones.

As a social commentary, the tale gently mocks the solemnity of authority figures. The elder (ćoso) is not wicked, though he is predictable, and he is beaten by someone younger, sharper, and hungrier for the tale itself. We might see this as part of a broader genre of verbal duels and lying contests that allow listeners to rehearse subversion in safe, comic forms. Like Nasreddin Hodja's riddles, or British bragging contests from Yorkshire or Scotland, or the frontier yarns of American tall tale heroes, *Laž za opkladu* plays with truth to

say something honest about human desire for agency and recognition (Bendix 2009; Dégh 1995).

From a theoretical standpoint, the tale helps us see fiction as a form of knowledge. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argued, folklore constructs ‘truths’ through aesthetic, performative, and symbolic means (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1989). It is not interested in whether millet really grows to heaven, though it is interested in what it means for a child to say that it does, and to do so better than an adult. In this way, *Laž za opkladu* becomes a story about stories, about their power to outlast, to outwit, and to transform.

Looking forward, this tale invites further research in several directions. One promising area lies in exploring children’s use of exaggeration and tall tales in peer folklore, especially how they use humour to test boundaries and establish status. Another is digital folklore: the rise of ‘copy-pasta’, internet hoaxes, and ironic storytelling online demonstrates that the logic of *Laž za opkladu* is far from obsolete. The techniques of escalation, hyperbole, and narrative baiting live on, albeit with new idioms and audiences. The folklorist’s task is to preserve stories, but also to track the forms that continue to express their enduring themes.

In closing, *Laž za opkladu* deserves its place in the international catalogue of tale types as because it represents ATU 1920 so clearly, as much as because it pushes the genre to its limit. It does what the best folktales do: it distills the improbable into something recognisable, something shared. It affirms that lying, when done right, can be the sincerest form of storytelling.

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The Impact of Macedonian Reforms on the Austro-Hungarian Annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (1903-1908)

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Abstract: The internationalization of the Macedonian issue and the outbreak of the Bosnian Crisis were closely linked to the foreign policy of Austria-Hungary. During the period of the Macedonian Reforms, the initially fragile alliance between Austria-Hungary and Italy was severely tested by disagreements over the occupation of Macedonian zones and their competition for regional hegemony. The original cooperative relationship between Austria-Hungary and Russia, which was committed to maintaining regional peace, became unsustainable as the reform process deepened and exposed structural disputes between the two countries over their interests in the Balkans. Germany, finding itself increasingly isolated internationally and fearing abandonment by its key ally, reluctantly abandoned its efforts to restore the traditional German-Russian friendship and to cultivate favorable German-Turkish relations. Instead, Germany was compelled to firmly support Austria-Hungary's Balkan policy, which led to a pronounced shift in German-Austrian primacy within the alliance. The realignment of relations among the Great Powers during the Macedonian reforms allowed Austria-Hungary to carry out its plan to annex the provinces of Bosnia-

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Herzegovina. However, the Bosnian Crisis, triggered by the annexation, further reshaped the relations between the Great Powers and the Balkan states, ultimately paving the way for the outbreak of the First World War.

Keywords: Austria-Hungary, Macedonian Reforms, Bosnian Crisis, Diplomatic Games, Bosnia-Herzegovina

Introduction

The Bosnian Crisis of 1908–1909 was the direct result of Austria-Hungary's aggressive foreign policy. The crisis profoundly affected the balance of power in the Balkans and triggered fundamental changes in the international system. In its aftermath, the previously cooperative relationship between Austria-Hungary and Russia over Macedonian reforms deteriorated significantly. Italy gradually distanced itself from the Triple Alliance and developed friendly relations with the Triple Entente. The remaining trust between the two military blocs evaporated, and the situation slid irreversibly toward an eventual rupture. As one scholar observed, the Bosnian Crisis exacerbated the confrontation between the two imperialist blocs and served as a prelude to the First World War (Antonoff 2006, p. 2).

For a long time, academic research has focused on the process of the Bosnian Crisis and the realignments of Great Powers relations before and after it. However, existing studies have failed to explore the intrinsic link between the Macedonian reforms, which were led by Austria-Hungary, and its subsequent decision to annex the two provinces. This paper examines the shifting great-power relations among Austria-Hungary and Italy, Austria-Hungary and Russia, and Germany and Austria-Hungary in the context of the Macedonian reforms. Drawing on archival materials from Britain, France, Germany, and other countries, it seeks to uncover the internal logic behind Austria-Hungary's active leadership of the Macedonian reforms and its annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Furthermore, this paper analyzes the impact of the Bosnian Crisis on the European political landscape, aiming to deepen scholarly understanding of the adjustments in Great Powers relations before the First World War, the complex situation in the Balkans, and the evolution of the Near Eastern question.

The Protagonists of Geopolitical Strife: The Austro-Hungarian Factor in the Evolution of the Bosnia-Herzegovina Issue and the Internationalization of the Macedonian Issue

The connection between Bosnia-Herzegovina and Austria-Hungary originated during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878. To prevent Austria-Hungary from intervening in the conflict, Russia promised the former the right to occupy the two provinces at an opportune moment. However, the Treaty of San Stefano, signed by Russia and the Ottoman Empire, disregarded Austria-Hungary's claims, provoking strong opposition from the latter. The subsequent Treaty of Berlin not only annulled the Treaty of San Stefano but also granted Austria-Hungary the right to occupy the two provinces and station troops in Novi Pazar. To legitimize this right and expand its influence in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Austria-Hungary adopted a series of measures. On April 21, 1879, the Austro-Turkish agreement was signed, compelling the Ottoman Empire to recognize Austria-Hungary's right to occupy and govern Bosnia-Herzegovina and maintain a military garrison in the Novi Pazar region (Yavuz and Sluglett 2010, p. 58). On December 20 of the same year, Austria-Hungary passed a law stipulating that all customs-related orders required the approval of both the Austrian and Hungarian governments. Furthermore, Bosnia-Herzegovina was to have a joint Ministry for Foreign Affairs to handle all customs and trade matters with other countries. The law of February 1880 granted the two governments constitutional powers of control over the affairs of the occupied provinces, enunciating the principle that any proposed change in the relationship between the occupied provinces and the monarchy must receive the assent of both the Austrian and Hungarian legislatures (BDFA 1991, vol. 34, pp. 146-147). In addition, Austria-Hungary intensified its religious and cultural penetration of Bosnia-Herzegovina. According to statistics, by the early 20th century, the public servants in Bosnia-Herzegovina were almost entirely Austrian or Hungarian subjects; even after years of educational development, the native population accounted for only 27% (BDFA 1991, vol. 34, p. 145). This indicates that under the long-term governance of Austria-Hungary, the two provinces had already

become an inseparable part of the former. At this point, although the Ottoman Empire remained the nominal suzerain, it was widely recognized that it had lost Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Novi Pazar region forever.

The internationalization of the Macedonian issue was a dynamic and evolving process. Throughout this process, Austria-Hungary played a crucial role.

First, Austria-Hungary sought to prevent the Balkan states from gaining regional dominance and exploited their internal conflicts to expand its own influence. This was most evident in its relations with Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece. In 1881, Austria-Hungary formed an alliance with Serbia through the Austro-Serbian secret treaty. This treaty promised to support Serbia's claims for greater rights and interests in the Balkans, surpassing those of its rivals, Greece and Bulgaria. Article 7 specifically stated that Austria-Hungary would not oppose Serbia's acquisition of territory on its southern borders, with the exception of the province of Novi Pazar. This southern border referred mainly to the province of Kosovo in northern Macedonia, as Macedonia was then divided into three provinces: Monastir in the west, Kosovo in the north, and Salonika in the south. In 1899, it was further clarified that Serbia would expand its territory "as far as conditions permit, in the direction of the Vardar Valley" (Wilkinson 1951, p. 95). Furthermore, Austria-Hungary actively discouraged expansionist efforts by Greece and Bulgaria. On the one hand, it worked to dissuade Bulgaria from supporting Macedonian revolutionary organizations in order to prevent the regional crisis from escalating. In July 1895, the French ambassador in Constantinople stated that Austria-Hungary would do everything in its power to prevent the spread of the Macedonian disturbances and would not give Bulgarian agitators any reason to intervene (DDF 1951, 1^{re} Série, Tome 12, pp. 106-107). In January 1899, the Austro-Hungarian ambassador in Constantinople, Calice, informed Bulgarian representatives that they should not expect any support or sympathy from Austria-Hungary for their involvement in Macedonian revolutionary actions (GP 1924, 12. Band, Zweite Hälfte, S. 523-524). On the other hand, Austria-Hungary did not support Greece's attempts to expand its power into southern Macedonia and establish hegemony in the Aegean region.

In 1895, Greece declared that it would not survive if it lost Macedonia, which it considered the acropolis of Athens and the forefront of Greek culture (Akhund 1998, p. 55). In July 1896, Greece organized several expeditions to Macedonia to establish its influence, but ultimately had to withdraw due to lack of support from the Great Powers, including opposition from Austria-Hungary.

In addition, Austria-Hungary pressured the Ottoman government to implement necessary reforms in Macedonia in order to address the grievances of the local population. After the signing of the Treaty of San Stefano, Austria-Hungary promised to help the Ottoman Empire restore order in Macedonia, proposed that the latter protect both Muslims and Christians, and also forced Serbia and Montenegro to accept changes to the treaty (DDF 1930, 1^{re} Série, Tome 2, p. 308). In October 1895, Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister Goluchowski expressed a desire to use the favorable moment of the Eastern Crisis to push for reforms in the Macedonian region. He believed that if the issue were resolved, Bulgaria would no longer have a reason to involve itself in Macedonian affairs (GP 1924, 10. Band, S. 145). In November of the same year, the Austrian Emperor also expressed concern about the growing revolutionary movement in Macedonia and warned that the situation could become dangerous if the Ottoman government did not establish control in the Balkans (GP 1924, 10. Band, S. 163). This implied that the Ottoman government needed to implement reforms promptly to prevent the spread of popular discontent in Macedonia.

