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Between Empire and Reform: Ştirbei's Memorandum on the Administration of Wallachia in 1827

Serkan KEÇECİ[1]

İmparatorluk ile Reform Arasında: Ştir Bey'in Eflak İdaresine İlişkin 1827 Tarihli Memorandumu

Öz

Bu makale, Barbu Ştir Bey'in 1827 yılının Aralık ayında Bükreş'teki Rusya Başkonsolosluğu için Fransızca olarak yazdığı *Mémoire sur le système administratif de la Valachie* başlıklı çalışmasını yeniden ele almaktadır. Bu çalışma, söz konusu memorandumu yalnızca Fanaryot idaresinin son döneminde yaşanan bozulmayı eleştirmek için yazılmış bir metin olarak okumak yerine, Eflak elitlerinin Osmanlı otoritesi ile Rusya'nın desteği arasında reform ve daha fazla özerklik talep etmek için kullandıkları siyasî bir araç olarak yorumlamaktadır. Akkerman Antlaşması ile 1828-1829 Rusya-Osmanlı Savaşı arasındaki diplomatik konjonktüre odaklanan bu çalışma, Ştir Bey'in Eflak'ın iç modernizasyonu üzerine olan idarî tenkidini Rusya'nın "medenileştirme" iddialarıyla ilişkilendirmektedir. Çalışma, arşiv kaynaklarından yararlanarak, memorandumun siyasî manifesto ve reform planı olarak ikili işlevini vurgulamakla beraber Ştir Bey'i *Regulamentul Organic* düzenine geçişte arabulucu olarak yeniden konumlandırmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Eflak, Rusya, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, Ştir Bey, Reformlar.

Makale Türü: Araştırma Makalesi

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Abstract

This article re-examines Barbu Ştirbei's *Mémoire sur le système administratif de la Valachie*, written in French in December 1827 for the Russian Consulate General in Bucharest. Rather than reading the memorandum merely as a critique of corruption under late Phanariot rule, it interprets the text as a political instrument through which a Wallachian elite sought reform and greater autonomy between Ottoman authority and Russian support. Situated within the diplomatic context following the Treaty of Akkerman and on the eve of the Russo-Ottoman War of 1828-1829, the work argues that Ştirbei's administrative critique linked internal modernization to Russia's "civilizing" claims. Drawing on archival sources, it highlights the memorandum's dual function as both a political manifesto and a plan for reform and repositions Ştirbei as a mediator in the transition toward the *Regulamentul Organic* order.

Keywords: Wallachia, Russia, Ottoman Empire, Ştirbei, Reforms.

Paper Type: Research Article

1. Introduction

The Danubian Principalities occupied a complex yet highly significant position between two empires at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Grosul, 1975: 68-124). Although the Ottoman Empire officially controlled these principalities, it was the Russian Empire that gradually shaped their political situation with its military and diplomatic power (Dvoichenko-Markov, 1994: 24-50). With the gradual decline of Ottoman authority in the first quarter of the century, Russia began to declare itself

[1] Dr., Dokuz Eylül University, Faculty of Letters, Department of History, serkan.kececi@deu.edu.tr, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2179-7584

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the protector of the Orthodox Christian subjects in Southeast Europe. During this tense and volatile period, Barbu Ştirbei, a member of the noble family in Wallachia who would later become known as Prince Barbu Dimitrie Ştirbei, wrote his report entitled *Mémoire sur le système administratif de la Valachie* in December 1827. Addressed to the Russian Consulate General in Bucharest and written in French, this document combined sharp observations on social and administrative issues with a sensitive call for political change. It outlined Ştirbei's perspective on reform and restructuring, aimed at attracting the attention of the Russian Empire, which he saw as the only way for Wallachia to have a fair and modern system of government (Grosul, 1966; 261-321). This work argues that Ştirbei's report should be seen not merely as a criticism of corruption in Wallachia or a request to Russia, but as a strategic intellectual endeavour within the changing imperial dynamics of the 1820s. The text highlights the political aspirations of Wallachia's leading figures, who were attempting to redefine their position between Ottoman control and Russian protection (Florescu, 1997: 53-72, 301-316). The text's main argument is that the memorandum served as a strategic call for reform, aiming to combine internal modernisation with external support, thereby granting Wallachia a certain degree of legitimacy within this dual structure of Ottoman rule and Russian control.

