Linguistics

A ROMANIAN 19TH CENTURY DOCUMENT FROM THE VIDIN REGION

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Abstract: *By bringing to the readers' attention an unpublished Ottoman era document in Romanian, issued in 1861 in Rabrovo, a village in the Vidin region, back then under Ottoman rule, the article tries to shed light on the wider historical and sociolinguistic context of the Romanian-speaking population south of the Danube in the 19th century. The document is a donation-adoption act by which a Romanian man gives one of his sons for adoption to his brother, who does not have heirs. The document is handwritten in Romanian, using Cyrillic script, signed by the chorbaji, mayor and eight witnesses, and stamped by the Turkish administrator. Though very short, it reveals several important facts about the Romanian-speaking population in Ottoman Bulgaria and its origin, the language used in communication and writing, family relations, etc. Coming from a family archive, this document of great emotional value for its owner, has also undisputable linguistic and historical significance.*
Keywords: Romanian language; Bulgaria; Cyrillic script; Ottoman empire; 19th century; family archives.

1. Preamble

The research on the Romanian-speaking populations in Central and Eastern Europe has gained considerable impetus in the last three decades. This is the period when, apart from Aromanians, Megleno-Romanians and Istro-Romanians, who did not lack the interest of scholars in the last century, the attention of researchers has moved towards other, less studied communities. Among them, the (Daco-)Romanian-speaking communities south of the Danube, in Serbia and Bulgaria.

Recent research on these communities followed three main lines of inquiry: (socio)linguistic, historical and ethnographic-anthropological. While documents are the main sources of historical research, linguists or anthropologists also gain a glimpse into the past through photographs, notes,

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written documents from the personal archives of their interlocutors: notebooks, songbooks, recipe collections, diaries, etc. These personal archive documents are usually not older than three generations (approximately 60 years), due to the perishability of the medium. As for official documents, they usually go into oblivion with the person to whom they belong, and the rule of the three generations does not apply here; documents older than a century are usually kept in official or church archives.

Therefore, it is rather unusual to come across a 150-year-old official document of undisputed historical and linguistic significance, in a family archive. The document this article discusses is an 1861 donation-adoption act from the village of Rabrovo, today in Bulgaria, written in Romanian Cyrillic. The owner, Danail Kasabov, the descendant of the adopted child that the document refers to, gave it to me asking me to use it to the best of my knowledge. Not being a historian, I hope to do that by presenting the facsimile of the document, transliterating and translating it, as well as framing it within the wider historical and sociolinguistic context, and making it available to a larger audience, both academic and non-academic.

2. The Romanian-speaking population in Bulgaria

The two Slavic states south of the Danube, Serbia and Bulgaria, are home to compact settlements of Romanian-speaking populations, which form a geographic, demographic and linguistic continuum with the Romanians north of the Danube. These communities are located mainly in the territorial triangle based north on the Danube, between the Romanian localities of Baziaș and Calafat, which has as main axis the Timok river. In Serbia, the Vlachs, Timok Vlachs or Vlach Romanians, as they are called, inhabit the area between the Danube in the north, the border with Bulgaria in the east, the Morava river in the west and the Rtanj Mountains in the south. The Vlachs of north-western Bulgaria inhabit the area circumscribed by the port town of Vidin and the rivers Timok and Danube, but villages with Romanian population can be found well beyond this area, mostly along the Danube, all the way to the town of Ruse, in the Oryahovo, Kula, Nikopol and Lom regions (Neagoe & Mărgărit 2006, Mărgărit & Neagoe, 1997: 76). Both communities, from Serbia and Bulgaria, are referred to as Romanians by the Romanian state and Romanian researchers, but considered Vlachs in Serbia and Bulgaria (see Sorescu-Marinković, 2012).

The time of the arrival or establishment of the Romanian-speaking communities in Bulgaria is a matter of debate, both among historians and linguists. It is certain, however, that movements of population from the north to the south of the Danube and vice versa took place throughout the Middle Ages, until the present day. Dislocations of population from the Romanian princedom of Wallachia were particularly intense during the Phanariot epoch

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(1711-1811), when entire villages, tens of thousands of paupers, fled over the Danube, in search of a better life and free land (Djordjević, 1906). Probably the decisive moment in the formation of a compact mass of Romanian population south of the Danube was the adoption of the strict Organic Regulation (1831-1832) in Moldova and Wallachia, when thousands of Romanian peasants crossed the river again, leaving behind their households, due to excessive taxation and obligations they were subject to in the Romanian principalities (Weigand, 1900: 19, Georgevitch, 1919: 19).