Ultimately, Austria-Hungary collaborated with other Great Powers to maintain its dominant position in the Balkans. In the late 19th century, as the Macedonian national liberation movement gained momentum and crises erupted in the Near East, Austria-Hungary, along with Great Britain and Italy, exerted pressure on the Bulgarian government to refrain from supporting the Macedonian revolt. This was crucial, as without the support of the Great Powers, the revolt could not have succeeded (GP 1924, 12. Band, Erste Hälfte, S. 125). In 1897, Austria-Hungary and Russia reached an agreement to maintain the status quo in the Balkans, avoid interference in the internal affairs of Balkan states, and cooperate diplomatically, which gave Austria-Hungary the freedom to act in Macedonia. In

January 1899, Goluchowski discussed with Russian Foreign Minister Muravyov the possibility of a Turkish-Bulgarian war. He stated that if Bulgaria emerged victorious, it would occupy Macedonia, and if the Ottoman Empire won, it could lead to a Europe-wide crisis, neither outcome was desired by either country. Thus, joint Austro-Russian pressure on the Balkan states could prevent a possible conflict between them (GP 1924, 12. Band, Zweite Hälfte, S. 523).

At the turn of the 20th century, the situation in Macedonia was rapidly deteriorating. To prevent a potential war among the Balkan states over the region and to protect their own spheres of influence, Austria-Hungary and Russia decided to intervene. Goluchowski announced that the Austro-Russian governments were working on a plan to improve the administration of the Macedonian provinces under the control of the Ottoman Empire. This plan would be presented to the signatories of the Treaty of Berlin, who would oversee the reforms implemented by the Ottoman government (BD 1929, vol. 4, p. 43). On February 21, 1903, the two countries officially submitted their proposal, known as “the Vienna Scheme” (BD 1928, vol. 5, pp. 51-53; DDF 1931, 2^e Série, Tome 3, pp. 115-118), to the Ottoman government. This marked the formalization of the Macedonian question as a European concern. Later that year, on October 2, the Austro-Hungarian and Russian governments proposed “the Mürzsteg Programme” (ASEE 1904, No. 2 (1904), p. 51) in an attempt to quell regional unrest. This program included even more extensive reforms. However, the Great Powers were more concerned with securing their own interests in the Balkans and engaged in complicated diplomatic maneuvers surrounding the implementation of the reform program.

Fragile Alliance: The Increasingly Fierce Struggle for Regional Hegemony between Austria-Hungary and Italy

In the early 1880s, Italy faced bitter colonial disputes with France in North Africa. Consequently, Italy accepted Germany’s invitation to join the Triple Alliance, which aimed to isolate France. This decision required Italy to temporarily set

aside its differences with Austria-Hungary. However, the Austro-Italian alliance was fragile from the start due to territorial disputes and conflicting interests. Since the unification of Italy, a growing trend of irredentism had emerged in the country. This movement sought to acquire Italian-speaking provinces under Austria-Hungary's control (Lowe and Marzari 1975, p. 11). From Italy's perspective, its legitimate claims within the alliance, including Trento and Trieste, were a logical consequence of irredentism (Bosworth 1979, p. 11). This made genuinely friendly Austro-Italian relations extremely difficult, as it was uncertain when war might break out between the two countries. Additionally, there were significant disagreements between Austria-Hungary and Italy regarding their respective expansion plans in the Balkans. This tension was particularly evident in the late 19th century, when both countries vied for influence in Albania, straining relations within the Triple Alliance and between the two powers. Austria-Hungary viewed Albania's independence as a means to counter Pan-Slavism and prevent Serbian and Montenegrin expansion in the western Balkans, while Italy saw Albania as a strategic location for economic investment and an opportunity to expand its interests in Southeastern Europe (Roselli 2006, p. 3). These conflicting goals ultimately led Austria-Hungary to regard Italy as its natural enemy in the Adriatic Sea, the Balkans, and territories such as Trento and Trieste. As a result, Austria-Hungary was willing to resort to a preventive war if necessary to eliminate this perceived threat (Herrmann 1992, p. 227). The alliance between the two countries became increasingly fragile as the Macedonian issue gained international attention and as reforms deepened the divide between them.

First, regarding the partition of Macedonia, Austria-Hungary opposed Italy's acquisition of Monastir, a western Macedonian province neighboring Albania. Calice argued that the formation of Christian gendarmerie battalions in Albanian areas, which had a predominantly Muslim population, would provoke violent riots among the local population, contradicting the original intention of the Mürzsteg Programme. Consequently, Albania needed to be excluded from the reform program, and it would be preferable for Italy to occupy Serres in the province of Salonika (GP 1927, 22. Band, S. 102). Goluchowski also remarked on

Italy's greed for Albania and its desire to interfere in everything (DDF 1932, 2^e Série, Tome 4, p. 442). Austria-Hungary's opposition to the Italian occupation of Monastir was based on the following considerations: since the Great Powers had already agreed to the reorganization of the gendarmerie by an Italian general, granting Monastir to Italy would only increase Italian influence in Macedonia and Albania. Furthermore, Italy had a marital relationship with Montenegro, which would result in Italy controlling the entire Adriatic Sea, thereby inevitably blocking Austro-Hungarian maritime trade routes. Italy opposed the Austro-Hungarian advance toward the southern tip of the Balkan Peninsula and sought a share in Monastir in order to strengthen its control over Albania. To achieve this goal, Italy actively sought the support of Britain and France. Italy expressed to France that it hoped for a Franco-Italian consensus to address the issue, given Austria-Hungary's preference for a dominant role in the Balkans (DDF 1932, 2^e Série, Tome 4, p. 410). France replied that it hoped for open communication among Britain, France, and Italy to avoid unnecessary disputes in the Balkans. As a result, France not only rejected Calice's proposal for Italy to occupy Salonika but also stated that the best way to resolve the Macedonian issue was for Austria-Hungary and Russia to develop a reform program that would be approved by the other Great Powers (DDF 1932, 2^e Série, Tome 4, p. 431). Britain showed its willingness to coordinate with Italy to push for the implementation of Macedonian reforms (BD 1928, vol. 5, p. 68). Additionally, if Austria-Hungary insisted on occupying Üsküb (Skopje) in Macedonia, Britain would support Italian possession of Monastir (DDF 1932, 2^e Série, Tome 4, pp. 454-456). In the end, with German mediation, Italy gained a share of Monastir, Austria-Hungary took Üsküb, and Albania was excluded from the reforms. Although the demands of Austria-Hungary and Italy were partially met, their differences only became more pronounced in the subsequent reforms.

Second, regarding Macedonian fiscal reform, Italy was displeased that it had not been consulted before the Austro-Russian reform plan was presented, viewing this as a unilateral action that violated the spirit of the Concert of Europe established by the Treaty of Berlin, and the reform plan included only Austria-Hungary and Russia, leaving out Italy (GP 1927, 22. Band, S. 206). As

a result, Italy proposed that representatives from all signatories of the Treaty of Berlin be appointed to monitor the reform alongside the Austro-Russian representatives (GP 1927, 22. Band, S. 247). To gain support from other Great Powers, Italy actively sought cooperation with Britain. Italian Foreign Minister Tittoni told Barrère, the French ambassador in Rome, that he fully agreed with the British view that, given the failure of the Mürzsteg Programme and the critical situation in Macedonia, it was very important for the Western Powers, mainly Britain and France, to agree on concerted action (DDF 1935, 2^e Série, Tome 6, p. 79). Germany was deeply concerned about the deterioration of Austro-Italian relations. It stated that the recent Austro-Russian actions had not been communicated in advance to the other Great Powers. The supreme control over Macedonian finances made the other Great Powers subservient to Austro-Russian influence, which put Italy in an awkward position. Given the divergence of Austro-Italian relations in a number of areas, it was difficult to imagine what Austro-Russian, and especially Austro-Hungarian, measures might have been taken to irritate Italy, both in form and in essence (GP 1927, 22. Band, S. 211). As a neighbor of the Balkan states, Italy had a special interest in the region. In any case, actions taken by Austria-Hungary in the Balkans would only increase Italian distrust, and the egoistic aims of Austria-Hungary would drive Italy away from it while pushing Italy to support the Western Powers (GP 1927, 22. Band, S. 244). Britain, France, and Italy agreed to send representatives to Macedonia to take charge of the finances, hoping to force the Ottoman government to accept the proposals of the Powers by a fait accompli, an action that confirmed German suspicions (DDF 1937, 2^e Série, Tome 7, p. 270).

In short, the Austro-Italian dispute over Macedonian reform worsened the already fragile alliance between the two countries. From the end of the 19th century, Franco-Italian relations began to ease, and the two countries started discussing the possibility of a commercial treaty and an attempt at political cooperation (BDFA 1991, vol. 24, p. 276). In November 1902, France and Italy concluded a treaty of neutrality, which weakened the position of the Triple Alliance in Italy's foreign policy. Even if the Triple Alliance had been renewed, it could not prevent the Franco-Italian rapprochement. Italy assured

France that it would not sign any military agreement or treaty involving a German attack on France (Fay 1966, p. 91). France stated that, in view of Italy's unquestionable loyalty, there was no need for the French government to seek explanations and assurances from the Italian government regarding the renewal of the Triple Alliance (BDFA 1991, vol. 24, p. 335). Furthermore, the Austro-Italian struggle for regional hegemony in the Balkans, on the one hand, drove Italy to often coordinate its actions with Britain and France on matters of Macedonian reform, aiming to prevent Austria-Hungary from dominating Balkan affairs. On the other hand, it forced Austria-Hungary to re-examine German-Austrian, Austro-Russian, and Austro-Turkish relations with the intention of maximizing its Balkan interests.