2. From Enlightened Dependence to Bureaucratic Modernity

Barbu Dimitrie Ştirbei (1799-1869) played a significant role in the intellectual and political development of Wallachia in the nineteenth century. A member of one of the region's most influential aristocratic families, Ştirbei received his education in Paris (Taki, 2021: 158). During this period, he was influenced by both French Enlightenment ideas and Orthodox moral customs (Campbell, 1971: 7-36; Eliade, 1898: 193-276). Ştirbei stands out as a figure representing the transition from Phanariot rule to modern bureaucracy (Constantiniu, 1972: 89-118). His career spanned Russian patronage, the revolutions of 1848, and the period of cautious reforms in the 1850s. This shows the struggle of a provincial elite aiming for independence through better governance rather than political rupture. Born in Craiova into the powerful Ştirbei family, whose roots lay in the Craioveşti lineage, Barbu received a classical and law education in Paris in the 1810s. His early years coincided with the rise of French administrative rationalism after Napoleon. This greatly influenced his political rhetoric. He returned to Wallachia in the final years of Phanariot rule and joined the boyar bureaucracy (Georgescu, 1973: 31-40). He soon became known as the grand *cloutzar* or chief treasurer. While in this position, he wrote his work *Mémoire sur le système administratif de la Valachie* in 1827. This document attracted attention for anticipating both the language and institutional plans of the later Danube reforms (Grosul, 1966).

When Ştirbei ascended the throne as Prince of Wallachia in 1849, his intellectual outlook had changed considerably over the preceding two decades. The revolutionary uprisings of 1848 had revealed both the power and the dangers of political idealism. In response, Ştirbei adopted a conservative model of modernisation that combined centralised authority with appropriate reforms. During his reign from 1849 to 1856, priority was given to infrastructure development, the codification of civil law and the professionalisation of the administration. However, radical social change was avoided. He continued to maintain his doubts about democratic participation, believing that order should come before freedom. This tension between bureaucratic modernity and political caution defined the advanced stage of his thinking. Therefore, Ştirbei's intellectual journey and development reflect the transformation of Wallachian modernisation from the moral cosmopolitanism of the 1820s to the technocratic pragmatism of the 1850s. In his work *Mémoire*, he expressed dependence as a condition for progress, but in his later administration, he transformed this dependence into disciplined autonomy (Costache, 2013). By positioning Wallachia among empires, but within the universal structure of rational governance, Ştirbei contributed to the ideological foundation of the Romanian

state (Jelavich, 1984). His legacy is not that of a revolutionary leader, but of a reformer who transformed dependency into an instrument of modernisation.

3. Historiographical Perspectives on Ştirbei

The historiography of Barbu Dimitrie Ştirbei reflects the broad evolution of Romanian historiography from a nationalist moral narrative towards administrative and structural analysis. In the early 20th century, Nicolae Iorga characterised Ştirbei as an enlightened yet conservative ruler who reinforced the modernisation efforts initiated under the *Regulamentul Organic* (Filitti, 1915: 89; Grosul, 1966: 266). In Iorga's most important work, *Viaţa şi domnia lui Barbu Dimitrie Ştirbei* (The Life and Reign of Barbu Dimitrie Ştirbei), Ştirbei is presented as a moral reformer who sought to re-establish order following the social and ideological upheavals of 1848 (Iorga, 1910: 11-19). This analysis of the nation-building rhetoric of the time emphasized Ştirbei's patriotism, moderation, and administrative competence. These narratives tended to overlook the cosmopolitan and imperial aspects of Ştirbei's early intellectual formation. Instead, they preferred to focus on his role in the teleological emergence of the modern Romanian state. Post-war Marxist historiography in Romania partially reinterpreted Ştirbei within the framework of class analysis. Scholars of the 1950s and 1960s, such as Andrei Oţetea and Dumitru Almaş, reinterpreted his reign as a phase of 'bourgeois reformism'. Although they pointed out that limited social progress was achieved during his tenure, they criticised its alignment with the interests of the conservative nobles. However, the ideological rigidity of this period did not in any way prevent valuable archival work from being carried out. The publication of administrative correspondence and financial regulations revealed the comprehensiveness of Ştirbei's bureaucratic reforms. From the 1990s onwards, a new academic trend, influenced by global and comparative perspectives, reassessed Ştirbei in the context of inter-imperial relations between the principalities on either side of the Danube. Keith Hitchins, among others, positioned his intellectual background within the system under Russian patronage, arguing that his model of governance was an example of reform through dependency (Hitchins, 1996: 274-276). More recent research, such as that of Süheyla Yenidünya, has re-examined Ştirbei's technocratic reforms in the light of Ottoman administrative modernisation and drawn parallels between his *Müesses Nizâm Arayışları (1849-51)* and the institutional projects of the Tanzimat period (Yenidünya, 2020: 11-23).