The Vlach population in Eastern Serbia is significantly larger than the one in north-western Bulgaria, which stretches in a compact group on the bank of the Danube, between the town of Vidin and the Timok river. Talking about this region, George Vâlsan, a Romanian geographer, stated in 1913 that "this piece of land is truly Romanian in terms of population, and includes 36 purely Romanian villages" (Vâlsan, 2001: 257).[8] Almost 90 years later, ethnographer Monica Budiș pleaded for considering the Romanians in Bulgaria a real community, and not just groups of people: "How could it be considered other than a community, when we are talking about over 30 villages only in the Vidin area, and about other 20 compact Romanian localities, located in the Danube valley, from Vidin to Ruse?" (Budiș, 2001: 27).

In 1923, Emanoil Bucuța, a Romanian philologist and political figure, classified the Vlachs of north-western Bulgaria into three large groups – *văleni, câmpeni* și *pădureni*, according to the geographical areas they inhabited: valleys, plains or forests (Bucuța, 1923: 11, 48). This territorial division corresponds, to a certain extent, to linguistic features specific for each group, especially phonetic ones (Nestorescu, 1996: VI). Researchers of this area have not yet reached a common opinion regarding the ethnographic differences between these groups. Thus, some consider that the differences are minor and "the terminological and phenomenological unity is extremely great" (Budiș, 2001: 40), others that "there are substantial differences from a linguistic and ethnographic point of view between the Timok Romanians and Danube Romanians" (Țîrcomnicu, 2011b: 13).

Regarding the number of Romanian speakers in Bulgaria, it has been a controversial issue and varied over time from a few tens of thousands to several hundred thousand. At the end of the 19th century, Gustav Weigand, a German linguist, traveling in the regions inhabited by Romanian-speaking population north and south of the Danube, concluded that in the Vidin area there were 40,000 Romanians, while in Vratsa – 13,000 (Weigand, 1908: 31). According to Emanoil Bucuța, who based his assessment on Bulgarian

[8] All quotations from literature have been translated by the author of this article, unless mentioned differently.

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statistics, in 1905 the number of Romanians in Bulgaria was bigger than 44,000, and in 1910, it reached over 48,500 people (Bucuța, 1923: 52). Nevertheless, the number of Bulgarian citizens declaring they are Romanians or Vlachs at censuses has drastically decreased over time. Thus, at the 2011 census, only 886 persons were registered as "ethnic Romanians" and 3,598 as "ethnic Vlachs". However, informal estimates lead to much bigger figures.

As far as the self-identification of this population is concerned, Romanian ethnologist Emil Țîrcomnicu noticed differences regarding the two big regions they inhabit. While those in the north-west of Bulgaria, around the town of Vidin, assume a Vlach identity (although by this they mainly refer to the fact that they do not speak standard Romanian, but an archaic variety), the majority of those in the villages along the Danube have a Romanian identity. This is most probably due to the fact that many know that their forefathers came from Romania, where they still have relatives; that is why they were are also called *țereni* (coming from *țară*, Rom. "country", or *Țara Românească*, the Romanian name of Wallachia) (Țîrcomnicu, 2010: 262).

3. The village of Rabrovo

Rabrovo (Rom. Rabova or Rabrova) is a village in north-western Bulgaria, near the Bulgarian-Serbian border. It is part of Boynitsa municipality, Vidin district, about 22 km north-east of the village of Boynitsa, which is the centre of the municipality, 28 km west of the town of Vidin and approximately 220 km north-west of the capital Sofia. It borders the villages of Borilovets, Kanits and Perilovets. At the latest census of 2011, the population of the village was 446. Approximately half of the inhabitants declared themselves Bulgarians, while the other half did not state their ethnicity. According to the National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria, at the end of 2019, Rabrovo had an estimated population of only 286 (NSIB).

According to Weigand, at the end of the 19th century Rabrovo had 1,687 Romanian inhabitants, and its satellite-settlement Funden (Bulg. Kanits), 113 (Weigand, 1908: 33). In 1910, their number had increased to 2,030 (Budiș, 2001: 39), to reach a maximum of 2450 in 1934. After this date, the population of the settlement gradually decreased. In the beginning of the 2000s, a significant percentage of the active population migrated to economically more advanced countries, which explains the dramatic drop in the number of inhabitants compared to the middle of the last century. In 2011, Țîrcomnicu observed that the population over the age of 35 was bilingual, speaking both Romanian and Bulgarian, but the number of people under 25 who spoke Romanian was extremely low (Țîrcomnicu, 2011a: 11). This was due to the absence of schooling in Romanian and especially to the interruption of intergenerational transmission of the language, a phenomenon

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also observed in most of the places inhabited by Vlachs in Eastern Serbia (Huțanu & Sorescu-Marinković, 2015: 207-208).

According to Bucuța's division, Rabrovo is considered a village of *pădureni*, along with Borilovets, Deleyna, Druzhba, Kalenik, Kanits, Kosovo and Topolovets. Bucuța believes that *văleni* and *câmpeni* have come from north of the Danube, while the *pădureni* originate from North-Eastern Serbia (Bucuța, 1923: 27, 28). However, Virgil Nestorescu, a Romanian linguist, who investigated the region in the second half of the 20th century, advances the idea that things are more complicated, as toponymy, history and cartography facts point to a much longer existence of these villages (Nestorescu, 1996: IX).

In 1998, during her ethnographic research, Budiș collected a series of legends about the village, complementing them with data extracted from the bilingual Bulgarian-Romanian newspaper *Vremia – Timpul*. According to these legends, after the fall of the kingdom of Vidin, in 1369, boyars and soldiers took refuge in the forests around Rabrovo, establishing the village of Radanuț, named after Radan Voda. After the Turks set the village on fire, the inhabitants fled in four directions, founding four villages that today bear the name Rabrovo and are located in Bulgaria, Serbia and Macedonia. According to another legend, the existence of several localities with this name is due to the curse of a bishop who was stoned to death in the first village called Rabrovo: after the bishop cursed the inhabitants, they were attacked by the Turks and forced to spread to the four corners of the world, where they founded localities of the same name. One theory attributes the name of the village to the Romanian expression *ra vorbă* ("curse"); another suggests that it comes from the Slavic *rab* ("slave, slavery"), while a third one supports the etymology from the Slavic word *hrabro* ("brave") (Budiș, 2001: 163-165).

4. The Rabrovo document

The document presented here (Figure 1) is a donation-adoption act dated 1861 and stamped by the Ottoman authorities in Rabrovo. Namely, a person called Mitru Ion, together with his wife, offers one of his sons, Florea, for adoption to his brother, Marin, who did not have children. The donor, Mitru Ion, mentions that, should his other children die, he will not have any requests from his brother. It is also stipulated that, should the brother's wife give birth, all children will be brothers.

The document is handwritten in Romanian, in Cyrillic script. It has the name of the chorbaji,[9] mayor and nine witnesses on it, as well as the

[9] In the 19th century, *chorbaji* was used in Ottoman Bulgaria as a title for (Christian) members of the rural elite, heads of villages and other rural communities and rich peasants, who were employed by the Ottomans in various administrative positions, such as tax collector and in courts of law.

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fingerprint of the donor. The document has two stamps. The upper one is a confirmation of paid tax, which contains the monogram of the ruling sultan, Abdülaziz I, and the price: *kıymet: min 100 ila 1000* ("value: from 100 to 1000")[10]. The lower one is the stamp of the clerk who validated the document, and the text in Ottoman Turkish reads: *muhtâr-i sâni karye-i Rabrova 1277* ("second Muhtar of the village Rabrovo, 1861").

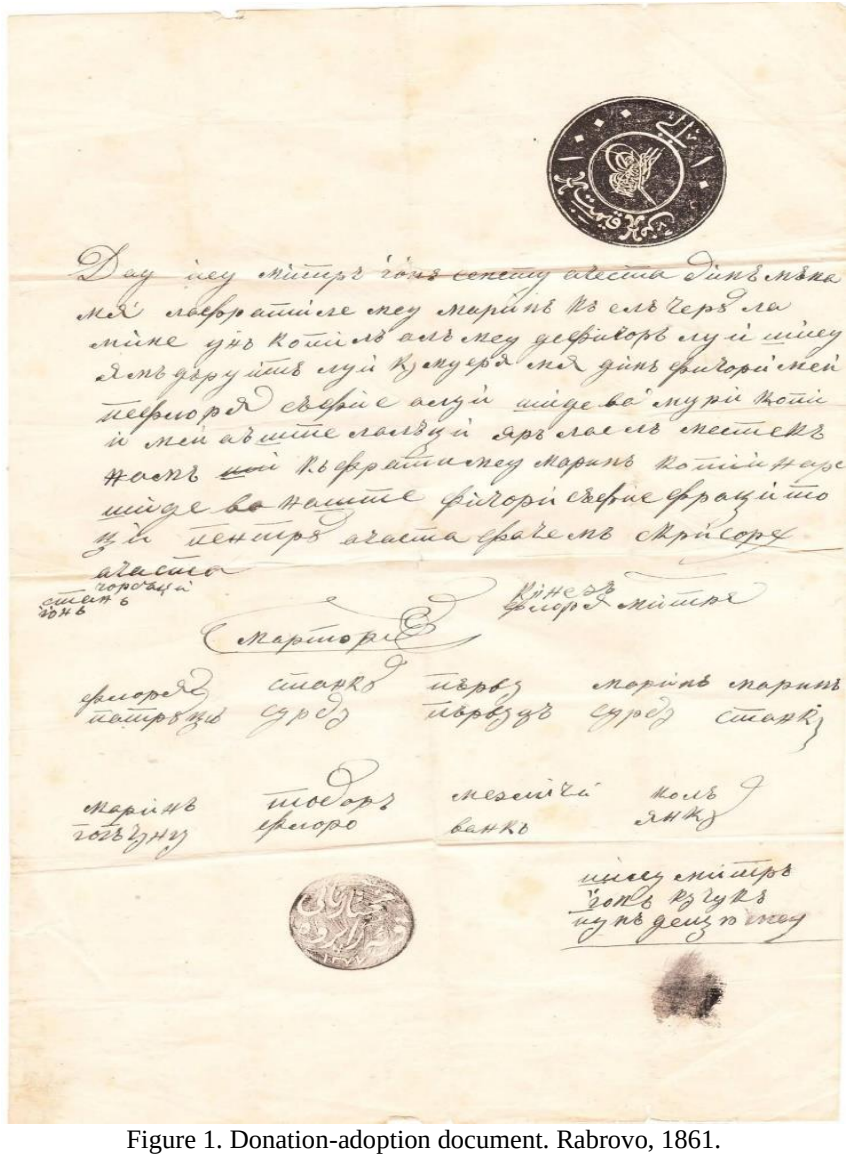


Figure 1. Donation-adoption document. Rabrovo, 1861.

[10] Kuruș or piastre.

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Romanian Cyrillic text	Transliteration	English translation
Дау иеу митръ ионъ сенету ачеста динъ мъна мя лафратиеле меу маринъ къ елъ черу ла мине унъ копилъ алъ меу дефичоръ луи шиеу ямъ дъруитъ луи кумуеря мя динъ фичори меи пе флоря съфие алуи шидева мури копи и меи аъште лалъци яръ лаелъ местекъ намъ ~~ши~~ къфратимеу маринъ копии наре шиде ва наште фичиори съфие фраци тоци пентру ачаста фачемъ скрисоре ачаста чорбаџи станъ ионъ Кинезъ флоря митря Мартори флоря патруцъ станко сурду първу първуцъ маринъ сурду маринъ станку маринъ гогъуну тодоръ флора мезелиђи ванкъ коля янку шиеу митръ ионъ кучукъ пунъ дежт а меу	Dau ieu mitr ion senetu acesta din mîna mia lafratiele meu marin că el ceru la mine un copil al meu deficior lui șieu iam dăruit lui cumueria mia din ficiori mei pe floria săfie alui șideva muri copi i mei aște lalți iar lael mestec nam ~~și~~ căfratimeu marin copii nare șide va naște ficiori săfie frați toți pentru aceasta facem scrisore aceasta ciorbagiu stan ion chinez floria mitria Martori floria patruț stanco surdu pîrvu pîrvuț marin surdu marin stancu marin gogîunu todor flora mezelici vanc colia iancu șieu mitr ion cuciuc pun dejt a meu	I, Mitru Ion, give this document from my hand to my brother Marin, as he asked me to give him one of my sons for adoption. My wife and I gave him Florea from my sons to be his. If my other children die, I will ask nothing from him, because my brother Marin does not have children. If (his wife) gives birth to boys, they shall all be brothers. This is why we write this letter. Chorbaji Stan Ion Mayor Florea Mitrea Witnesses Florea Pătruț Stancu Surdu Pîrvu Pîrvuț Marin Stancu Marin Gogîunu Todor Flora Mezelici Vanc Colea Iancu And I, Mitru Ion the Small, put my finger.

Table 1. The transliterated and translated text of the 1861 Rabrovo document.

5. Social and historical context

Towards the end of the 14th century, in 1397, Vidin became a pashalik. The entire region south of the Danube came under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, which was interrupted only for a short time, during which the area was under Habsburg rule (1718-1739). The Ottoman occupation was

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maintained in the Vidin region until 1878. In the Russian-Romanian-Turkish war of 1877-1878, Vidin was one of the points of intense Ottoman resistance.

In neighbouring Serbia, Prince Miloš Obrenović led a liberation movement, and gained the autonomy of Serbia in 1814. The Belgrade pashalik expanded, annexing the area inhabited by Vlachs between East Morava and Timok. After the Peace of Adrianople, in 1829, Miloš Obrenović requested the annexation of Timok and Krajna, counties with a majority Romanian-speaking population, which was realized in 1833. After this military intervention, the border with Bulgaria was set on the Timok river. For the first time, the Vlachs in Eastern Serbia were formally separated from those in the Vidin area, who remained under Turkish rule for four more decades.

Therefore, in 1861, the year in which the document we are dealing with was signed and stamped, Rabrovo and the entire Vidin region were still under Ottoman rule, unlike the nearby Romanian villages on the other bank of the Timok river, which at that point belonged to Serbia. 1861 is also the year in which Sultan Abdülaziz I (1830-1876) ascended to the throne of the Ottoman Empire, succeeding his brother Abdülmecid I. Abdülaziz I was the thirty-second sultan of the Ottoman Empire and ruled from 1861 to 1876. Despite receiving a traditional Ottoman education, he was an ardent admirer of the West, and wowed audiences on a lavish, first ever trip to Western Europe by an Ottoman sultan, in 1867 (Howard 2017: 226).

After Serbia's expansion and the annexation to the new state of the areas inhabited by the Vlachs, the assimilation of this population began. They lost the rights they had under the Turks, Romanian stopped being used in schools and churches. Nevertheless, in the middle of the 19th century, on the other bank of the Timok river, the Romanian-speaking population of the Vidin region still enjoyed all freedoms offered by the Ottomans, including the right to use their language in church, school and administration, as also proved by this document.

Thus, Gustav Weigand, traveling through the Romanian villages of Bulgaria and Serbia, at the end of the 19th century, observed the differences between the policies of the two states regarding the assimilation of minorities:

> "In Bulgaria the realities are different. There is nothing being done by the Bulgarian government for the Bulgarianization of Romanians. The religious service is in Romanian, the priests are Romanian; Bulgarian is also taught in school, but the language of instruction is Romanian" (Weigand, 1900: 16-17).

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In another study about Romanians and Aromanians in Bulgaria, the German scholar emphasized again that the policy of non-assimilation of minorities (still) pursued by the Bulgarian state at that time was best to have satisfied citizens:

> "On the occasion of visiting several Romanian households in different villages, I convinced myself that the inhabitants felt very well in their new homeland, which they had changed with the old one only 100 years ago. (...) The Romanian language is taught in schools; but the students also learn with pleasure Bulgarian, because they need this language. In the marginal parts of the Romanian linguistic region, with villages where several languages are spoken, the Romanian language is lost, but not in the large, purely Romanian villages, in the compact Romanian linguistic region. The Bulgarian government is doing nothing to speed up the assimilation process and this is the best way to have satisfied citizens" (Weigand, 1908: 3-4).

The oppression exercised even before the middle of the 19th century in Eastern Serbia began in the areas inhabited by Romanians in Bulgaria only in the interwar period:

> "In 1923-1924, Romanian schools and churches are closed (where they existed), priests and teachers - arrested; Romanian textbooks are confiscated, under the pretext that they will be replaced with new ones; locals are forced to stop wearing their traditional costume, to cut their shirts, they are forbidden to speak Romanian in front of local authorities, fines and corporal punishment are applied for the simple *guilt* of being Romanian, of speaking Romanian, of sending their children to schools in Romania. All state, county and commune officials, as well as teachers and priests, are replaced by Macedonians and Bulgarians, brought especially for this purpose" (Budiș, 2001: 35).

As we can see from the document of Rabrovo, the Romanian-speaking population in the Vidin area was still using the Romanian language, written in Cyrillic, in administration. North of the Danube, the shift from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet happened gradually, in the 19th century, with help of a transitional alphabet. In 1861, when the Rabrovo document was issued, the Latin alphabet had already been introduced in administration in Wallachia, by an 1860 order of Ion Ghica, Minister of Internal Affairs. In 1862 it became official in Moldova, as well. The transition from Cyrillic to Latin, if it happened at all, was probably much slower for the Romanian-speaking population south of the Danube, given that they lived in a Slavic state that used, and still uses, only the Cyrillic alphabet.

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As we can infer from the very short text of the document, the Romanian variety used in Rabrovo around the middle of the 19th century belonged to the Oltenian subvariety, spoken in southern Romania. Among the phonetic features indicating a southern Romanian origin of the speakers is the use of the form *дежт* ("finger"), while among the morphological characteristic – the use of the simple perfect tense: *черу* ("(he) asked"). It is important to note that, apart from the name of only one witness, all other 12 names mentioned in the document are Romanian. This Romanian-speaking population could have had relatively recently settled in Rabrovo, maybe not more than three decades before, probably following the Organic Regulation. It is possible that the parents of the child given for adoption could have even been born on the territory of present-day Romania.

It should also be noticed that the document contains only male names: the natural mother of the child given for adoption is only mentioned as the wife of Mitru Ion, while the wife of the adopter is merely implied in the text. This should come as no surprise, given that the Romanian family was highly patriarchal: the father was the head of the family, and the rights over the child were not determined in the best interest of the child or the mother, but of the family (Nedelcu, 1993: 203-222). In old Romanian law, adoption was regulated by the Calimach Code, a civil code of Moldova promulgated in 1817 by ruler Scarlat Calimach, which combined local law, based on local custom, with Byzantine law. The Calimach Code regarded parental power in relation to the best interests of the child, but the father was the main judge in the family.

Only four years after this document was issued, in 1865, the Romanian Greek Catholic missionary Samoil Draxin arrived in the Vidin region. Draxin, born in a Romanian family in Vojvodina, managed to attract more than 15,000 followers among the Romanian population in the area, for his project regarding the creation of Big Romania (Măran, 2012, Țîrcomnicu, 2010: 257). Emanoil Bucuța, who printed Draxin's letters to the Metropolitan Church of Blaj, in Transylvania, as an appendix to his 1923 work *The Romanians between Vidin and Timok*, considers that, in the history of the people in this region, the Draxin episode has a special importance, "which could have easily become a major crossroad" (Bucuța, 1923: 36).

6. Conclusions

Written documents in Romanian from south of the Danube, issued in the 18th or 19th century, are rare. The presented document, though very short, contributes to a clearer image about the Romanian-speaking population in Ottoman Bulgaria, its language, origin, family relations, state administration, political context. Being published for the first time, the emotional value that the document has for its owner, the descendant of the child who was adopted in 1861, is now doubled by an undisputable scientific significance,

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underlining the importance of family archives as sources of historical and linguistic information.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Ionuț Colan from Bucharest, who, knowing my long-lasting interest in the Vlach community of Eastern Serbia, acted as intermediary and put the document from neighbouring Bulgaria at my disposal. I want to thank my colleague from the Institute for Balkan Studies in Belgrade, Ognjen Krešić, for translating the Ottoman Turkish text on the stamps and sharing my enthusiasm towards the document, and my friend Monica Huțanu from the West University of Timișoara for her invaluable help in reading the Cyrillic text.

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