From Cooperation to Confrontation: The Collapse of the Austro-Russian Reform Framework in Macedonia

Austria-Hungary's initial determination to occupy Bosnia-Herzegovina was motivated by a desire to shorten the Austro-Turkish border, protect its fragile Dalmatian possessions, prevent the union of Serbia and Montenegro, eliminate the threat posed by Serbian expansionism, and preserve its growing economic ties with Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Orient. Ultimately, however, these motives stemmed from the ambition to maintain a central role in confronting Russia and preventing it from gaining a foothold among the Balkan Slavs or dominating the southern Balkans (Ruthner et al. 2015, pp. 24-26). As the two main rivals in the Balkans, both Austria-Hungary and Russia sought to maximize their own interests at each other's expense. When Russia shifted its focus to the Far East at the end of the 19th century, Austria-Hungary turned its attention to domestic affairs. Thus, preserving the status quo in the Balkans became a mutual goal. The Austro-Russian Agreement of 1897, brokered by Germany, aimed to enable the two countries to maintain the balance of power in the Balkans and thereby facilitate peace (Seaman 2003, p. 164). Cooperation between the two countries continued until the issue of Macedonian reforms arose.

Firstly, the British proposed sending officers to reorganize the gendarmerie. However, Austria-Hungary and Russia favored appointing a foreign general to lead the reform, with officers from each Great Power providing assistance. Russia proposed that, following the appointment of the foreign general, a note would be drafted by the Russian and Austro-Hungarian ambassadors in Constantinople, with input from the ambassadors of the other Great Powers. This note would then be distributed to the assigned officers. Additionally, Austria-Hungary stated that the overall organizational plan would be developed by the Austro-Hungarian and Russian ambassadors, with ongoing communication between them and the ambassadors of the other Great Powers (ASEE 1904, No. 2 (1904), pp. 152-153). This collaboration between Austria-Hungary and Russia, in contrast to the British approach, solidified their leading roles in the reform process.

Secondly, regarding the division of occupation zones in Macedonia, Russia, constrained by the war situation in the Far East, largely favored the Austro-Hungarian position. In a conversation with Goluchowski, Russian Foreign Minister Lamsdorff stated that despite the distractions of Asian affairs, the Tsarist government would not ignore the Macedonian issue and would be willing to provide effective assistance to Austria-Hungary in ensuring peace in the region. Furthermore, he openly acknowledged that the Russo-Japanese War would affect the two countries' stance on the Macedonian issue, potentially encouraging a belligerent attitude from the Ottoman Empire that could jeopardize the reform process (DDF 1932, 2^e Série, Tome 4, p. 399). Therefore, to secure their respective advantages, Austria-Hungary and Russia should present their agreed-upon plan to the Great Powers for discussion. This would ensure that the other Great Powers understood that even if the Mürzsteg Programme failed, it did not signify the end of the two countries' mission, and would prevent them from hoping that Austria-Hungary and Russia would surrender their dominance over Balkan affairs (DDF 1932, 2^e Série, Tome 4, p. 437).

Finally, both Austria-Hungary and Russia unanimously demanded that the Ottoman government increase the number of foreign officers and extend their

powers. The ambassadors of the two countries sent multiple joint notes to the Ottoman government, requesting that it recognized the authority of foreign officers to give orders to Turkish officers and to dismiss any imperial officers and soldiers who were not physically, intellectually, or morally qualified, or who had a history of misconduct or lack of discipline. These dismissed officers and soldiers were to be immediately transferred elsewhere and the Ottoman government also agreed to receive the necessary foreign officers and non-commissioned officers for the reorganization of the gendarmerie, as proposed by the Great Powers (ASEE 1904, No. 4 (1904), pp. 65-66). To pressure the Ottoman government into accepting the additional officers, Austria-Hungary and Russia sent officers to Macedonia without prior notice. Calice stated that the two countries would inform the Ottoman government that if it wished to conclude contracts with these new officers on the same terms as the previous ones, the embassy would be happy to accept such an arrangement. Otherwise, the new officers would be paid by their respective governments and wear national uniforms while assisting their colleagues. This procedure was required by the Mürzsteg Programme (ASEE 1905, No. 2 (1905), p. 68). Subsequently, Austria-Hungary and Russia threatened the Ottoman government with coercive measures from the Great Powers and demanded that it accept their proposals. In a joint note sent by the ambassadors of Austria-Hungary and Russia to the Ottoman government, it was stated that due to the disorder and confusion in the Macedonian provinces, it was crucial to appoint additional officers. If the Ottoman government refused to accept the proposal, the Great Powers would take joint action—an action for which France and Italy had already expressed their support (ASEE 1905, No. 2 (1905), p. 79). Ultimately, the Ottoman government was forced to agree to the Austro-Russian proposal.

With the end of the Russo-Japanese War, Russia, seeking to get rid of domestic pressure caused by its defeat in the Far East, once again shifted its diplomatic focus to the Balkans, where competition with Austria-Hungary resumed. As a result, the relationship between the two countries, which had been cooperating on Macedonian reforms, gradually broke down due to the struggle for dominance in the Balkans.

Russia took the lead in proposing judicial reform in Macedonia and actively pushed for its implementation. Austria-Hungary, however, showed little enthusiasm toward the Russian proposal. This was due not only to the structural conflicts between the two countries in the Balkans but also to the growing rivalry between Austria-Hungary and Serbia over Bosnia-Herzegovina, which diminished Macedonia's importance in Austria-Hungary's foreign strategic plans. The Austro-Hungarian occupation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1878 had prevented Serbia from expanding westward, leaving Serbia with no option but to temporarily recover its claim over the two provinces (Glenny 2012, p. 148). However, after the coup d'état of 1903, Serbia moved toward a diplomatic course of confrontation with Austria-Hungary, seeking Russian protection and gaining support from its neighbors for the new government. This intensified the rivalry between Austria-Hungary and Serbia over Bosnia-Herzegovina. Additionally, Austria-Hungary hoped to make concessions to the Ottoman Empire regarding Macedonian reforms in order to secure greater rights and interests in the future. Furthermore, Germany's stance on Macedonian reform influenced Austria-Hungary's foreign policy. On one hand, Germany wanted Austria-Hungary to give more control to the Ottoman government and not pressure it further (GP 1927, 22. Band, S. 404-407). On the other hand, in light of the agreements among Britain, France, and Russia, Germany realized that it was isolated and could neither break the Franco-Russian alliance nor restore its traditional friendship with Russia. To change this situation, Germany supported Austria-Hungary's Balkan policy, thereby allowing Austria-Hungary to pursue a more active foreign policy. Finally, the drawbacks of the Austro-Hungarian dual model of rule became increasingly evident and hindered the implementation of its foreign policy, weakening its position in the Macedonian judicial reform. It can be said that the establishment of dualism became a permanent obstacle to systematic change in the empire (Roshwald 2001, p. 12).

In January 1907, Austria-Hungary and Russia jointly submitted a draft of judicial reform to the Ottoman government. The latter expressed its willingness to cooperate but indicated that a longer waiting period was needed before

implementation. Austria-Hungary welcomed the Ottoman government's attitude as a favorable opportunity to enhance Ottoman autonomy. Russia, however, argued that a delay in judicial reform might provoke discontent among the Christian majority in Macedonia and that the reform program should be implemented immediately (Zaitsev 1995, pp. 55-57). In June, Russia presented Austria-Hungary with a final plan for the reorganization of the judicial system. The plan completely rejected Austro-Hungarian attempts to maintain Austro-Russian dominance over Macedonian judicial reform and instead adopted the British view of co-management by the Great Powers. Austria-Hungary modified the Russian plan by suggesting that the Ottoman government should be given full powers to choose the officials responsible for judicial reform (Zaitsev 1995, pp. 59-61), but Russia maintained its position that if Austria-Hungary did not give way on the question, it would then be referred to the ambassadors of the Great Powers in Constantinople for a joint decision (Zaitsev 1995, pp. 61-63). In addition, Russia actively sought the support of Britain to put pressure on Austria-Hungary. Britain, taking into account its global strategic interests and France's role in mediating Anglo-Russian relations, indicated that it would stand by Russia and seek to move their relationship toward an entente (GP 1927, 22. Band, S. 419; DDF 1950, 2^e Série, Tome 11, p. 235).

Russia's collaboration with Britain, France, and Italy on Macedonian reforms heightened Austro-Hungarian apprehension about Russian expansion in the Balkans. In early 1908, Austria-Hungary proposed the Novi Pazar Railway as a means to advance its interests in the region. Once completed, this railway would greatly support Austria-Hungary's dominance in the Balkans (May 1938). Furthermore, the proposal marked the end of years of Austro-Russian cooperation in pressuring the Ottoman government to implement reforms in Macedonia (Schurman 2008, p. 7). The shift from Austro-Russian cooperation to confrontation over the Macedonian issue reinforced Austria-Hungary's desire to expand its vested interests in the Balkans, and the major change in the Dual Alliance resulting from the Macedonian reforms further strengthened Austria-Hungary's resolve to pursue a more proactive diplomacy.