Historiography in Russia and Turkey has approached Ştirbei from different yet intersecting perspectives. In the Russian scholarship, particularly during the Soviet period, Ştirbei was generally characterised as an agent of the policies of Pavel D. Kiselev (Bitis, 2006: 426-464; Chulkov, 1906; Druzhinin, 1946; Grosul, 1995: 77-115). This view is founded on the Marxist readings of imperialist circles. However, recent Russian scholars have begun to reconsider this paradigm of dependency and have started to recognise the role of the Wallachian elite, who played an essential role in designing administrative reforms. Historians in Turkey, on the other hand, have tended to view Ştirbei within a comparative context of the modernization of Ottoman provinces. Ştirbei's work *Mémoire* has been reinterpreted as part of an intellectual movement linking the late Phanariot period to the Tanzimat, reflecting common concerns about corruption, private property, and legality. This comparative approach has repositioned Ştirbei within his imperial context as a figure who, while discussing dependency, presented a vision of the state rooted in both Ottoman and European reform discourses.

4. Administrative Critique and Political Strategy

Ştirbei's analysis of the Wallachian administration in 1827 depicts a systemic dysfunction. He portrays an administrative system suffering from bribery, arbitrary taxation, unprofessional civil servants and widespread mistrust. However, beyond these administrative details lies a broader political argument. The source of disorder in Wallachia was not only local inadequacies, but the structural inconsistencies of its semi-colonial status. Ottoman rule, exercised through taxation and

restrictive trade policies, coexisted with a certain level of uncertainty under Russian protection, which, while rhetorically benevolent, had not yet translated into institutional reforms. In the report, the insistence on ensuring "public security built on stable foundations" and reforming fiscal administration and securing property rights reflected more than bureaucratic concerns. It was a veiled reference to a new constitutional order modelled on the principles Russia had committed to defend since the Treaty of Akkerman. The Akkerman Treaty and the imperial *hatt-ı şerif* issued in April 1827 compelled the rulers of Wallachia and Moldavia to carry out reforms that would ensure the "welfare of their subjects." Ştirbei used this opportunity to reframe administrative reform as both a legal and moral duty derived from international commitments. This turned his memorandum from a technical discussion on governance into a political memorandum addressed to St. Petersburg. This memorandum claimed that Wallachia's relief could be achieved not through revolutionary secession, but through enlightened reforms under the protection of the Russian empire.

5. Politics of Dependence

By 1827, Russia's intervention in the principalities along the Danube had become increasingly obvious. Following the annexation of Bessarabia in 1812 and the subsequent Russo-Ottoman wars, Russian consuls began to impose an informal guardianship over the local noble class (Cazacu, 1993: 211-226). However, Ştirbei's memorandum underscores that this guardianship was not passively accepted. On the contrary, the Wallachian elite endeavoured to reconceptualise Russian protection as a means of consolidation of power within the country. By describing the principality's problems in the language of administrative science and political economy (terms resonating with Russian and Western bureaucratic modernity), Ştirbei reshaped the demand for local autonomy as part of a common civilisational mission. This rhetorical gambit foreshadows what later historiography would define as a policy of conditional loyalty. In this policy, the nobles placed themselves in the position of agents of reform while pledging allegiance to both imperial authorities. Ştirbei's emphasis on moral renewal, bureaucratic accountability, and fiscal transparency should therefore be considered both a critique of Phanariot despotism and an argument for a new form of governance built on merit and legitimacy. The proposals included in the memorandum, such as the establishment of a gendarmerie, the abolition of forced confiscation, the rationalisation of taxation, and the creation of independent courts, constituted a proto-constitutional programme based on the Enlightenment concepts of order and property.

6. Between Ottoman Decline and Russian Reformism

The period in which Ştirbei's text was written was quite critical. Following the Greek Revolt between 1821 and 1829, the Ottoman Empire's authority in the Balkans had seriously deteriorated, both morally and administratively (Barratt, 1973: 47-115). The Phanariot regime in the principalities, which had already suffered a loss of prestige, was replaced by local hospodars in 1822. This change was an apparent concession to Ottoman reform. In practice, however, it served to deepen Russia's influence in the region. The Treaty of Akkerman allowed Russia to legitimise this influence by granting it the right to monitor the implementation of internal reforms and to protect the Christian subjects. In this context, Ştirbei's memorandum should be evaluated as a stage in Russia's broader project of enlightened intervention, which aimed to portray imperial control as protective rather than coercive. The document's pro-Russian rhetoric and content reflected the strategic calculations of the local elite, who, is far from being mere apologists, strove to utilize the empire's 'civilizing' rhetoric for their own purposes. Ştirbei indicated that the future of Wallachia depended on Russia's capacity to impose its administrative order where Ottoman rule had failed, but that it should be done without directly annexing the principality. Therefore, this text represents the political imagination of the Danubian Principalities during the so-called *Regulamentul Organic* (1831-1832), a period in which Russia's occupation led to the emergence of the first codified administrative constitutions (Filitti, 1915: 89).

7. Historiographical and Archival Context

From a historiographical perspective, Ştirbei's memorandum represents a transitional step between the Phanariot moral critique of despotism and the reformist discourse that appeared in the mid-nineteenth century. While Nicolae Iorga primarily evaluated Ştirbei as an enlightened reformer, later academic studies have stressed his ambivalent and controversial position as both a reformer and a collaborator within the dual imperial system. The document also provides insight into the origins of Wallachian administrative thought by tracing the roots of early nineteenth-century critiques of corruption to the constitutional terminology of the later generation of 1848. Several versions of the text have survived to the present day. The oldest version, dated December 1827, *Aperçu sur le mode d'administration de la Valachie*, was submitted by Ştirbei (then grand *cloutzar*) to the Russian Consulate General in Bucharest. The original manuscript is preserved in the *Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Voenno-Istoricheskii Arkhiv* - RGVIA (Russian State Military Historical Archive), *fond* 846, *opis*' 16, *delo* 943. In 1832, Ştirbei produced a revised version for General Pavel D. Kiselev, governor of the principalities under Russian occupation. An abbreviated translation of this later text was published posthumously in *Convorbiri Literare* between 1888 and 1889 (Ştirbei, 1888: 737-751; 1889: 26-43). This complex history of transmission reflects the hybrid nature of the memorandum, which was both an administrative report and a political manifesto addressed to the imperial elite.

8. Significance of the Memorandum

Interpreting Ştirbei's memorandum through the context of Ottoman-Russian rivalry reveals the sophisticated diplomacy of local reforms (Taki, 2016). More than a passive expression of foreign sovereignty, this document demonstrates the ability of the Wallachian elite to construct a pragmatic policy of dependency that merges reform, loyalty, and personal interests. Ştirbei's visionary administrative rationality and moral renewal would later serve as a precursor to the *Regulamentul Organic* and the modernisation programme of his own reign (1849-1856). It also illustrates the use of reform rhetoric in negotiations for sovereignty within imperial hierarchies, a broader phenomenon apparent in South-Eastern Europe in the early nineteenth century. By placing Ştirbei's memorandum in a broader context, this work aims to make a bottom-up contribution to the historiography of the Eastern Question, restoring the intellectual weight of the Principalities of the Danube (Bitis, 2006; Kiniapina, 1978). The memorandum is noteworthy both as a piece of administrative criticism and as a document of political imagination. It can also be viewed as an effort to reconcile moral renewal with imperial pragmatism during a period when the Ottoman Empire's future in Europe hinged on a balance between obedience and reform.

Ştirbei's *Mémoire* should be examined in the context of the legal and diplomatic structure established by the Akkerman Agreement and the Treaty of Edirne, which redrew the status of the principalities along the Danube River. The Akkerman Agreement allowed Russia the right to monitor internal reforms and the protection of Christian rights, while the Treaty of Edirne formally approved these provisions following the Ottoman Empire's defeat in the war of 1828-1829 (Emerit, 1937; Sheremet, 1975). Together, these two agreements launched a period that Keith Hitchins called dual sovereignty. During this period, while Ottoman sovereignty formally continued, in practice Russia controlled administrative and political oversight. In this ambiguous context, the Wallachian elite discovered an unprecedented rhetorical space where loyalty and reform could be employed simultaneously. Ştirbei's memorandum can be regarded as an example of this new rhetoric. Referring to the *hatt-ı şerif* of April 1827, he stated that he accepted Ottoman law, while explicitly appealing to the 'Russian Imperial Court' as the true protector of justice and prosperity. This was not just an ordinary gesture of respect, but also a deliberate redefinition of legitimacy. It was a definition that preserved the formal existence of Ottoman rule while effectively transferring sovereignty from Istanbul to St. Petersburg.

Ştirbei reformulated Russia's protectorate in terms of the moral and administrative terminology of the Enlightenment, turning dependency into an opportunity for reform. By pointing out abuses such as the corruption of the *ispravnici*, the extortion of the *spatharie* (police ministry), and the arbitrariness of taxation, he revealed that local institutions could not be revitalised without imperial tutelage. Nevertheless, he implied that this tutelage should appear in the form of rational legislation and bureaucratic control rather than annexation. In this way, the *Mémoire* outlined a policy of conciliation specific to the Danubian principalities in the late 1820s. It legitimised Russia's civilising mission while allowing for a vision of 'protected autonomy' that enabled the Wallachian elite to retain a degree of self-government. In this sense, Ştirbei's report prefigured the later logic of the *Regulamentul Organic* (1831-1832), a hybrid constitutional order originating from the same dichotomy between Ottoman model and Russian essence.

While the *Mémoire* refers to international treaties to reinterpret sovereignty, it also provides a meticulous diagnosis of administrative and economic decay as a means of legitimising reform. The first half of Ştirbei's report can be interpreted as a true analysis of poor governance. The report begins with the assertion that the true test of any government lies in its capacity to ensure the safety of persons, property and honour, and sadly notes that Wallachia fails to meet these standards. Building on this moral basis, it presents a harsh critique of the *spatharie*, *vistiarie* (treasury or finance ministry) and network of local officials (*ispravnici*, *zaptzis*, *slujitori* and *catanes*), which, instead of maintaining justice and order, have turned authority into a mechanism of plunder. According to him, the *spatharie* had become a 'source of countless abuses,' a system where positions were sold, banditry was overlooked, and public safety depended on poorly armed peasants who had to purchase their own weapons and uniforms. Such details, drawn from everyday experience, make Ştirbei's *Mémoire* one of the earliest sociological portraits of a crumbling pre-modern bureaucracy. The *vistiarie*, the equivalent of the Ministry of Finance, is portrayed in similar terms. Officials received low salaries, offices were sold at auction, and tax collection was based on a hierarchy of petty tyranny. The concept of *loudi*, the basic tax unit, is described not as a rational system but as an arbitrary instrument of domination manipulated by officials who raise or lower quotas in exchange for personal gain or bribes. Ştirbei defines corruption as a systemic failure, raising his critique from moral reaction to administrative theory. Thus, *Mémoire* foresees modern reformist epistemology, namely the belief that malfunctioning can be remedied not only through moral preaching but also through institutional restructuring.

However, the political logic underlying this diagnosis is equally important. The portrait of a country 'without security, laws or industry' is not merely a complaint, but also a rhetorical strategy. By depicting the collapse in all its dimensions, Ştirbei opens up conceptual space for external intervention. The solutions proposed by Știrbei, such as the creation of a national gendarmerie, the introduction of monetary rather than in-kind taxation, and the establishment of independent courts, set the framework for a new state structure under foreign, particularly Russian, control. Thus, this debate creates a delicate balance. While preserving the discourse of national renewal, it surrenders the means of its implementation to imperial patronage. In this sense, the *Mémoire* is both a text criticising Ottoman negligence and a draft for Russian administrative tutelage. The reforms proposed would later reappear almost verbatim in the *Regulamentul Organic*, decreed under Russian occupation after 1831. This fact strikingly confirms how Ştirbei's political imagination foreshadowed the institutional terminology of the protectorate regime. While the *Mémoire* serves as both a political intervention and a critique of the administration, it also indicates the emergence of a new intellectual approach, namely the discourse of political economy, in Wallachian political writings. Ştirbei's description of Wallachia starkly differs from the moralistic or deterministic statements that were typical of earlier Phanariot texts. He characterizes his country not as a moral organism in need of virtues, but as an economic

system subject to measurable imbalances. In the *Mémoire*, society is examined through the categories of productivity, insufficiency, and circulation. The security of persons and property is identified as a prerequisite for economic activity. The breakdown of the police and treasury is denounced as a squandering of capital. Peasants are considered a 'productive force' restricted by institutional inefficiency. The terminology employed refers to rational governance rather than divine justice.

Ştirbei's method of diagnosis highlights the influence of the administrative sciences of the Enlightenment, transferred to the elites on the banks of the Danube through French education and the bureaucratic culture of the Habsburg and Russian empires. His use of statistical arguments - listing *150 catane* per region, *17 regions*, *2,550 men*, and *70,000 inhabitants per region* - goes beyond presenting an empirical example (RGVIA, 846/16/943: 4); it offers a new way of understanding politics. Quantitative analysis has been turned into a tool for criticism. By estimating the disproportion between public expenditure and administrative efficiency, Ştirbei developed not only a political but also an objective and seemingly technical argument for reform. His method of presenting revenues in tabular form, dividing the principality's total income of *6,228,000 piastres* into precise tax categories (RGVIA, 846/16/943: 22), was in line with the practices of European state accounting manuals in the late Enlightenment period. This quantitative awareness places him within a broader inter-imperial trend, stretching from St Petersburg to Vienna and Paris, where reform was increasingly viewed as a question of fiscal balance and bureaucratic rationalisation.

In this context, Ştirbei's *Mémoire* not only diagnoses corruption, but also rediscovers the language of governance. It redefines the noble figure, transforming it from an intermediary between the ruler and his subjects, inherited through lineage, into a rational and prudent 'fonctionnaire' who can be integrated into a cosmopolitan science of governance. This redefinition is politically significant. By adopting the discourse of economic rationality, Ştirbei presents himself as a reliable representative of 'civilised' Russia, whose officials and consuls share the same discourse of bureaucratic efficiency. The rhetorical structure of the *Mémoire* - i.e. its systematic division into ministries, its references to law, economy, and order - mirrors the bureaucratic discourse of the empire to which it is addressed. Thus, this text, at first glance a courteous tone, is also a display of competence, an implicit expression of the claim to share the epistemic power of modern government. *Mémoire*, therefore, stands at the eve of a new intellectual economy that converts moral complaints in Wallachia into statistical governance and local patriotism into administrative professionalism. This document announced the technocratic style that would take the place of the moral renewal discourse in Ştirbei's later princely period (1849-1856), with its emphasis on institutional efficiency and infrastructure development programmes. However, in 1827, this transformation remained largely rhetorical. It functioned as a kind of discursive bridge between the moral world of Ottoman dependency and the bureaucratic modernity under Russian tutelage.

In the last section of Ştirbei's *Mémoire*, the logic of administrative reform extends to the fields of political economy and foreign trade. Identifying the financial and judicial malfunctions of Wallachia, Ştirbei focuses on the problem of economic circulation, or, in his words, the "véritable cancer qui nous ronge" (the real cancer that consumes us). His criticism goes beyond internal administrative failures and targets the structural restrictions imposed by Ottoman mercantilism. The principality 'cannot sell any local product whatsoever to the Turks of Istanbul' and is also prohibited from exporting livestock products 'under the pretext of supplying the capital'. The result is a self-perpetuating cycle of poverty. Deprived of free market opportunities, agricultural production declined, pastures were left fallow, and peasants subsisted on corn alone. This definition converts economic dependency into a political debate. Under the guise of supply obligations, Ottoman monopolies devastated the country's productive energy and rendered the people incapable of progress. In this context, Ştirbei's call for 'liberté du commerce' (freedom of trade) should be regarded not only as a demand for economic

prosperity but also as a demand for legal liberation from imperial restrictions. Ştirbei's argument echoes contemporary European liberal thought, which considers commercial freedom to be the basis of civil order. However, Ştirbei grounds this ideal not in abstract principles, but in pragmatic necessities such as achieving a balance between production and consumption. By persistently arguing that the Sublime Porte should clearly determine the amount of provisions Istanbul needed throughout the year and purchase all necessary goods 'aux prix courants' (at market prices), he turns moral protest into a rational programme of regulation. In his visionary view, trade should be liberated not through revolutionary transformation, but through legal regulation and administrative transparency. These principles are again consistent with the bureaucratic principles of the Russian Empire. The final section thus contextualizes Wallachia's revival within the broader economy of the Black Sea region and Russia's geopolitical agenda of 'civilising mission.' By emphasising that free trade must coexist with strong governance, Ştirbei reveals the dual logic of the later *Regulamentul Organic*. Internal order is a prerequisite for economic freedom. His logic brings Wallachia's tradition into line with the northern model of enlightened despotism rather than the Ottoman system of privileges and monopolies. At the same time, Ştirbei's conclusion calls for gratitude to 'Son Auguste Protecteur'. It presents Russia not as an invader, but as the moral decider of justice and prosperity. The *Mémoire* concludes where it began, namely at the point where dependency is transformed into reforms. Economic liberalisation, administrative rationality and political protection converge in a single vision. According to this point of view, the principality was saved from Eastern stagnation thanks to the disciplined benevolence of imperial rule.

9. Conclusion

Ştirbei's *Mémoire* lies at a historical turning point, where the rhetoric of Enlightenment reforms meets the realities imposed by imperial rule. The text criticises local corruption while simultaneously affirming its loyalty to imperial authority. It expresses a reformist spirit that cannot be considered separate from dependency. Within the intricate diplomacy on the Russian-Ottoman border, Ştirbei's memorandum reconceptualised the Danube Principalities not as passive extensions of the empire, but as laboratories of modern governance. These laboratories were areas where imperial tutelage could be transformed into administrative innovations. This dual approach, in which obedience and initiative came to the fore, crystallized the fundamental contradiction of sovereignty during the period of the Eastern Question. Russia's self-proclaimed 'civilising' mission in the Balkans depended on local intermediaries who could transform the empire's objectives into reliable reform programmes. Ştirbei's memorandum, by adopting a rational approach to governance, made precisely this transition possible. His diagnosis of financial disorder, judicial arbitrariness, and economic stagnation was not just an empirical description but also an appeal for intervention. By calling on the 'Russian Imperial Court' as the moral arbiter of Wallachia's future, Ştirbei effectively transferred sovereignty from Istanbul to St. Petersburg. At the same time, he preserved the Ottoman image necessary for European diplomacy. Ultimately, a kind of representative modernity emerged, in which reform and obedience were dialectically linked. The *Mémoire* transcends the boundaries of the period in which it was written.

This text demonstrates the emergence of a new political epistemology among the nobles after the Phanariot period. This epistemology substituted political economy and bureaucratic efficiency calculations for the rhetoric of divine justice. Ştirbei's references to statistics, fiscal balance, and institutional design make him one of the first practitioners of administrative science in Southeast Europe. Therefore, his later period as prince can be considered as the political implementation of the epistemic world that began in 1827. The same rational approach that criticised the *spatharie* and *vistiarie* was also echoed in his later reforms of the judiciary, public works, and education. In both periods, moral renewal constituted an integral part of administrative order. This belief influenced his

conservative approach to modernisation. From a broader perspective, