

Research Article

Shifting Identities as a Strategy to Remain in the Homeland: The Remarkable History of Kurfallı, Eastern Thrace's Last Bulgarian Village

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Abstract:

The Bulgarians of the village of Kurfallı in Silivri, who had previously survived the aforementioned wave of migration by asserting their identity as Greeks, also survived the 1923 Population Exchange by reaffirming their Bulgarian identity. However, in the 1930s, when it became evident that they could no longer maintain their identity as the sole remaining Bulgarian community in the region, they chose to exchange places with a Turkish village from Bulgaria in 1935. This represented the final instance of population exchange in the Balkans. The paper is primarily based on Turkish archival sources.

Keywords: Eastern Thrace, Bulgarians, Greeks, Population Exchange, Kurfallı

Eastern Thrace has a long history of multiculturalism, with a diverse population that has included adherents of various religions and denominations, including Greek, Bulgarian, Turkish, Jewish, Armenian, and Catholic traditions.

The nationalisms that emerged in the Balkans from the 19th century onwards began to influence this region as well. As wars increased and nation-states were established, the pace of migration between them

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accelerated. Consequently, Eastern Thrace lost its multicultural character during the early decades of the 20th century, resulting in the forced displacement of Christians from the region. One such group was the Bulgarian population.

The Bulgarian Population of Eastern Thrace

In Eastern Thrace, the Bulgarian population was concentrated in several regions. These regions can be classified as the Edirne-Kırklareli, Keşan-Malkara, and Çatalca-Silivri lines. Additionally, there were settlements in the southern reaches of the Sea of Marmara, situated in the proximity to the coastline, which were inhabited by Bulgarians to a lesser extent than in Thrace, too.¹

Prior to the Balkan Wars, there were 78 Bulgarian villages and 34 mixed villages in Eastern Thrace.² As documented in the Ottoman census published by Kemal Karpat, the Bulgarian population in the province of Edirne (Edirne center, Tekirdağ, Gelibolu, Kırklareli) was 70,369 between the years 1881/1882 and 1893. Of this population, 34,000 were in Kırklareli, while the remaining 400 were in Lapseki, 1,300 in Hudavendigar province, and nearly 6,000 in Catalca (Silivri, B. Çekmece, Çatalca center).³

As indicated in the 1902 *Edirne Province Yearbook (Salname)*, the total population of the territories currently comprising Thrace in Turkey was 632,515, of whom 79,634 were identified as Bulgarians.⁴ After the 1903 Ilinden uprising, it is also known that there was a Bulgarian migration from Eastern Thrace.⁵

In the official Ottoman records, all Orthodox Christians were recorded as part of the Greek *millet*. Consequently, Bulgarian speakers were also considered Greeks by the Ottoman government and were under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. However, from the latter half of the nineteenth century onward, nationalism also began to rise among the Bulgarians, with their primary objective being the establishment

¹ On Bulgarian settlements in Eastern Thrace see: L. Miletich, *Razorenito na trakiiskite balgari prez 1913 godina*, (Sofia: Darzka vna Pechatnitsa, 1918); Stoyan Rayçevski, *İztoçna Trakya*, (Sofia: Bilgarski Bestseller, 2002)

² Başbakanlık Cumhuriyet Arşivi (BCA)-272 12 63 191 1

³ Kemal H. Karpat, *Osmanlı Nüfusu (1830-1914)-Demografik ve Sosyal Özellikleri*, (İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2003), 164,188.

⁴ Hümmet Kanal, "Salnâmelere Göre 19. Yüzyıl Sonlarında Kırkkilise (Kırklareli) Sancağı," *Journal of History School*, XXVI (June 2016), 157.

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strandzha_Commune (accessed 15 October 2024)

of an independent church.⁶ Following the establishment of the Bulgarian Exarchate in 1870, a schism arose within the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, dividing it into two distinct groups: those who remained under the Exarchate's jurisdiction and those who aligned themselves with the authority of the Patriarchate.⁷ As one moved farther from Istanbul, the influence of the Exarchate grew stronger, while the Patriarchate was more powerful in proportion to its proximity to the city.

The Balkan Wars of 1912–1913 and World War I significantly reshaped the demographic landscape of the Balkans. In pursuit of altering population structures deemed undesirable, states undertook swift and decisive measures, employing a variety of methods to achieve their objectives. During the First Balkan War, the Bulgarian Army advanced as far as Çatalca, carrying out punitive campaigns primarily against Muslims and, at times, Greeks. These campaigns involved killings, the burning of homes, and the forced displacement of civilians. Additionally, all Bulgarians living in territories occupied by the Bulgarian Army were brought under the jurisdiction of the Bulgarian Exarchate. Believing that Bulgaria had gained excessively from the First Balkan War, the other Balkan states, now joined by Romania, declared war against Bulgaria. The favourable circumstances created by this second conflict allowed the Ottoman Army, under the command of Enver Bey, to reclaim Eastern Thrace, including Edirne, on 22 July 1913. This was accomplished by crossing the Midia-Enos line, which had been designated as the border during the London Conference. However, the Balkan Wars and the events that transpired during this period led the Ittihadists to conclude that the continued existence of the Ottoman Empire in its remaining territories could only be assured by the removal of Christians from these regions.⁸ The primary targeting of the Bulgarians was likely driven by the desire to remove "unreliable" elements from a narrow area in close proximity to the capital. This area had previously been occupied by the Bulgarian Army, and there was a prevailing fear of its potential return. Additionally, widespread resentment and hostility towards Bulgarians and Bulgaria further fuelled these actions.

The Balkan Wars prompted some of the remaining Muslim populations in the Balkans to seek refuge in the remaining Ottoman territories, driven by the pervasive oppression and massacres they had

⁶ İlber Ortaylı, "Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Millet," *Tanzimat'tan Cumhuriyet'e Türkiye Ansiklopedisi*, cilt:4, 997.

⁷ Dimitris Stamatopoulos, "The Bulgarian Schism Revisited," *Modern Greek Studies Yearbook*, 24/25 (2008-2009), 105-125.

⁸Taner Akçam, *Ermeni Meselesi Hallolunmuştur-Osmanlı Belgelerine Göre Savaş Yıllarında Ermenilere Yönelik Politikalar*, (İstanbul: İletişim, 2008), 11.

endured. In this context, the Christian inhabitants of Eastern Thrace also confronted a similar trajectory of violence, oppression, and victimization. Consequently, the Bulgarian population of Eastern Thrace also commenced a rapid exodus from the region beginning in July 1913. The Carnegie Report, which examined the causes and processes of the war immediately following the Balkan Wars and documented war crimes against civilians, also addressed human rights violations by the parties involved, sometimes citing testimonies to substantiate these claims. The Carnegie Report documents the atrocities perpetrated by the Bulgarian army against the Muslim and Greek populations in Eastern Thrace. However, it also reveals that, following the Bulgarian army's withdrawal, the Bulgarian population in Eastern Thrace was subjected to revenge attacks, kidnappings, deaths, injuries, and looting. These acts were only halted after a considerable period of time with the intervention of the consuls of the great powers.⁹ During this period, Bulgarian houses in the Kırklareli and Pınarhisar regions, as well as in the Çatalca province, were largely destroyed during the occupation and subsequent retreat of the Bulgarian army. The lands on which these houses once stood were later allocated to Muslim refugees from Bulgaria, who were in need of shelter at the time.¹⁰

One of the most significant consequences of the Balkan Wars was the rapid transformation of the population structure in Eastern Thrace, which occurred concurrently with the implementation of new policies towards non-Muslims in this region.¹¹

The initial exchange agreement to be concluded in the Balkans was the Istanbul Agreement between Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire, which was signed on September 29, 1913. The agreement provided for the reciprocal relocation of populations from villages situated within 15 kilometers of the border. Notably, prior to the agreement's conclusion, 48,570 Muslims and 46,764 Bulgarians had already migrated.¹² In accordance with Article 9 of this agreement, the Bulgarian population residing outside the designated zone and who had evacuated their residences during the war would be

⁹*Report of the International Commission to Inquire into the Causes and Conduct of the Balkan Wars*, (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1914,) 128-129.

¹⁰ BCA-272 12 63 191 1; BOA-HR-İM 63 56 5

¹¹ For details see: Ryan Gingeras, "A last toehold in Europe: the making of Turkish Thrace, 1922-1923," in *War and Collapse: World War I and the Ottoman State*, eds. M. Hakan Yavuz with Feroz Ahmad, (Salt Lake City; The University of Utah Press, 2016), 371-404; Darko Majstorovic, "The 1913 Ottoman Military Campaign in Eastern Thrace: A Prelude to Genocide?," *Journal of Genocide Research*. 21 (2018), 1-22.

¹² Stephen P. Ladas, *The Exchange of Minorities: Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey*, (New York: Macmillan Co., 1932), 15.

entitled to retain their property rights and to return to their homes within a period of two years.¹³

During this period, the Bulgarian villages of Eastern Thrace were largely depopulated, with only a small number of Bulgarians remaining. These individuals were in urban centers such as Edirne and Kırklareli, as well as in villages along the Silivri-Çatalca line. Following the signing of the Armistice of Mudros in 1918, the population saw a slight increase due to the repatriation of Bulgarians to their villages.¹⁴

Bulgarians of Kurfallı Village in Silivri

In his 1878 book, Synvet asserts that the Silivri region was home to 9,470 Greeks, 500 of whom were bilingual in Bulgarian.¹⁵ Karpas (2000) cites the number of Silivri Bulgarians as 2,804, as recorded in the 1881-1882-1893 census.¹⁶ Soteriadis provides the 1912 population figures for Silivri as 4,920 Muslims and 10,851 Greeks, with no mention of Bulgarians. Additionally, he includes the figures of 873 Armenians, 2,010 Jews, and 230 Gypsies.¹⁷

It is well-documented that the villages of Sinekli and Cücesergan (now known as Seymen) in the Silivri *kaza* were exclusively inhabited by Bulgarians, while the villages of Akveren and Kurfallı were home to a mixed population of Turks and Bulgarians.¹⁸ Iliev and Penushev suggest that Kurfallı is the oldest Bulgarian settlement in the region.¹⁹ The Bulgarians of Kurfallı also remained part of the Greek *millet*, retaining their affiliation with the Patriarchate of Constantinople. In 1892, the village was home to 50 Orthodox families and a school dedicated to Saints Constantine and Helen, which had 30 students enrolled.²⁰ An examination of the Ottoman archives reveals that an application was submitted for the

¹³ Mehmet Hacısalihoğlu, "Negotiations and Agreements for Population Transfers in the Balkans from the Beginning of the 19th Century until the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913," *Journal of Balkan and Black Sea Studies*, year 1, issue 1, (Fall 2018), 66.

¹⁴ Bilal Şimşir, *Lozan Telgrafları-1 (1922-1923)*, (Ankara: TTK, 1990), 466.

¹⁵ A. Synvet, *Les Grecs de L'Empire Ottoman etude statistique et ethnographique*, (Constantinople: 1878), 13.

¹⁶ Karpas, *Osmanlı Nüfusu* 170

¹⁷ George Soteriadis, *An Ethological map illustrating Hellenism in the Balkan Peninsula and Asia Minor*, (London: Edward Stanford, 1918), 6.

¹⁸ BCA-272 12 63 191 1

¹⁹

<https://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%9A%D1%83%D1%80%D1%84%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B8> (accessed 10 October 2024)

²⁰ Evstratiou I. Drakou, *Ta Thrakika*, (Atina, 1892), 26.

extension and reconstruction of the Bulgarian school, which was likely destroyed in the 1894 earthquake.²¹

On November 5, 1903, the Ministry of the Interior issued a missive to the *Mutasarrıflık* (county) of Çatalca. It reminded officials of the requirement to register non-Muslims separately by community, as stipulated in the second article of the recently enacted population regulation. If residents of Kurfalı, despite belonging to the Greek community, wished to transfer their records, their requests were to be fulfilled.²²

The ongoing rivalry between the Patriarchate and the Exarchate manifested in this region as well. In 1907, two men were apprehended in Kurfalı. It was believed that they were involved in spreading Bulgarian propaganda by distributing documents from Bulgarian committees.²³

It is evident that the antagonism and abduction activities that commenced in 1913 against Bulgarians in Eastern Thrace were also directed against the Bulgarians of the Silivri and Çatalca region, which had not been occupied by Bulgarians, in 1914. In a communication dated May 26, 1914, the Ottoman Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed the Ministry of the Interior that the Bulgarian Embassy in Istanbul had reported that the village of Kurfalı consisted of 150 households, 35 of which were Muslim. Additionally, 40 Bulgarian households had emigrated to Bulgaria during the Second Balkan War, while the remaining Bulgarian families continued to live in the area peacefully. However, after Easter, a group of bandits raided the village at night, breaking into Bulgarian homes and warehouses. They stole wheat, flour, clothing, and other valuables, as well as livestock, including 2,000 sheep. On the day before Easter, the bandits looted a shop owned by a Bulgarian named Athanas Rusef, taking goods worth more than 40 liras. When the Bulgarians protested, they were told they were free to leave the village. The village teacher reported that Bulgarians were pressured to depart quietly and that gendarmes, who were only present during the day, denied the existence of bandits when complaints were made. Furthermore, he claimed that when Bulgarians expressed a desire to leave the village, they were asked to sign documents confirming their voluntary departure, with some allegedly being coerced into signing. The report stated that 40 Bulgarian families fled to Sinekli train station, carrying only what they could manage on their backs. A railway official, recognizing

²¹ BOA-BEO 539 40405

²²BOA-DH-MKT 794 3

²³BOA-Y.PRK.ASK 246 105

them as former employees, placed them in open wagons to protect them from further theft. About 30 families later moved to Silivri and Tekirdağ, hoping to reach Istanbul, but their subsequent whereabouts remained unknown. The Bulgarian Embassy emphasized that these actions violated the Istanbul Agreement between the two countries and warned of the risk of Bulgaria adopting a retaliatory stance. The situation demanded immediate and decisive action to prevent further escalation.²⁴

On May 31, 1914, the Bulgarian Embassy reiterated its concerns. The Embassy reported that the District Governor of Silivri, upon learning of the Bulgarians' departure from Kurfallı, visited Sinekli Station and urged them to return to their villages, assuring them of their safety. Subsequently, he proceeded to Silivri, where he conveyed the same message to the Bulgarian refugees who had sought refuge there. The Bulgarians were subsequently compelled to return to their villages, only to discover that the personal effects they had left behind in their homes had been plundered by the Muslim population. As a result of the Bulgarians reporting the circumstances of their homes and belongings to the Silivri officers upon request, the Muslims subjected them to severe extortion, making it impossible for them to remain in the village. For instance, Nikola Todorov was physically assaulted and intimidated, compelling him to evacuate the area with his children. The Muslim forces initiated an assault on the female population, specifically targeting young girls and women. They conducted searches of the residences of Aleksandra Kostantinova, a twenty-year-old girl, and six other girls, with the intention of forcibly relocating them to the mountains for conversion. Upon realizing that the officials had failed to fulfill their commitments, the Kurfallı Bulgarians reached the conclusion that they could no longer continue residing in their villages and opted instead to migrate to Bulgaria. However, local officials impeded their departure and directed all stations to refrain from accepting their belongings. The officials prohibited the Bulgarians from departing unless they obtained a certificate from the Greek Metropolitan of Silivri, Evgenios (Papathomas). Concurrently, the Bulgarians' fields were being appropriated or their crops were being harvested by foreigners. The Embassy lodged a protest against these developments and requested the Ottoman Ministry of Foreign Affairs to issue a directive to the relevant officials, instructing them to refrain from impeding the departure of Bulgarians who were compelled to leave their place of birth. Additionally, the Bulgarian Embassy raised the case of ten Bulgarian families in

²⁴ BOA-HR-SYS 2073 6

Boğazköy (Çatalca), who were prevented from migrating with their livestock, urging that no further obstacles be placed in their path.²⁵

"We Are Greeks, Not Bulgarians"

Upon receiving these complaints from the Bulgarian Embassy in Istanbul, the Ministry of Interior, the Gendarmerie, and the Silivri District Governor's Office initiated an investigation. In order to fulfill this objective, the officials proceeded to Kurfalı, conducted inquiries, and compiled a report dated June 17, 1914. The report indicates that, when the Bulgarian *mukhtar* of the village, the council of elders, and the villagers were assembled in a suitable location and questioned, it was ascertained that approximately 30 households from the village proceeded to Sinekli station and loaded their belongings onto wagons. Furthermore, the report indicated that the loaded belongings were not unloaded by anyone in any way. It also stated that the Bulgarians returned to their villages only after the Metropolitan of Silivri personally came to Sinekli station and instructed them to unload their belongings, which had been loaded onto wagons, and return to their villages until the evening. It was established that some of their belongings were left with Muslim neighbors in their villages on the condition that they would be sold and returned upon their return. The investigation further concluded that no threats or intimidation had been directed at the Bulgarians. The claim that Nikola, son of Todori, was beaten and forced to flee, leaving his children behind, was also dismissed. Nikola informed Nikolaki, son of Yordan, and others that he was traveling to Istanbul to visit his son Todori and had not yet returned. His family remained in the village and allegedly faced no pressure. The claim that individuals in the village were seeking Bulgarian girls to take to the mountains and convert them to Islam was also found to be untrue. This assertion was refuted by the *mukhtar*, the council of elders, and the entire village. In regard to the assertion that they were obstructed from applying for immigration and that directives were issued to refrain from accepting Bulgarian passengers at the stations, understood that no such directive was provided during the investigation. It was determined that no Bulgarian intending to emigrate had applied to the Greek Metropolitan for documentation. Instead, they had declared themselves to be "not Bulgarians, but members of the Greek *millet*." This information was read aloud in the presence of the gathered parties and was formally signed and sealed by the commanding officers of the gendarmerie and police station, along with the *mukhtar*, members of the council of elders, and other notable

²⁵ BOA-HR-SYS 2073 7

figures.²⁶ Consequently, the Bulgarians of Kurfallı sought to evade the policy against Bulgarians by asserting their Greek identity in official records.

During this period, Bulgarian diplomatic correspondence with the Ottoman Ministry of Foreign Affairs contained both overt and subtle threats. These communications warned that policies targeting Bulgarians and the hardships imposed on them could strain diplomatic relations between the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria and jeopardize the welfare of the Muslim population living in Bulgaria. Notably, the number of complaints decreased after the outbreak of World War I and the subsequent alliance between the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria.

In consequence of the Ottoman Empire's military defeat, the Armistice of Mudros was concluded on October 30, 1918. During this period, the region was placed under the control of the Entente powers, and in 1920, the Greek army occupied Eastern Thrace. As a result, some Bulgarians returned to their villages. A letter dated October 19, 1920, from the *Mutasarrıflık* of Çatalca to the Ministry of Interior indicates that during the occupation of Eastern Thrace by the Greek army, the villages of Akviran, Bekirli, Kurfallı, and Sinekli in Silivri kaza remained outside the occupation. As these villages were situated on the border, the second copy of the population books, which should have been in the possession of the villages in question, was examined. The new *mukhtar* reported that the second copy book had either not been provided to the Greek quarter of Kurfallı village or had gone missing. Consequently, a re-census of the Greek quarter, which had a current population of approximately 450, was deemed necessary. This decision was made in line with the instructions issued by the Ministry of Justice on May 10, 1917. The census was to be carried out by a commission formed in accordance with the relevant directive.²⁷

By the fall of 1922, following the defeat of the Greek army in Anatolia, the Mudanya Armistice was signed on October 11, 1922. Under its terms, the Greek army was required to evacuate Eastern Thrace within fifteen days. This decision instilled great fear among the Greek population of Eastern Thrace, prompting many to migrate to Greece alongside the retreating Greek army. As the Lausanne Conference approached, discussions intensified about the possibility of a population exchange between Muslims in Greece and Greeks in Turkey.

²⁶ BOA-HR-SYS 2073 7

²⁷BOA-DH-SN THR 87 37

In 1913, Exarch Iosif relocated from Istanbul to Sofia, leaving Metropolitan Meleti (Veleshki) as his deputy in Istanbul. A document dated November 20, 1922, addressed to the Vilayet of Istanbul, indicates that the Bulgarian Metropolitan in Istanbul sought to have the inhabitants of the Kurfalı village incorporated into the metropolitanate on the grounds that they were Bulgarians.²⁸

In a written communication dated April 5, 1923, the Bulgarian delegate in Istanbul, General Markov, articulated his concerns following a meeting with Adnan Bey, the Ankara Government's representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Istanbul. Metropolitan Meleti had appointed Zhelyu Ivanov as a teacher at the Kurfalı school, and he had assumed his duties in November 1922. However, the school was subsequently closed a few months later. Similarly, Priest Stefan, who visited the village for Christmas, was forced to leave within 24 hours, leaving the village without a priest. Plans to send another priest for Easter were abandoned due to expectations of similar circumstances. On March 15, two soldiers from the 4th Regiment entered Panayot Dimitrov's house, causing distress to his wife and children by firing their weapons indiscriminately. Villagers were unable to farm due to fears of attacks and were compelled to perform daily tasks, feed soldiers without compensation, and grant them access to their homes. On March 28, two horses were stolen from Nikola Petrov's stable. Although a complaint was filed with the local gendarmerie, it was ignored, and the horses mysteriously reappeared in the stable days later. Two unidentified individuals tied Georgi Rachev to a tree while he was traveling to a neighboring municipality, seizing his horses and carriage. On March 21, a 15-year-old farm worker tending oxen in Apostol Nikolov's field was shot and injured, the oxen were stolen, and the youth was sent to a hospital in Istanbul. Markov reported these incidents in detail, emphasizing that the mukhtar and the council of elders were fully aware of the Bulgarian assistance provided to the Turks during the Greek occupation.²⁹

In a letter dated July 1, 1923, the *Mutasarrif* (sub-governor) of Çatalca wrote to Adnan Bey, the representative of the Ankara Government in Istanbul. He stated that the village of Kurfalı had been Bulgarian before the Balkan War, Greek Orthodox after the Balkan War due to the exchange of Bulgarians, and that following the decision in Lausanne that Greeks would be subjected to the exchange, the villagers wanted to convert to the Bulgarian sect just to avoid the exchange. The Bulgarian Metropolitan had assigned a permanent priest to the village. The *Mutasarrif* stated that

²⁸BOA-HR-İM 62 62

²⁹ BOA-HR-İM 70 86

individuals were free to choose their religion or sect, but he himself was uncertain about how to handle such matters. Seeking clarity, he requested guidance from the Ministry of Justice. In response, he was informed via telegram that the issue had been discussed by the Council of Ministers, which decided to postpone establishing official relations with local clerics and religious bodies until after the peace conference. It was deemed premature to take any action at that time. During Colonel Esad Bey's tenure as acting Governor of Constantinople, he unofficially permitted the Metropolitan to send a provisional priest to Kurfallı for Easter. The priest conducted services and returned after the holiday. Later, for another religious feast, the Metropolitan dispatched the same priest, who went directly to the village and began the service. When the gendarmerie inquired about his documents and the purpose of his visit, the priest claimed to have official papers. These documents were collected and forwarded to the relevant authorities, but by then, the feast had ended, and the priest had already departed.³⁰

Population Exchange between Turkey and Greece

On January 30, 1923, the Lausanne Conference reached a decision regarding the exchange of Muslims in Greece and Greeks in Turkey.³¹ On March 13, 1924, following the commencement of the population exchange, the Bulgarian delegation submitted a formal request to the Istanbul Representative Office of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This request asserted that the Christians residing in the village of Kurfallı were originally Bulgarian and should not be subjected to the exchange.³² However, in the official correspondence of the Turkish bureaucracy, it was explicitly stated that the involvement of a representative office in such a matter, which was considered a domestic issue, was not welcomed.³³ In a strongly worded statement issued on May 21, the Bulgarian government cautioned that exchanging the people of Kurfallı with Greece, a nation with which they shared minimal cultural or historical ties, would deeply harm the Bulgarian population.³⁴ Once again, no response was received from the Turkish side. Consequently, on May 24, the Bulgarian delegation submitted another application to the Turkish authorities. The application detailed that the inhabitants of Kurfallı were of Bulgarian origin and spoke Bulgarian. It was revealed that, in recent days, Turkish refugees arriving in the area had

³⁰BOA-HR-İM 51-13

³¹ For details see: Ladas, *The Exchange of Minorities*

³² BOA-HR-İM 4 18

³³ TC. Dışişleri Bakanlığı Arşivi- 15104548

³⁴ BOA-HR-İM 4 18

forced the Bulgarians to vacate their homes, which were then occupied by the refugees without any intervention from the authorities. As a result, the Bulgarians were left homeless. Highlighting the Turkish government's purported "positive attitude towards this linguistic and ethnic group," the Bulgarian delegation expressed its expectation that the Turkish authorities would take immediate action to protect the residents of Kurfallı. Additionally, it was stressed that relocating the villagers to Greece, a country with which they had no meaningful connection, would likely lead to significant dissatisfaction among the Bulgarian public.³⁵

In a letter dated May 31, 1924, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded to the Bulgarian Representative's correspondence from May 21, 1924. The representative had alleged that Bulgarians in the village of Kurfallı had been evicted from their homes and replaced by Turkish immigrants from Greece. The Ministry countered that the information it had received did not substantiate these complaints. On the contrary, it claimed that individuals who had previously identified as Greeks during the census were now asserting Bulgarian identity to avoid inclusion in the population exchange. The Ministry concluded that no further explanation was owed to the Bulgarian Representative and advised him to refrain from submitting such applications.³⁶

A letter from the Ministry of Exchange, Reconstruction, and Settlement to the Prime Ministry in early June revealed that the residents of Kurfallı were slated for transfer under the population exchange. However, the villagers had applied for exemption, claiming Bulgarian identity. Consequently, the Çatalca Province was tasked with providing clarification on the matter. If the villagers were indeed Bulgarians, excluding them from the exchange with Greece would have been reasonable. However, the situation was complicated by the unimplemented provisions of the 1913 Istanbul Agreement, which addressed the exchange of Bulgarians in Eastern Thrace. This left unresolved the status of Turkish citizens of Bulgarian descent and Orthodox Bulgarian citizens residing in Thrace. Recognizing the bureaucratic impasse, the Council of Ministers issued a decree on June 18, 1924. It instructed the relevant ministries to investigate further. Should it be confirmed that the individuals were of Greek Orthodox descent and therefore subject to the exchange, or of

³⁵ TC. Dışişleri Bakanlığı Arşivi -11784517

³⁶BOA-HR-İM 106 19

Bulgarian descent, albeit unlikely, no immediate action would be taken, and their status as citizens would remain unchanged.³⁷

“We Are Bulgarians, Not Greeks”

On June 21, 1924, a telegram was dispatched to the Ministry of the Interior, signed by Athanas Rusev, the village's *mukhtar*:

“Despite the fact that the Christian inhabitants of the village of Kurfalı in Çatalca are originally Bulgarian, the Subcommission of Population Exchange has recognized them as Bulgarians. However, the Governor of Çatalca is settling refugees in their households and distributing their crops on the pretext that they were previously affiliated with the Patriarchate and registered as Greeks in the population records. Our previous affiliation with the Patriarchate and our registration as Greeks in the population records had no bearing on our Bulgarian identity. The testimony of all the Turks in the region corroborates the assertion that we have consistently identified as Bulgarians. The prospect of resettlement in Greece would have placed us at significant risk of exploitation and potential mortality. In light of the probable expulsion from Greece, I respectfully request that the relevant authorities issue directives in accordance with the principles of justice and mercy. This would ensure our continued protection under the Turkish state and enable us to remain in our village, while allowing us to retrieve our crops.”³⁸

In a document dated June 22, 1924, the Bulgarian representative Radev reported that approximately 20 Bulgarian households in Kurfalı had been designated for exchange the following day. This decision was based on their registration as Greeks in the population register. Furthermore, even if they were accepted by Greece, their lack of proficiency in the Greek language would prevent them from settling there. As a result, they were likely to be deported to a remote, barren island or to Bulgaria. Radev made a special and humanitarian request for these Bulgarians to be temporarily exempted from the exchange, allowing them to emigrate to Bulgaria at a later date. In light of the ongoing negotiations with Bulgaria, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed its approval of the request and accordingly requested immediate instructions via telegraph to be conveyed to the relevant parties.³⁹ At this juncture, the Bulgarian Metropolitan in Istanbul was issuing testimonial certificates to these individuals and attempting to persuade them to relocate to Bulgaria. As a result of the aforementioned circumstances, the Ministry of the Interior directed the provincial

³⁷ BCA- 30 18 1 1 10 30 19

³⁸ TC. Dışişleri Bakanlığı Arşivi - 11784515

³⁹ TC. Dışişleri Bakanlığı Arşivi -11784510

authorities in Çatalca to defer the scheduled exchange of Bulgarians.⁴⁰ This directive was anticipated and received favorably by the Bulgarian Government. The following information was published in the newspaper *Demokratičeski Sgovor*, which was considered the official organ of the government:

*“The resolution of the issue pertaining to the status of the Bulgarian population in Turkish Thrace represents a pivotal point of contention in the ongoing Turkish-Bulgarian negotiations. The Ankara government's decision to refrain from disturbing the Bulgarian inhabitants of Kurfalı, who were compelled by local authorities to emigrate to Greece on the grounds that they were documented as pro-Patriarchate and therefore Greek, is a welcome development. These individuals should be allowed to reside in their original locations without further disruption.”*⁴¹

Subsequently, following the issuance of the decree on June 18, an effort was made to ascertain the nationality of these individuals, specifically whether they were of Greek or Bulgarian origin. On July 21, 1924, the Çatalca Province responded to a request from the Ministry of the Interior, stating that, based on research conducted by the General Directorate of Population, the entire Christian population of Kurfalı, which totaled 433 individuals (217 men and 216 women), had been registered as Greek Orthodox in both the 1906 and 1914 censuses. Consequently, the original population records had been destroyed by Bulgarian forces during the Balkan War.⁴²

Moreover, as evidenced by a letter penned by the Governor of Çatalca on July 22, 1924, when the exchange of Greeks was in discussion at the Lausanne Conference, the Bulgarians of Kurfalı had a Bulgarian priest and a teacher brought to their village. Upon seeking approval for these individuals, the Governor declined, prompting the priest's return to Istanbul. The Bulgarian Metropolitan in Istanbul sought to become involved in the matter and was urged by the Istanbul Police Directorate to refrain from further communication, given that the government did not recognize his spiritual authority. Subsequently, the Bulgarian delegation interceded on the matter. The governor perceived the underlying objective of this intervention to be the establishment of a Bulgarian presence in the Edirne and Çatalca region, with the aim of securing a competitive advantage in Thrace in the future and reactivating the Thracian Committee's operations in Bulgaria. The governor held the view that,

⁴⁰ TC. Dışışleri Bakanlıđı Arşivi - 11773954

⁴¹ TC. Dışışleri Bakanlıđı Arşivi - 11773923

⁴² TC. Dışışleri Bakanlıđı Arşivi - 11773905

irrespective of their background, the Christians of Kurfallı were, according to official records, Greek Orthodox and therefore should be subjected to exchange without delay and the country cleansed of such individuals.⁴³

However, the circumstances were not conducive to the Governor's request. In a letter dated September 10, 1924, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that negotiations for the signing of a friendship treaty with Bulgaria were still ongoing. The Ministry further stated that the implementation of the decision on the aforementioned persons at this time might have a detrimental effect on the negotiations and that it would be more appropriate to postpone the implementation of this decision until the end of the ongoing negotiations with Bulgaria. Also, the Ministry of Exchange, Reconstruction and Settlement petitioned the Council of Ministers to render a decision on this matter.⁴⁴

Server Cemal (Balısoy), the undersecretary of the embassy in Sofia, transmitted to Ankara that the *Utro* newspaper reported on September 26, 1924, that the Governor of Çatalca had summoned the prominent Bulgarians living in the village of Kurfallı and the priest of the village. The Governor had informed them that the Bulgarians of Kurfallı were guests in the village and that they would soon have to leave. This pronouncement gave rise to considerable apprehension even among the Turkish population in Bulgaria. In light of these developments, the Bulgarian government sought to engage with the Turkish government to ensure the continued presence of Bulgarians in their homes.⁴⁵ On October 9, 1924, Server Cemal was duly apprised of the findings of the research via a written communication. The research revealed that the Christian population of Kurfallı village was of the Greek Orthodox faith and that they should be transferred to Greece, in accordance with the terms of the exchange, along with other Greeks. The transfer of the Christians of Kurfallı village to Greece had been postponed at the request of the Bulgarian representative Simeon Radev during the negotiations for a Turkish-Bulgarian friendship treaty. However, the Turkish bureaucracy now had a new concern. Given the imminent conclusion of the exchange with Greece and the likelihood that the transfer of these individuals would not be accepted by Greece even if attempted after its conclusion, it was deemed necessary for the Bulgarian government to make a commitment in advance to accept them with its consent and without objection if an attempt were made to send them from Turkey at a later date. It was imperative to convey to the Bulgarian

⁴³ TC. Dışişleri Bakanlığı Arşivi - 11773905

⁴⁴ TC. Dışişleri Bakanlığı Arşivi - 11687653

⁴⁵ TC. Dışişleri Bakanlığı Arşivi -11692103

government that this obligation had to be fulfilled before the conclusion of the exchange with Greece and within a limited timeframe.⁴⁶

The Minister of Exchange, Reconstruction and Settlement reiterated the necessity of transferring the Christians of Kurfalı, irrespective of their claims, given that their population records indicated they were Greek Orthodox. In a letter dated October 8, 1924, the Ministry of the Interior advised maintaining the status quo until the conclusion of negotiations with Bulgaria.⁴⁷ In a written statement, the Legal Advisor of the Ministry of Interior expressed the following opinion: It was demonstrated that the majority of the individuals in question were registered as Greek Orthodox, with some residing in the Greek neighborhood. Additionally, it was noted that a few of them had been identified as Bulgarians for an extended period. Therefore, during the exchange process, those registered as Greek should have been immediately subjected to exchange, while the others should have been exchanged as soon as their Greek descent was confirmed.⁴⁸

In June 1925, the Mixed Exchange Commission was duly informed that the Kurfalı Christians, who had previously claimed Bulgarian identity to be excluded from the exchange, were in fact Orthodox and Greek, affiliated with the Patriarchate. A response from the commission was anticipated regarding this matter.⁴⁹ In a document dated June 15, 1925, it was stated that this matter had been discussed with the head of the Greek delegation of the commission, that they would provide assistance in this matter, that the Turkish side would not demand the admission of the individuals in question to the Greek side, that the decision that they were subject to exchange would be sufficient, that upon such a decision they would all spontaneously flee to Bulgaria, that "this situation should be kept very secret" and that it could only be discussed with the head of the Greek delegation.⁵⁰ By October 1, 1925, the Christians of Kurfalı were potentially eligible for transfer to Greece, and the relevant authorities were duly informed of this development.⁵¹

⁴⁶ TC. Dışışleri Bakanlıđı Arşivi - 11692085

⁴⁷ TC. Dışışleri Bakanlıđı Arşivi - 11692092

⁴⁸ TC. Dışışleri Bakanlıđı Arşivi - 11773860

⁴⁹ BCA-30 10 123 877 18 1

⁵⁰ TC. Dışışleri Bakanlıđı Arşivi -11687659

⁵¹TC. Dışışleri Bakanlıđı Arşivi - 11687664

The Bulgarians Stay

In early 1926, Bulgarian Prime Minister Lyapchev informed the Turkish ambassador to Sofia that maintaining cordial relations with Turkey was in Bulgaria's best interest. He also conveyed that Bulgaria had already begun implementing the provisions of the agreement and expressed hope that the Bulgarians of Kurfallı and Terkos would not be expelled from Turkey. On February 28, 1926, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs relayed this information to the Ministry of the Interior, requesting that the impending ratification of the friendship agreement be taken into account and that the aforementioned requests be fulfilled.⁵²

On March 18, 1926, Simeon Radev, the Bulgarian Mission's Chargé d'Affaires, visited the Istanbul Representative Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and requested that the requisite license for the opening of the Bulgarian primary school in the village of Kurfallı be granted with minimal delay, as he had been assured that the school would be permitted to commence operations.⁵³ In the absence of a response, the Bulgarian delegation reiterated its request to open the school on April 29, 1926. However, the Çatalca Province stated that out of the total population of 778 in the village, 391 were registered as Muslims and 396 as Greeks. Furthermore, no individuals were registered as "Bulgarian" in the village. The population registry indicated that those who desired to open the school were Greeks. Consequently, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs denied the request to open a school under the name "Bulgarian School." In light of these considerations, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a negative response on May 26, 1926.⁵⁴ The village's ongoing challenge of lacking a permanent priest persisted, too. In a request dated November 3, 1926, the Istanbul Representative Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs requested that the Istanbul Province issue orders to relevant authorities to permit Bulgarian priest Stefan Dashkov to visit the village, as it was a Bulgarian feast for four days.⁵⁵

In a letter dated May 14, 1927, Hüsrev (Gerede), the Turkish Minister in Sofia, expressed his reservations to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the implementation of Article C of the attached protocol to the 1925 Turkish-Bulgarian friendship treaty. This article stipulated that both governments would mutually acquire the immovable property left behind by Bulgarians from Eastern Thrace who had abandoned their homes after

⁵² TC. Dışişleri Bakanlığı Arşivi - 11333338

⁵³BOA-HR-İM 180 17; HR-İM 185 79

⁵⁴BOA-HR-İM 188 64

⁵⁵BOA-HR-İM 203 30

October 18, 1912, as well as by Muslims who had migrated to Turkey from territories that had separated from the Ottoman Empire. The Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed that Turkey was forcing Bulgarians from Eastern Thrace, who had migrated to Bulgaria after October 18, 1912, to leave the country and was confiscating their land. The Bulgarians of Kurfallı village were cited as a key example. Gerede sought clarification from the ministry and cautioned against the potential consequences of interpreting and applying this article in such a manner:

“In light of this interpretation of Article C, while it is not possible to estimate the quantity of property belonging to Bulgarians that will be confiscated by the government in our country, it seems reasonable to conclude that the total will not be significant. Conversely, it is anticipated that the confiscation of land belonging to thousands of Muslims in the proposed Bulgaria will result in the displacement of approximately twenty to thirty thousand individuals. These individuals, who have made strides towards improving their livelihoods, will be compelled to leave Bulgaria as a consequence of the aforementioned confiscation.”⁵⁶

As reported by the Embassy in Sofia on March 2, 1928, the Bulgarian newspaper *Posledna Pošta*, in its issue of February 27, 1928, highlighted efforts to protect the cultural rights of Bulgarians residing in Eastern Thrace. The report explained that the only remaining Bulgarian school in the village of Kurfallı had initially been allowed to open but was later closed due to a lack of financial resources. The church faced a similar fate. The newspaper argued that it was inconceivable for Bulgarian schools and churches in Turkey to receive support from the Turkish government, especially given that M. Kemal had not extended assistance to the muftis. In contrast, the Bulgarian government had allocated a significant sum of money to support the mufti offices and Turkish schools.⁵⁷

In 1928, a number of families from the Kurfallı relocated to Istanbul and Bulgaria, primarily due to concerns regarding the availability and quality of educational opportunities.

From 1930 onward, the Bulgarian press showed a marked increase in its focus on Kurfallı, reporting on negative developments in the village. It was claimed that the village church had been closed, Bulgarian girls had been abducted by Turks and forced to convert, Bulgarians had been coerced into attending mosque services, and their lands had been confiscated. In response, the *Cumhuriyet* newspaper countered the Bulgarian press reports,

⁵⁶ TC. Dışişleri Bakanlığı Arşivi -10334260

⁵⁷ TC. Dışişleri Bakanlığı Arşivi -7527586

stating that on-site investigations had been conducted and that none of the allegations were substantiated.⁵⁸

In 1932, a census was conducted in Kurfallı, which revealed that there were approximately 400 Bulgarians residing in the area.⁵⁹ In his address to the Bulgarian parliament in 1932, Bulgarian Prime Minister Mushanov asserted that between 1925 and 1931, there was no interest in Bulgarian property in Turkey. He further stated that the property around Edirne was occupied by the Turks, with the exception of the village of Kurfallı, which had a population of 100 households. Additionally, he highlighted a discrepancy in the interpretation of the 1925 protocol and noted the formation of commissions to address these issues following his visit to Ankara.⁶⁰ By 1933, there were also reports indicating that the village was without a priest.⁶¹ The *Ataka* newspaper reported that the Bulgarians of Kurfallı had been offended on religious grounds. The liturgy had been performed by a Muslim *Hoca* instead of a priest.⁶²

The Last Population Exchange

However, the Bulgarians' concerns extended beyond the academic and religious spheres. Additionally, they had other concerns regarding their future prospects. The issue of whom to marry began to emerge due to the fact that individuals were related to one another. The demographic shift resulted in the formation of new familial relationships, with boys and girls becoming each other's cousins. Orthodox beliefs, however, prohibited marriages between cousins. Furthermore, there were no longer any Bulgarians residing in the villages of Çatalca and Terkos. Young men from the village traveled to Bulgaria in search of brides and did not return, leading the village to gradually become a predominantly female settlement. This situation prompted the Bulgarian population to consider emigration as a viable option. Upon submitting their request to the Turkish government, it was acknowledged and subsequently referred to the Bulgarian government. In response, the Bulgarian government inquired with 700 Turkish villages to determine which would be interested in relocating to Turkey.⁶³

⁵⁸ "Çatalca havalisinde hiçbir Bulgara haksızlık yapılmamıştır," *Cumhuriyet*, 30 June 1930

⁵⁹ BCA-272 11 25 134 11

⁶⁰ "Türkiye-Bulgaristan münasebatı yeni bir safhaya girdi," *Milliyet*, 25 November 1932

⁶¹ "Trakya gazetesine gelince," *Son Posta*, 30 September 1933

⁶² BCA-30 10 241 629 7

⁶³ "Turkish Peasants Exchange Village with Bulgarians", *The Christian Science Monitor*, 29 July 1935

In a letter dated January 14, 1934, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed the Prime Ministry that during the negotiations between the two governments in January 1934, the Bulgarians of Kurfallı first proposed an exchange with 3-4 thousand Muslims in Bulgarian Macedonia.⁶⁴

Meanwhile, 52 Turkish families residing in the village of Kediören (Rosina) in the Popova district of Bulgaria, intending to migrate to Turkey, contacted Bulgarians in the village of Kurfallı in Silivri and proposed a property exchange. As reported by Bulgarian consul Vanchev, the villagers proceeded to their respective destinations, prepared a list of properties, and attempted to negotiate a resolution among themselves.⁶⁵ However, there were also individuals who expressed a desire to remain in their current location. The head of a family from the village stated that he was firmly opposed to being relocated to Bulgaria and would only consider going to Romania if the government compelled him to do so.⁶⁶

The decision regarding mutual migration was reached during the summer of 1934, when the Bulgarian ambassador, Antonov, met with the Turkish Prime Minister, İsmet İnönü. The Bulgarian government agreed to facilitate the transportation of Turkish nationals' belongings by rail at no cost, on the condition that the same provision would be extended to Bulgarian citizens residing in Turkey. Both governments also concurred on the issuance of temporary passports to the emigrants at no charge.⁶⁷ To achieve this objective, the Turkish government enacted a decree by the Council of Ministers on February 16, 1935. As a result, it was resolved that the costs incurred by the Bulgarians would be covered by the budgetary allocation for refugees, while the expenses related to the resettlement of incoming Turks would be financed through the Ministry of the Interior's designated budget. Additionally, free passports would be issued to the Bulgarians, and, due to the exchange of real estate among them, a general power of attorney would be provided to an official for the registration of properties in the land registry. Notably, the Ministry of Finance cited the 1934 Settlement Law (No. 2510) as the legal basis for exempting Bulgarian nationals from passport and visa fees. This legislation, which remains in force, grants the Minister of the Interior the authority to take action against individuals considered outside Turkish cultural norms, including the

⁶⁴ BCA-30 10 242 632 5

⁶⁵ "Eski başbakan nezaret altında, 60 kişi mevkuf", *Cumhuriyet*, 24 January 1935

⁶⁶ "Mübadele edilecek 2 köy", *Cumhuriyet*, 28 March 1935

⁶⁷ BCA-30 18 1 2 51 10 9

potential for denaturalization.⁶⁸ Now, the Silivri District Governor is responsible for overseeing the process and ensuring its proper progression.

On April 15, 1935, the final exchange took place, completed within a single day. A total of 271 Bulgarians departed for Bulgaria, while 366 Turks arrived in Turkey. The individuals involved traveled on the designated train, accompanied by a property inspector and security personnel, and arrived at the respective railway stations as planned.⁶⁹ It was agreed that the residents of both villages would transfer their properties to the respective governments. In return, the governments would issue promissory notes to the residents, which would be offset against the properties they were to receive.⁷⁰ A designated government official was tasked with overseeing the transfer of properties that had been bequeathed to the immigrants in the title deed. Upon arrival, the immigrants brought with them 105 heads of livestock, including 12 pairs of horses, 32 pairs of oxen, and cows.⁷¹ In his book *Silivri Tarihi* (History of Silivri), Cemal Kozanoğlu posits that a small number of families remained in the village.⁷²

Conclusion

During their time within the Greek *millet* of the Ottoman state, the rise of the Bulgarian Exarchate and the growth of Bulgarian nationalism placed the Bulgarian-speaking Orthodox population in a difficult position, caught between two opposing forces. The rivalry between the Greek Patriarchate and the Bulgarian Exarchate intensified, prompting some Bulgarians to align with one side and others with the other. Following the Balkan Wars, anti-Bulgarian sentiment in the Ottoman public reached such a level that it displaced the Bulgarians of Eastern Thrace. In this context, the assertion "we are Greeks, not Bulgarians" became a practical strategy among the Bulgarian population in villages around Çatalca and Silivri, which had not been occupied by Bulgarians during the war, such as the Bulgarians of Kurfalli, as they were officially registered as Greeks in the population registers. However, a decade later (1923), when the exchange of Greeks was being discussed, they were forced to assert their Bulgarian identity. The changing dynamics of Turkish-Bulgarian relations allowed them to maintain this position for another ten years, enabling them to stay in their

⁶⁸ BCA-30 18 1 2 51 10 9

⁶⁹ "İki Türk ve Bulgar köyü mübadele edildi," *Cumhuriyet*, 16 April 1935; "Barter 104 families," *The Portsmouth Herald*, 4 April 1935; "Bulgaria, Turkey trade 52 families," *Des Moines Tribune*, 3 April 1935

⁷⁰ "Mübadele edilecek köylülerin malları," *Cumhuriyet*, 25 March 1935

⁷¹ "Göçmenler anavatana hizmete geldik diyor," *Akşam*, 18 April 1935

⁷² Cemal Kozanoğlu, *Her Yönüyle Silivri*, (Silivri: Silivri Belediyesi Kültür Evi, ty), 158.

homeland. However, the diminishing Christian presence in the area made it increasingly difficult for the community to survive. In response, the Bulgarians of Kurfalı devised a solution in the form of a mutual exchange with a Turkish village in Bulgaria.

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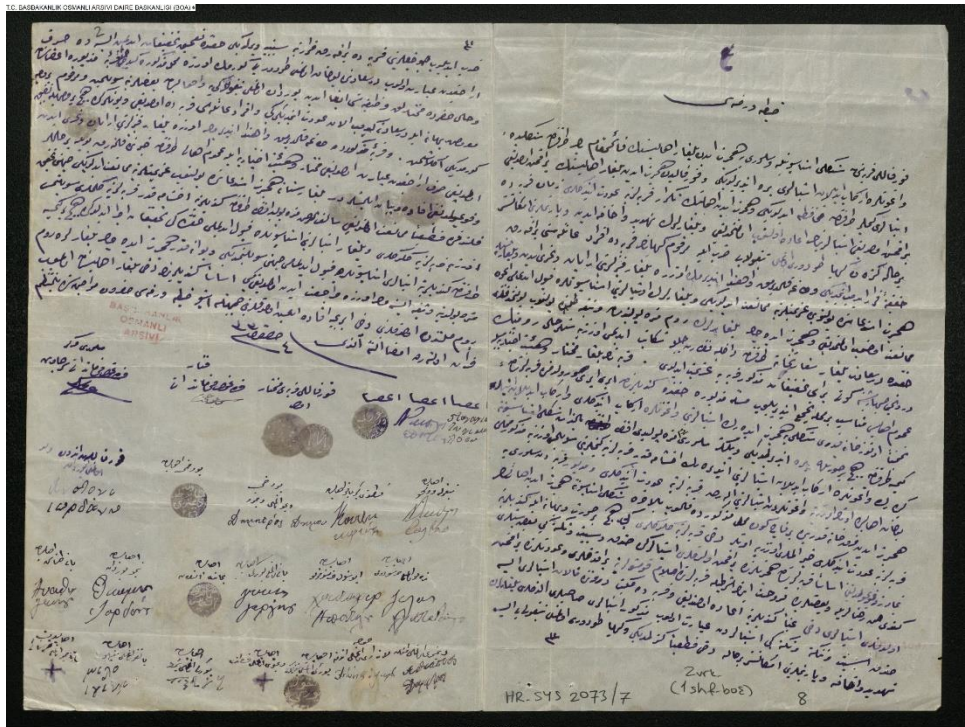
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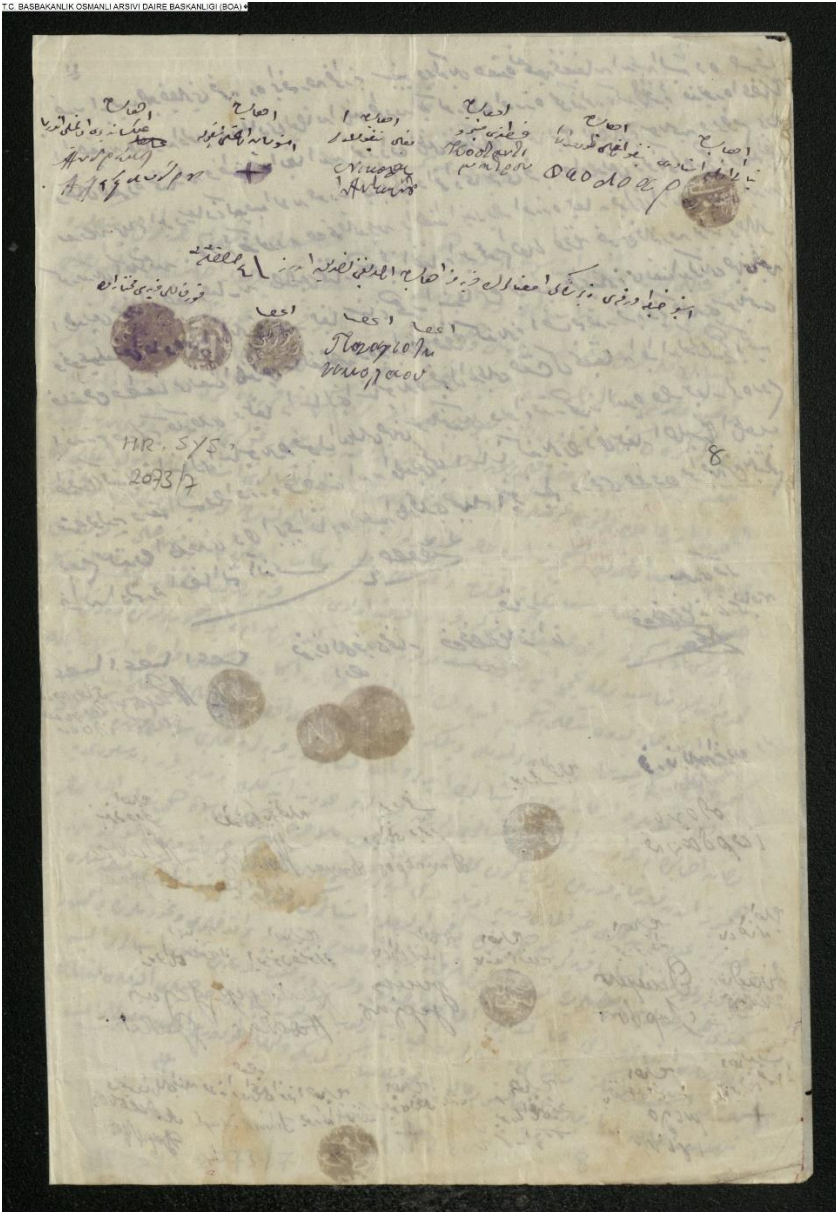
Appendix:

BOA, HR-SYS 2073, 7 Zabıt Varakası (Protocol Sheet) of the population of Kurfalli: "We are not Bulgarians; we are Greeks."



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T.C. BAŞBAKANLIK OSMANLI ARŞİVİ DAİRE BAŞKANLIĞI (BOA)



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