Shift in Primacy: The Changing Dynamics of the German-Austrian Alliance and Austria-Hungary's Growing Confidence

In 1879, Germany and Austria-Hungary signed the Treaty of Alliance. For Germany, Bismarck's real aim was to prevent Austro-Russian conflict by ensuring Austria-Hungary's dependence on Germany, thereby avoiding the mutual destruction of the two autocracies (Roberts 2001, p. 72). The Dual Alliance, established in 1879, was not intended to prepare for a military conflict with Russia; on the contrary, its purpose was to demonstrate political power, draw Tsarist Russia toward Germany and Austria-Hungary, and thus secure peace in Europe (Hildebrand 1989, p. 91). It was the result of a proactive diplomacy in which Germany sought to establish a European state system under its control (Bridge and Bullen 2005, p. 212). For Austria-Hungary, the Dual Alliance was aimed directly at Russia and served essentially as an anti-Russian tool (Simpson and Jones 2015, p. 378). After the conclusion of the alliance, Germany always played the dominant role. However, as Austria-Hungary actively promoted Macedonian reforms, Germany supported it at many critical moments for the sake of maintaining alliance stability. Germany's gradual "entrapment" by Austria-Hungary reinforced the latter's determination to boldly pursue an expansionist Balkan policy.

In the first place, in the face of Austro-Italian conflict over Macedonian reforms, Germany initially sought to maintain the stability of the Dual Alliance and coordinate differences within the Triple Alliance to prevent the two alliances from falling apart. To achieve this, Germany proposed a compromise plan: supporting Italian occupation of Monastir while satisfying the Austro-Hungarian demand to exclude Albania from the gendarmerie reform. However, Germany's attempts to accommodate both sides did not alleviate the differences between Austria-Hungary and Italy. The famous Austro-Serbian "Pig War" of 1906-1909 enabled Italy to gain some influence in Belgrade and expand its influence in the Balkans (Tallon 2012, p. 33). Additionally, Italy frequently coordinated its

actions with Britain, France, and Russia during the Macedonian reform process, making it less dependent on the Triple Alliance than in the past and potentially able to abandon the alliance at any time. Italy had told Germany that it would remain loyal to the Triple Alliance in spirit and rejected the French proposal to leave the alliance, but it would not strain Franco-Italian relations, as this would not be in its own interests (Bülow 1931, p. 57). The shift in Italy's position and attitude made Germany realize that the Triple Alliance was now clearly less important than the Dual Alliance. In view of this, Germany became increasingly inclined to support the Balkan policy pursued by Austria-Hungary.

In the second place, Germany's severe external circumstances increased its dependence on Austria-Hungary. After the establishment of the Franco-Russian Alliance, Germany realized that it risked being caught in a two-front attack by France and Russia. To escape from this unfavorable situation, Germany exploited the conflicts between Britain and Russia and between Japan and Russia, making numerous attempts to restore the traditional friendship between Germany and Russia. Therefore, in the Macedonian reforms, Germany consistently supported the principle of Austro-Russian leadership, intending to maintain the stability of the 1897 Austro-Russian entente and reestablish the Three Emperors' League. However, as Austro-Russian differences over Macedonian reforms intensified, Britain, France, Russia, and Italy often acted in concert, especially after the establishment of the Triple Entente, which led Germany to largely accept the existing European power structure. To avoid isolation, the Dual Alliance became the only thing Germany could rely on at this time. German Chancellor Bülow analyzed that the world was full of hostility, hatred, and envy toward Germany: British dislike and envy of Germany had not been eliminated; France still harbored a vengeful mindset and wished to revive its European hegemony; the tendency toward anti-German democratic revolutions in Russia was on the rise; Italy remained an uncertainty; and Austria-Hungary was grappling with its own internal problems (Bülow 1931, pp. 218-219). This unfavorable international environment forced Germany to firmly maintain the solidity of the Dual Alliance, fearing abandonment by its ally. Furthermore, Germany's long-standing political, economic, and military penetration of the Ottoman

Empire was being challenged by Austria-Hungary's active Balkan policy. Since the Congress of Berlin, German-Turkish relations had grown and strengthened as Germany realized that the Ottoman Empire was a necessary ally, without this partner, Germany could neither compete with Britain and Russia in the Orient and Asia nor reap its desired benefits (Watson 1917, p. 127). Therefore, when the Great Powers pushed for Macedonian reforms, Germany often created obstacles to the reforms in order to safeguard the interests of the Ottoman Empire and minimize its losses. France commented on Germany's behavior in the Macedonian reforms, stating that Germany's reluctant support for the Austro-Russian reform program was clearly aimed at winning the goodwill of the Ottoman Empire, yet its behavior was not driven by sympathy for the empire but merely by the desire to maximize its own gains (DDF 1935, 2^e Série, Tome 6, pp. 153-154). As Austria-Hungary's policy toward the Ottoman Empire became more assertive, Germany ultimately chose to temporarily sacrifice the interests of the Ottoman Empire to meet the needs of its ally.

In the end, Austria-Hungary took advantage of Germany's predicament and decided to pursue an eastern policy guided by itself rather than by Germany, intending to revive imperial prestige (Watson 1911, p. 174). The Macedonian reforms made Austria-Hungary realize that it could pursue an active foreign policy in the Balkans without undue fear of opposition from Germany. Because Austria-Hungary did not share Germany's acute sense of external crisis and because of its long-standing friendly relations with Britain and France, it enjoyed favorable conditions for the smooth implementation of its foreign policy. For example, when Austria-Hungary witnessed the friendly collaboration among Britain, France, Russia, and Italy on the issue of Macedonian judicial reform, it tried hard to persuade Germany to support the Anglo-Russian proposal in order to secure Russia's backing on the future question of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Austria-Hungary told Germany that rejection of the Anglo-Russian proposal by the Ottoman Empire would produce the most serious consequences and endanger its sovereignty, and that it would be wise to accept the proposal in a friendly manner (GP 1927, 22. Band, S. 450). As a result, Germany found itself confronted by the other five Great Powers over the Macedonian reforms,

placed in the awkward position of either insisting on the Concert of Europe or maintaining friendly relations with the Ottoman Empire (GP 1927, 22. Band, S. 453-455). Ultimately, after weighing the pros and cons, Germany chose to sacrifice the interests of the Ottoman Empire to satisfy the demands of Austria-Hungary.

The German policy of firmly supporting Austria-Hungary at the expense of German-Russian amity and German-Turkish friendship became an important factor that further stimulated Austria-Hungary's quest for regional hegemony. In early 1908, when Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister Aehrenthal proposed the Novi Pazar Railway as a means of expanding the empire's influence in the Balkans, the British ambassador to Austria-Hungary, Cartwright, commented that Aehrenthal's main motivation was to boost national pride and promote the imperialist spirit of the Dual Monarchy (BDFA 1991, vol. 34, p. 276). When Austria-Hungary announced the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cartwright again observed that Aehrenthal's policy aimed to reduce the empire's reliance on Germany and maintain its position as a leading European power. He believed that increasing the empire's prestige could help ease tensions and conflicts within the Dual Monarchy (BDFA 1991, vol. 34, pp. 303-304). Even Bülow acknowledged that there was no need for Germany to directly push Austria-Hungary into a hostile camp, as the two countries were bound by their alliance and would always stand together on the Bosnian question. Germany would never abandon Austria-Hungary (Bülow 1931, p. 332). However, Austria-Hungary's proactive foreign policy ultimately drew Germany into Balkan affairs. When the Bosnian Crisis erupted, Germany's fear of being abandoned by its ally outweighed its fear of being implicated, leading to even stronger support for Austria-Hungary's foreign policy. This further solidified the primary and secondary roles of the two countries within the alliance.

Conclusion

The Macedonian reforms served as a crucial arena for the diplomatic games of the Great Powers. Austria-Hungary intervened actively due to its particular

geopolitical interests in the Balkans. Throughout the reform process, the differences between Austria-Hungary and Italy over the occupation zones further strained an already contradictory alliance relationship; the competition for regional hegemony between Austria-Hungary and Russia turned their previously cooperative relationship into one of division; and the divergence in strategic interests between Germany and Austria-Hungary caused a shift in the primary and secondary roles within their alliance. Against the backdrop of strong German support and the perceived threat of Russian and Italian expansion in the Balkans, Austria-Hungary decisively adopted a new offensive policy. The shifting relationships between Austria-Hungary and the other Great Powers played a crucial role in its eventual annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In addition, the situation of the Ottoman Empire was also slowly changing as the protagonist of the Macedonian reforms. In July 1908, the Young Turks revolted from Macedonia with the goal of establishing a constitutional government. This patriotic movement aimed to overthrow an already ossified and incompetent ruler and replace him with a more capable government that could defend the empire from dangerous threats (Lewis 1961, p. 207). The new Turkish government posed a threat to Austria-Hungary, as Aehrenthal feared that the Young Turks would invite representatives elected by the inhabitants of Bosnia-Herzegovina to the Turkish parliament. This would make it difficult for Austria-Hungary to continue its occupation of the two provinces. As a result, Austria-Hungary accelerated its annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in response to the rapidly changing circumstances.

The Bosnian Crisis ended with the German ultimatum to Russia and the subsequent recognition of the annexation by Russia and Serbia. However, rather than bridging the gaps among the Great Powers, the seemingly peaceful resolution of the crisis only worsened the situation in the Balkans.

Firstly, the settlement of the Bosnian Crisis upset the balance of power in the Balkans. Serbia believed that Bulgaria's acquisition of full independence and Greece's acquisition of Crete (which was proclaimed annexed to Greece in 1908)

had broken the balance of power among the three countries, while Austria-Hungary's fait accompli of annexing Bosnia-Herzegovina and the establishment of a constitutional government in the Ottoman Empire seemed destined to permanently destroy Serbian plans for expansion in all directions. It can be said that the winter of 1908–1909 was the lowest point for Serbian fortunes (Forbes et al. 1915, p. 120). To change this unfavorable situation, Serbia on the one hand expressed its pro-Russian intentions and hoped to use Russian power as a counterweight to Austria-Hungary. On the other hand, it endeavored to reach an agreement with Bulgaria on the division of Macedonia. In April 1910, the monarchs of Serbia and Bulgaria visited Russia at the same time and held intimate talks with the Tsar, which created the conditions for Russia to mediate the differences between the two countries over their interests in Macedonia. In March 1912, the two countries signed a treaty of alliance, reaching a consensus on the partition of Macedonia. The conclusion of the Serbo-Bulgarian alliance gave impetus to cooperation among the Balkan states. A treaty was signed between Greece and Bulgaria in May 1912, and Montenegro concluded agreements with Serbia and Bulgaria in September 1912. Thus, the Balkan states formally established an alliance against the Ottoman Empire. The formation of the Balkan League marked an important change in the regional political landscape: the small states' quest for regional hegemony began to challenge the influence of the traditional regional Great Powers, Austria-Hungary and Russia, which in turn affected their relations with the Great Powers.

Secondly, the outcome of the Bosnian Crisis fully exposed Russia's weaknesses. As a result of the defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, Russia was momentarily incapable of organizing a strong countermeasure against Austria-Hungary. Even before the Annexation Crisis, Guchkov, the leader of the Russian Octoberist Party, acknowledged that Russia lacked a comprehensive plan to revitalize its military power (Herrmann 1992, p. 220). Aehrenthal also asserted before the annexation plan was implemented that Russia would not be able to undertake major foreign operations for a considerable period, given its poor financial situation, the ongoing transformation and reform of the army and naval administrations, the need to replace strategic materials lost in the Russo-Japanese War, and the slow

progress in fleet reconstruction (Herrmann 1992, p. 225). Russia's powerlessness before the Bosnian Crisis exacerbated its predicament after the crisis. Britain commented on Russia's dilemma, stating that Russia's interests in the Balkans were of a more serious and urgent nature than its interests in other distant parts of the world. If Russia were to fall from its present position as the protector and the defender of the Slav race, and allow Austria-Hungary to usurp the functions that it was now exercising, it would have to submit to a total absorption of Serbia in the Austrian Empire, to an occupation of the Sandjak of Novi Pazar, to the incorporation of an autonomous Albania, and to the eventual descent of Austria-Hungary to Salonica, with all the resulting consequences. Austria-Hungary's position would be supreme in the Near East, to the entire detriment of the Muscovite Empire (BD 1933, vol. 9, part 1, p. 531). In response to this dilemma, from 1909 onward Russia implemented a new military reform program, increased its defense spending, and restored its military power, making itself a significant force within the Triple Entente and a growing threat to Germany and Austria-Hungary (Herrmann 1992, p. 220). Additionally, Russia drastically adjusted its foreign relations, strengthening ties with Britain and France and actively involving Italy in its efforts to prevent Austria-Hungary from expanding its power in the Balkans. In October 1909, Russia and Italy signed the Racconigi Agreement, in which they agreed to maintain the status quo in the Balkans and, if the status quo became unsustainable, to promote the development of the Balkan states in accordance with the principle of nationality (GP 1927, 27. Band, Erste Hälfte, S. 164). Russia also played a key role in resolving conflicts among the Balkan states and in establishing the Balkan League. After the formation of the Balkan League, Russian Foreign Minister Sazonov exclaimed excitedly, "Well, this is perfect! Five hundred thousand bayonets to guard the Balkans—this would bar the road forever to German penetration, Austrian invasion." (Taylor 1954, p. 484)

In the aftermath of the Bosnian Crisis, both the two military blocs and the Balkan states struggled to reorganize their relations. The struggle for hegemony among the Great Powers and among the Balkan states became increasingly intertwined. As each of the opposing sides took a firm stance, believing that the other harbored potentially offensive motives, the already strained relations

among the Great Powers were likely to be shattered by a single event. The Sarajevo Incident of June 1914 became that particular event which shattered the existing power structure.

Notes

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Greek-Language Primary Education and National Mobilization in the Sanjak of Gjirokaštër, 1869–1913

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Abstract: This article examines Greek-language education in the Sanjak of Gjirokaštër during the late Ottoman period (1869–1913), emphasizing its role in fostering national consciousness and cultural continuity within a multiethnic imperial context. Drawing on unpublished archival documents, consular correspondence, records of educational associations, and patriarchal sources, the study reconstructs the network of actors involved in education, including the Ecumenical Patriarchate, local metropolises, lay associations, benefactors, and the Greek consulate. These actors operated both cooperatively and competitively, promoting Greek linguistic and cultural identity while navigating Ottoman authority. Associations such as the *Association for the Propagation of Greek Literature* (SDEG) and the *Epirus Educational Association of Constantinople* financed schools, teacher training, and scholarships, though chronic financial shortages, limited infrastructure, and administrative interference constrained the implementation of the ambitious curriculum, which combined classical studies with modern sciences. Educational practice emerged as a space of ideological contestation and social mobilization, with textbooks, national and religious celebrations, and church integration functioning as mechanisms of cultural memory and reinforcing collective belonging. The study demonstrates that Greek education in Gjirokaštër served as both a spiritual and political stronghold of Hellenism, with institutional development shaped by the interplay of diplomacy, ecclesiastical authority, and civic initiative, laying the groundwork for the educational and national transformations leading to the modern Greek state.

Keywords: Greek-language education, Sanjak of Gjirokaštër, Ottoman Empire, national identity, Ecumenical Patriarchate, educational associations, and cultural memory

Introduction

During the late phase of Ottoman rule, the region corresponding to present-day southern Albania more specifically, the districts of Gjirokaštër (Argyrokastro), Himarë (Himara), Delvinë (Delvino), Tepelenë (Tepeleni), Përmet (Premeti), and Pogoni - part of which lies within modern Greek territory - became a contested space shaped by competing national movements, linguistic diversity, and shifting political loyalties. Within this broader Ottoman context, the Sanjak of Gjirokaštër emerged as a strategically significant area for the development of Greek-language education. Beyond its pedagogical function, Greek-language schooling was promoted by ecclesiastical authorities, educational associations, and representatives of the Greek state as a means of strengthening Greek linguistic, religious, and cultural identification among Orthodox Christian

communities, while operating alongside competing educational and national projects in the region.

This article presents a detailed empirical analysis of the history of education in the Sanjak of Gjirokastër during the period 1869–1913 within the political, institutional, and social broader context of the Ottoman Empire during the nineteenth century. Drawing on a wide range of unpublished archival sources, it examines educational reforms, curricula, and institutional actors, as well as everyday educational practices and their social implications. Particular attention is given to the relationship between schooling, national and political identity formation, and the historical and social conditions that shaped these processes at the local level. The study further incorporates economic analysis, documenting patterns of funding, the scale and frequency of financial support, and the coordination between ecclesiastical authorities, educational associations, and state institutions, including the involvement of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs. By analysing the circulation of textbooks and teaching materials alongside administrative and financial structures, the article demonstrates that education functioned as an organised and strategically deployed instrument of social and political intervention, contributing to the maintenance of Greek cultural identity within the Ottoman imperial framework.

The chronological framework (1869–1913) was selected because it encompasses a formative period in the institutional development of Greek-language education in the Ottoman provinces and coincides with significant political and administrative transformations in the Balkans. The period's outset is marked by the founding of the *Association for the Propagation of Greek Literature* (1869), as recorded in Government Gazette 24/24-5-1869, which became the principal body for organizing and financing Greek-language education in the Ottoman territories, in close collaboration with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, frequently with the Greek state, and other collective institutions. The same year saw the publication of the General Regulation on Public Education (*Maarif-i Umumiye Nizamnamesi*) by the Ottoman government, specifically through the Ministry of Public Education under Minister Saffet Mehmed Esad Paşa, who for the first time

introduced state intervention into the Ottoman educational system (Altin, 2008, pp. 271 – 283; Hasebe, 2018, pp. 181–207). These parallel developments shaped the institutional environment within which Greek-language schools operated. The study concludes in 1913, following the Balkan Wars and the dissolution of Ottoman authority in the region, events that fundamentally altered the political framework governing education in the Sanjak of Gjirokaštër.

The selection of this topic is deliberate, as education constituted one of the fundamental instruments for shaping national consciousness during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Within the Ottoman Empire, Greek-language education constituted one of several educational networks through which different communities sought to preserve and promote their linguistic, religious, and cultural traditions. This study examines the institutional actors involved in the organization and support of Greek-language schools in the Sanjak of Gjirokaštër, including the Ecumenical Patriarchate, local ecclesiastical authorities, community leaders, educational associations, private benefactors, and the Greek state (1830). Particular attention is devoted to the mechanisms through which these actors financed schools, appointed teachers, assuming a uniform impact on the local population, the article analyses these initiatives as part of the broader interaction between education, community organization, and competing national projects in the late Ottoman Empire.

During the period under study, the Ottoman Empire was undergoing a phase of “modernization” and educational reform (Engelhardt, 1882, pp.257–261; Davison, 1963, pp.38; Shaw & Shaw, 1977, pp.59.), which created both opportunities and challenges for implementing changes in regional educational practices. Within this context, the educational initiatives and responses of the local communities are examined. The research draws upon a broad array of primary and secondary sources. Key sources include the Archives of the *Association for the Propagation of Greek Literature* (SDEG), the Historical Archive of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs (HAGMFA), the Foundation for Northern Epirus Studies (FNES), the General State Archives (GSA), the Society for Epirote Studies, the Koventarios Municipal Library of Kozani, and the libraries of the Faculty of Philosophy at the

University of Athens, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, and the University of Ioannina. The combined analysis of these sources has enabled the construction of a multidimensional portrayal of the period under investigation.

Based on the above, the central research question guiding this study is as follows: How did Greek-language education function within the contested political, cultural, and institutional environment of the Sanjak of Gjirokaštër during the late Ottoman period (1869–1913), and what role did it play in the competing projects of Greek nation-building, Albanian national mobilization, and Ottoman imperial integration? The study is structured into three sections. The first section examines the concept of nationalism, its development, and its role in the Sanjak of Gjirokaštër during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Framing the study within the theoretical perspective of nationalism provides a fertile lens for interpreting educational activity in the Sanjak during the late Ottoman period. The second section analyzes the relationships among the various educational actors. Finally, the third section explores the educational activities in the Sanjak during the period under review, highlighting that education within the Greek-speaking communities of the Ottoman Empire was neither uniform nor consistent over time.

Nationalism in the Sanjak of Gjirokaštër

The Sanjak of Gjirokaštër constituted a particularly significant geographical area during the late Ottoman period, due to its strategic position and cultural diversity. Its historical trajectory, as a meeting point and crossroads of ethnic, religious, and cultural groups, rendered it a field of persistent contestation claimed both by the Ottoman Empire and the Great Powers, as well as by the emerging Balkan nation-states, particularly Greece. The successive changes and conquests in the wider region of the Sanjak resulted in a series of political, geographical, administrative, and military readjustments, which reshaped the local structure and profoundly influenced its development and evolution, reflecting the complexity of the historical processes and the forces at play. During the nineteenth century, the emergence of Greek, Albanian,

and Ottoman political projects transformed the region into a space where questions of language, religion, education, and communal affiliation acquired increasing political significance (Papanastasiou, 2009, pp. 41–104; Dostoevsky & Kavelin, 2007; Gellner, 1983; Anderson, 1983; Brubaker, 1996; Hobsbawm, 1990; Özkirimli, 2011; Kitromilides, 1992). This period was marked by profound and multifaceted global transformations (Tziovas, 2003, pp. 9–20). Nationalism advanced the principle that the nation is not merely a geographical entity, but a community founded upon shared values, traditions, and aspirations (Anderson, 1997, p. 26; Michail, 2003, pp. 20–27).

An examination of nationalism in the Sanjak of Gjirokastrë is essential for understanding the conditions under which Greek-language education developed during the late Ottoman period (Dalakoura, 2017, p. 1–21). The region functioned as a politically and culturally contested space where Ottoman reforms, local communal structures, and competing Greek and Albanian national movements intersected. Educational initiatives, institutional affiliations, and linguistic choices cannot be fully explained without reference to the broader nationalist dynamics that shaped social relations and administrative practices in the area. Situating education within this context allows for a clearer interpretation of schooling not only as a cultural activity but also as a mechanism through which political loyalties, collective identities, and territorial claims were articulated and negotiated (Kechriotis, 2005, pp. 51–72). Educational practices, school textbooks, celebrations, and symbols functioned as tools for constructing a homogeneous national identity that connected students to a shared ancestry and an idealized collective past (Anderson, 1997, pp. 11–13; Brass, 1991; Geertz, 1993; Özkirimli, 2011; Shils, 1957, pp. 130–145). Greek-language education therefore formed part of a broader strategy pursued by ecclesiastical authorities, educational associations, local communities, and the Greek state to strengthen Greek linguistic, religious, and cultural identification among Orthodox Christian populations. At the same time, Albanian educational initiatives promoted comparable arguments based upon language and historical continuity in support of Albanian national aspirations (Baltsiotis, 2003, pp. 45–125; Banks, 2005, p. 51; Gellner, 1992, pp. 20–22; Koulouri, 1988, pp. 46–48).

The Tanzimat reforms altered the institutional environment within which these competing educational projects developed. Within this ideological framework, the school curricula were explicitly aligned with the objectives of national education. Subjects such as History, Religion, Geography, Greek Language, and Civic Education (*Patridognosia*) sought to cultivate a patriotic ethos by emphasizing the “national mission” of the pupils. The content of textbooks from the period 1880–1919 reflects an overtly ideological orientation, focusing on heroic historical episodes, eminent leaders, and acts of collective valor, thereby presenting the homeland as a source of shared pride and identity. Beyond language, Religion also occupied an important position within Greek-language education, reflecting the close institutional relationship between the educational system and the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

The simultaneous presence of Greek nationalism, Albanian nationalism, and Ottomanism (Göçek, 2011; Faroqhi, 2004; Karpas, 2001; Shaw & Shaw, 1977; Goffman, 2002; Kafadar, 1995) transformed the Sanjak of Gjirokastër into one of the most politically and culturally contested regions of the late Ottoman Empire. Rather than representing discrete or isolated political projects, these competing ideologies coexisted within the same geographical and social space, where they continuously interacted, overlapped, and challenged one another in their efforts to secure the political allegiance and cultural identification of the local population. The complexity of this contest was further intensified by the region’s heterogeneous demographic composition, characterised by linguistic diversity, religious pluralism, and fluid patterns of local and communal affiliation that did not always correspond to the exclusive national categories promoted by emerging nationalist movements. Consequently, educational institutions occupied a particularly prominent position within this struggle, since they offered not only formal instruction but also opportunities for the dissemination of language, historical narratives, religious values, and conceptions of collective belonging (Todorova, 1976: 93–109). The following sections examine how these broader political dynamics were translated into the institutional organisation, financing, and everyday operation of Greek-language schools in the Sanjak of Gjirokastër.

Relations Among Educational Institutions and the Politics of Schooling

Within this contested political environment, the Ottoman state did not remain a passive observer of educational developments. On the contrary education became an increasingly important instrument through which the Ottoman administration sought to strengthen administrative control and respond to the political challenges created by the rise of nationalist movements. In their effort to preserve the unity of the Empire, the Ottoman leadership sought to cultivate the notion of a unified national identity. The adoption of the reforms introduced during the Tanzimat era (1839 – 1876) represented a concerted attempt by the Ottoman state to regain the favor of the Great Powers while simultaneously appeasing Christian populations—particularly those advocating for national fulfillment (Dağlar Macar, 2010, pp. 805 – 817; Quataert, 2006 pp. 132–148). The Sublime Porte was compelled to proclaim reforms aimed at revitalizing the Empire and averting its impending collapse (Kokolakis, 2003, pp. 63–66; Sakaoglou, 2003; Sarres, 1990, p. 278).

Prior to the implementation of the Tanzimat reforms (1839 – 1876), education within the Ottoman Empire remained rudimentary (Betsas, 2010, pp. 118–153; Chatzopoulos, 1991, pp. 302–309; Ergin, 1940). It adhered to a traditional, religious, and conservative model reflecting Islamic principles and the socio-cultural structures of the period (Demirel, 2021, pp. 118–153). Christian education, by contrast, operated informally and relied primarily on the practices of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. With the introduction of the reforms, education acquired legal recognition, enabling the Greek state to engage in educational affairs as part of its broader foreign policy strategy. During the reign of Sultan Abdülaziz (1861 – 1876), special privileges were granted to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, delineating the modes of social and religious expression available to Christian Ottoman citizens and effectively designating the Patriarchate as the principal agent of educational organization (Papadopoulos, 1908, pp. 596–601). As such, the Patriarchate emerged as *“the religious and national center of the Greeks in Turkey”* (Terzis & Ziogou-Karastergiou, 1998, p. 219).

Between 1869 and 1913, relations between the two parties became increasingly strained. As the Ottoman state recognized the powerful influence of education—particularly amid the rise of Balkan national movements—it grew fearful of the spread of nationalist tendencies and thus intensified its restrictive policies toward Greek-language schooling. In 1869, a new institutional framework was established, and by 1895–1896, the compulsory teaching of Ottoman Turkish in non-Muslim schools was reinforced. Individuals deemed politically dangerous were removed from educational positions, and measures were taken against local communal bodies responsible for staff appointments (*Gianya*, 23.10.1869, no. 26). The dismissal of teachers provoked widespread discontent among local authorities. During the absolutist reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876–1909), government interventions in education multiplied, standing in stark contradiction to the earlier reformist decrees that had laid the legal foundations for Greek education within the Ottoman Empire.

Beyond the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which served as the principal organizer of Greek-language education, numerous associations played a crucial role in supporting and expanding educational activities (*Phoni tis Ipeirou*, 1892: no. 12; GAK F181 326/2). Among the most prominent were the *Association for the Propagation of Greek Literature* (AYE, 1871, pp. 134–137), the *Greek Philological Society of Constantinople* (Giannakopoulos, 1998), and the *Epirote Philological Educational Society of Constantinople* (EHFSC, 1872–1873, pp. 5–10; *Phoni tis Ipeirou*, 1892: no. 12). Their primary objective was to organize and strengthen education in order to promote nationalist ideals among the Christian populations of the Empire, thereby paving the way for eventual independence and union with the free Greek state.

The Association for the Propagation of Greek Literature (SDEG) was the most influential educational organization supporting Greek-language schools in the Ottoman Empire. It provided financial, organizational, and material assistance while maintaining a close administrative relationship with the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which financed a substantial part of its activities. In return, the Association remained accountable through regular financial reporting and

close cooperation with the Greek consular authorities. The sustainability of Greek-language schools in the Sanjak of Gjirokaštër depended heavily upon this support. Through the Association, scholarships were awarded to students and teachers from the region, who subsequently served in local schools according to its educational priorities.

The Greek Consulate in Gjirokaštër played a central role in coordinating educational activities in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Tsoukalas, 1992: 400–411). Beyond distributing financial assistance, it monitored the operation of schools, evaluated local educational needs, and supervised the implementation of educational policy. Regular consular reports provide valuable evidence regarding the organization, staffing, and financial condition of Greek-language schools in the Sanjak. Together with educational associations, benefactors, and local communities, the consulate contributed to the development of a coordinated educational network that promoted Greek-language education within the Ottoman administrative framework.

By overseeing school operations, submitting detailed reports, and managing financial allocations, the consulate ensured the effective distribution of resources and the consistent implementation of educational programs. On a quarterly basis, the Consul prepared a comprehensive report on the condition of the schools and their needs, and was also responsible for evaluating community petitions and making decisions regarding their progression. These primary sources provide a detailed picture of education in a region situated at the crossroads of national and political influences, while also offering valuable insight into the efforts undertaken to promote Greek education. Although a large body of primary sources was examined, two indicative examples may be highlighted: the 1873–1874 census conducted by the EHFSK (*Regulations of the Epirus Philomathic Society in Constantinople, Year 2, Vols. A and B, 1873 – 1874*) and the statistical survey of 1898–1899 published in the newspaper *Agon* (08.12.1900, is.90, 21.01.1901, is.96, 26.01.1901, is.97, & 22.06.1901, is.188). These sources provide detailed data on the operation of schools in the Sanjak of Gjirokaštër,

including information on student and teacher numbers as well as the conditions prevailing in rural communities.

The combined efforts of associations, benefactors, and the consulate—supported by the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs—created a dynamic system that advanced education in the Sanjak of Gjirokaštër. At the same time, the consulate's involvement fostered a system of collective responsibility, in which the financial contributions of local communities and benefactors were complemented by state oversight. This cooperation enhanced the organizational capacity and financial sustainability of Greek-language education while supporting the broader cultural and educational objectives pursued by Greek institutions within the Ottoman Empire. Simultaneously, the Ottoman administration attempted to reconcile communal educational autonomy with the broader objectives of imperial centralization and political stability. The educational landscape of the Sanjak should therefore be understood as the product of continuous negotiation between imperial governance, ecclesiastical authority, local communal interests, and competing nationalist programs. It was precisely this interaction that shaped both the opportunities and the limitations of Greek-language education during the final decades of Ottoman rule.

Educational Activity

The institutional framework described above provided the administrative and organisational foundations upon which Greek-language education developed in the Sanjak of Gjirokaštër. However, the existence of educational legislation, ecclesiastical supervision, and financial support did not automatically guarantee the establishment or continuous operation of schools. The practical implementation of educational policy depended upon a wide range of local factors, including demographic conditions, communal resources, political circumstances, and the changing relationship between local educational authorities and the Ottoman administration. Consequently, an assessment of educational activity requires moving beyond institutional structures to examine how schools functioned in practice and how educational networks evolved

within the contested social and political environment of the late Ottoman Empire.

The available evidence derives from diverse archival, ecclesiastical, and administrative sources that vary considerably in scope, completeness, and perspective, requiring careful contextual interpretation. This unevenness reflects the heterogeneous nature of the sources, which document education in the region from different perspectives and with varying levels of precision. Moreover, the interpretation of these sources requires particular attention to the social categories through which education was recorded and understood. Administrative reports, ecclesiastical documents, and nationalist publications frequently employed classifications based on religious affiliation, linguistic practice, or communal belonging, categories that did not always correspond to the modern concepts of ethnicity and nationality. Therefore, the study of educational development in the Sanjak of Gjirokastër must take into consideration the complex relationship between religious identity, language, and emerging national consciousness during the late Ottoman period.

The ethnic and linguistic composition of the population of the Sanjak of Gjirokastër requires careful interpretation, as religious affiliation, language, and national identity did not necessarily coincide during the late Ottoman period. Although the Orthodox Church and the Greek educational network exercised considerable cultural influence throughout the region, this should not be taken to imply that all Orthodox Christians identified themselves as ethnically or nationally Greek. Contemporary scholarship has demonstrated that a substantial proportion of the Orthodox population consisted of Albanian-speaking communities whose national identification remained fluid, situational, or locally defined for much of the nineteenth century. In many cases, linguistic practice, religious affiliation, communal membership, and political allegiance represented overlapping but distinct forms of identity that cannot be retrospectively equated with modern national categories. Consequently, participation in Greek-language education or affiliation with the Ecumenical Patriarchate should be understood primarily as indicators of religious,

educational, and cultural orientation. Recognising this complexity is essential for interpreting the operation of Greek schools in the Sanjak of Gjirokaštër, since these institutions functioned within a heterogeneous social environment in which Greek, Albanian, and Ottoman actors simultaneously sought to influence populations whose identities were often multiple, negotiated, and continually evolving. The situation described here was not unique to this *Sanjak* but reflected broader patterns across the Ottoman Empire. What distinguished the region, however, was the parallel rise of Albanian nationalism (Elsie, 2012; Frashëri, 1964; Skendi, 1967). Greek associations, the Ecumenical Patriarchate and local benefactors played a central role in the development of educational institution in the *Sanjak*, despite the persistent material shortages, lack of legal recognition, and social constraints that delayed modernization and reform.

Against this complex demographic and political background, the reconstruction of the educational network requires the systematic comparison of a wide range of archival and published sources. Drawing upon extensive analysis of reports, official correspondence, statistical surveys, educational registers, and private archival collections, this study identifies the operation of schools in 133 *settlements* within the Sanjak of Gjirokaštër during the late Ottoman period (Giapoutzopoulou, 2025). These institutions comprised a diverse educational network including common schools, mutual instruction schools (*allilodidaktika*), Greek schools, central schools, mixed schools, girls' schools (*parthenagogeia*), three kindergartens attached to girls' schools, one teacher training school (*didaskaleion*), and three gymnasium-level classes integrated into the central schools. The diversity of these institutions reflects both the gradual expansion of the educational network and the differentiated educational needs of Orthodox communities across the Sanjak.

The operation of these schools was far from stable, as the financial instability of local communities frequently led to interruptions and subsequent reopenings. Examination of specific years reveals varying numbers of active institutions. For instance, during the 1873–1874 school year, 68 schools were recorded (EHFSC, 1873–1874: 155–216), while by 1902 the number had risen to 128 across

corresponding communities (*General Index of Greek Schools in European Turkey*, 1902).

Table 1.

Villages	Total					
	Schools 1873 – 1874	Schools 1902	Teachers 1873 - 1874	Teachers 1902	Students 1873 - 1874	Students 1902
Argyrokaastro (Gjirokaster)	2	3	3	7	168	178
Frastani (Frashtan)	0	1	0	1	0	20
Grapsi (Grapsh)	0	1	0	2	0	45
Georgutsates (Jorgucat)	1	1	1	1	40	30
Vuliarati (Bularat)	1	1	1	1	50	45
Kra (Kerre)	0	1	0	1	0	6
Pepeli (Pepel)	1	1	1	1	20	25
Selio (Selo)	1	1	1	1	50	30
Duviani (Dhuvjan)	1	1	1	1	40	25
Kakogoranji (Goranxi)	0	1	0	1	0	10

The expansion of Greek-language education in the Sanjak of Gjirokastër was neither incidental nor solely the result of local educational initiatives. Rather, it constituted the outcome of a coordinated and sustained effort involving a network of ecclesiastical, communal, and philanthropic institutions, most notably the Ecumenical Patriarchate, local Orthodox communities, and Greek educational associations. Through the provision of financial resources, the

training and appointment of teachers, the distribution of textbooks, and the supervision of curricula, these actors established an institutional framework that facilitated the systematic expansion of Greek schools throughout the region. The numerical growth of educational institutions should therefore be interpreted not merely as an indicator of increasing literacy or educational provision but as evidence of a broader cultural and political strategy aimed at strengthening Greek educational and cultural influence among Orthodox communities. In this respect, the expansion of schooling formed part of a wider process through which education became an instrument of nation-building and political mobilization in the late Ottoman Empire.

The ideological function of Greek education is particularly evident in the structure and content of the curriculum. Subjects such as History, Religious Studies, and Civic Education (*Patridognosia*) were designed not simply to transmit knowledge but to cultivate a shared historical memory, religious affiliation, and collective sense of belonging consistent with the ideological principles of the Greek national movement. Instruction emphasized the historical continuity of Hellenism, the centrality of the *patris* (homeland), and the moral obligations of pupils towards the nation, thereby transforming the classroom into a space for the construction and dissemination of national identity. Within the contested environment of the Sanjak of Gjirokaštër, where Greek, Albanian, and Ottoman projects simultaneously competed for the allegiance of local populations, schools assumed a significance that extended well beyond their pedagogical function.

The quantitative comparison between the educational data of 1873–1874 and 1902 demonstrates the expansion of Greek-language schooling in the Sanjak of Gjirokaštër, while also revealing the limitations and uneven character of this development. The increase from 68 recorded schools in 1873–1874 to 128 schools in 1902 does not represent a linear process of educational growth but rather the outcome of continuous negotiation between local initiatives, financial resources, ecclesiastical structures, and political conditions. The establishment of new schools in villages such as Frastani (Frashtan), Grapsi (Grapsh), Kra

(Kerre), and Kakogoranj (Goranxi) illustrates the gradual extension of the educational network into smaller settlements, while the variation in student numbers and teaching staff reflects the different demographic and economic circumstances of each community.

The comparative evidence demonstrates a substantial expansion of Greek-language education in the Sanjak of Gjirokastër between 1873–1874 and 1902, while simultaneously revealing the uneven character of this development. The increase from 68 to 128 recorded schools reflected the gradual extension of the educational network into smaller settlements, including Frastani, Grapsi, Kra, and Kakogoranj. Nevertheless, educational growth was neither linear nor uniform. Of the eighty-five villages recorded without schools in 1873–1874 by the Epirote Philological Educational Society, only twenty-seven had established schools by 1902, whereas forty-seven communities continued to lack educational institutions. These findings indicate that the expansion of Greek-language education depended upon the interaction of local initiatives, demographic conditions, financial resources, ecclesiastical organisation, and political circumstances rather than upon educational planning alone.

The statistical evidence should also be interpreted with caution. Educational data compiled by Greek institutions, including the Epirote Philological Educational Society of Constantinople and the Greek Embassy in Constantinople, formed part of broader efforts to document the educational presence of Greek communities in the Ottoman Empire and therefore reflected contemporary institutional priorities. When examined alongside archival correspondence, school registers, and local administrative reports, however, these sources provide valuable evidence concerning the operation of Greek schools and the challenges they encountered. They further demonstrate that Greek-language education developed within a socially and politically contested environment, where Ottoman administrative policies, local communal structures, and competing Greek and Albanian educational initiatives jointly influenced both the establishment of schools and their long-term sustainability.

One of many reasons for the inconsistency of Greek-language schools in Gjirokastër was their *financial fragility*. Archival records provide extensive fiscal data that may be grouped into two broad categories: state-sponsored and private funding. Financial resources were channeled through the associations, the Church, and Greek consulates, while private benefactors also played a significant role through donations and endowments. The need for financial resources was institutionally recognized; the associations systematically encouraged private contributions, promoting philanthropy as a moral and civic duty essential to the perpetuation of national and cultural continuity.

Historical sources confirm the *simultaneous flow of state and private funding*. Many schools were sustained by a combination of collective and individual patronage. However, conditions were far from ideal. Numerous letters document chronic problems: salary delays, withholding of payments by ecclesiastical authorities due to personal disputes with teachers, and instances of financial mismanagement. Teachers and local school overseers frequently petitioned the SDEG and the Consulate for the immediate dispatch of funds, some even warning that they would cease their duties if payments were not made, as they lived in extreme poverty.

State support, particularly through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is evident in every annual budget. Substantial amounts were deposited with the Association for the Propagation of Greek Literature (SDEG) for redistribution among the schools of the region (SDEG, D/5 350, pp. 21–30; SDEG, 1872, p. 54). Analysis of financial data reveals relative stability in quarterly funding, though fluctuations occurred—corresponding to the liquidity constraints of the Greek economy. Economic crises in Greece periodically reduced state funding, increasing the dependence of schools upon local communities and private benefactors. This explains the frequent references in correspondence to delays and insufficiencies in financial support, which rendered private contributions all the more indispensable.

Each year, local communities, churches, and representatives of the Greek state made concerted efforts to secure the resources necessary for the operation of

schools, covering expenses for teachers' salaries, educational materials, and infrastructure. The absence of stable funding created a vicious cycle that limited the schools' capacity to fulfill both their educational and national roles. Modest annual tuition fees and contributions from the Greek diaspora were crucial for sustaining educational institutions; nevertheless, the majority of students came from impoverished families.

During this period, pupils were required to purchase their own textbooks—an expense often beyond the means of the poorer households. According to the data examined, nearly half of all students declared their inability to obtain the necessary schoolbooks. In the village of Drymades (Dhërmi), for instance, fifty pupils submitted a request for 357 textbooks, vividly illustrating the scale of material deprivation. More than half of the total student population consisted of indigent children whose lack of resources hindered their regular school attendance (SDEG, I/7 225, p. 208). Deficiencies were not limited to textbooks; shortages of teaching aids, such as geographical maps, also obstructed the effective teaching of subjects like geography and history.

Textbooks published and used within the Kingdom of Greece could not be directly employed in Ottoman territories. In the Christian communities of the Empire, all schoolbooks required approval by both the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Ottoman authorities. This dual approval process reveals the inherent complexity of the educational system in these communities, as the Ottomans sought to maintain control by placing bureaucratic and ideological constraints on Greek-language education. Ottoman supervision of educational material formed part of a broader effort to regulate communal education rather than merely to restrict Greek schools. By requiring official approval of textbooks and monitoring the appointment of teachers, the Ottoman administration sought to incorporate communal education into an increasingly centralised educational system while limiting the dissemination of nationalist ideas that threatened imperial cohesion. Consequently, many of the administrative obstacles encountered by Greek schools reflected not only anti-Greek policies but also the broader objectives of late Ottoman educational reform. Despite these

adversities, local communities and associations strove to sustain their schools and to meet the operational and material costs involved.

Another persistent issue was the shortage of qualified teachers. Initially, teaching positions were mostly occupied by priests, who were gradually replaced by lay educators possessing the requisite qualifications. To address the problem, incentives were introduced and teacher-training institutions were established. Within the Ottoman Empire, the Patriarchate recognized the limited pedagogical expertise of teachers, who signed annual contracts until 1897, when these were replaced by *Certificates of Competence* issued by the Patriarchal Central Educational Committee and local Metropolitans (EA 35 1911, pp. 144–146). This intervention highlights the growing emphasis on teacher training and certification, underscoring the importance of pedagogical quality in the educational process.

The most prominent teacher-training institution in the *Sanjak* of Gjirokaštër was the *Zographeion Teachers' Seminary*, which played a decisive role in educating Greek-speaking male and female teachers (EHFSC 2, vol. II, 1873–1874: 194–241; *Voice of Epirus*, July 23, 30, and August 6, 1893, pp. 45–47; Kitsos, 1975; Kitsos, 2004). Upon its establishment, it fostered an educational environment that promoted the Greek language and culture. Its graduates became emissaries of Greek intellectual life, contributing decisively to the diffusion of education throughout the region. They were required to serve in local schools for at least five years (Kitsos, 1975, pp. 48–49).

Nevertheless, their work proved far from easy. Salaries were meager, as evidenced by numerous complaints and resignations, while personal conflicts with associations or local communities often led to dismissals (SDEG, Γ/7 225, pp. 218–221). The experience of teachers illustrates the broader realities of Greek-language education in the Sanjak of Gjirokaštër. Educational development depended upon a fragile balance between local initiative, ecclesiastical authority, philanthropic support, Greek state involvement, and Ottoman administrative regulation. Schools therefore functioned neither as isolated

educational institutions nor as straightforward instruments of national policy. Rather, they operated within a dynamic and contested environment in which political authority, communal organisation, economic resources, and competing national ideologies continuously interacted. The expansion of the educational network during the final decades of Ottoman rule should consequently be understood as the product of this complex interaction rather than the inevitable outcome of a single national educational program.

Conclusions

Despite sustained efforts by ecclesiastical institutions, educational associations, local communities, and individual benefactors, the expansion of Greek-language education in the Sanjak of Gjirokastër remained a complex and uneven process shaped by practical, institutional, and political constraints. Financial limitations, shortages of textbooks and qualified teachers, internal disputes, and Ottoman administrative regulations affected the operation and continuity of schools (Assmann, 2017). However, Ottoman involvement should not be interpreted solely as an attempt to restrict Greek education. During the final decades of imperial rule, education became an important field through which Ottoman authorities sought to modernise administration, strengthen state control, and promote a shared imperial identity based on the principles of Ottoman citizenship (*Osmanlılık*).

The curriculum and daily practices of Greek schools reveal the broader cultural and ideological functions attributed to education. Subjects such as Ancient Greek language and literature, History, Religious Studies, and *Patridognosia* were not only intended to provide knowledge but also to cultivate historical consciousness, moral values, and collective belonging. Through textbooks, school celebrations, religious instruction, and communal practices, education contributed to the preservation and transmission of Greek cultural memory among Orthodox communities (Assmann, 2017). Nevertheless, the relationship between Orthodox affiliation, language, and national identity remained complex. Participation in Greek-language education or affiliation with the

Ecumenical Patriarchate should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of a fixed Greek national identity, as many Orthodox inhabitants of the region belonged to Albanian-speaking communities whose identities were shaped by overlapping linguistic, religious, local, and political affiliations.

Within this environment, education became a central arena in which competing projects sought to influence the future orientation of the population. Greek institutions promoted schooling as a means of preserving Orthodox cultural traditions and strengthening connections with Hellenic identity. Albanian national actors increasingly viewed education as essential for the cultivation of Albanian language and national consciousness, while Ottoman authorities sought to maintain imperial cohesion through educational regulation and reform (Elsie, 2012; Frashëri, 1964; Skendi, 1967). The Sanjak of Gjirokaštër therefore represented not merely a space of national rivalry but also a field of negotiation, adaptation, and interaction between imperial and communal visions of belonging.

The development of Greek-language education was made possible through the cooperation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, educational associations, Greek diplomatic representatives, teachers, benefactors and local communities. Their efforts contributed to the expansion of the school network, the training of teachers and the circulation of educational materials. At the same time, the quantitative evidence demonstrates the limitations of this process. Despite significant growth in the number of schools and continued local demand for education, many settlements remained without stable educational institutions due to financial difficulties, demographic conditions, administrative restrictions and local circumstances.

Based on the examination of archival sources, contemporary newspapers, statistical reports and institutional records, this study demonstrates that education in the Sanjak of Gjirokaštër functioned simultaneously as a means of instruction, a mechanism of cultural transmission, and an arena of political negotiation (Giapoutzopoulou, 2025). Between 1869 and 1912, Greek-language

schooling developed within a dynamic environment shaped by Ottoman reforms, Greek educational initiatives, Albanian national mobilisation and the complex identities of local communities. Rather than representing a linear process of national expansion, the history of education in the region reveals the coexistence and competition of multiple projects seeking to shape collective identities and political loyalties in the late Ottoman Empire. Further comparative research on other Ottoman border regions may provide additional insight into the relationship between education, nationalism and imperial transformation.

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Ethical Statement

It is declared that scientific and ethical principles have been followed while carrying out and writing this study and that all the sources used have been properly cited

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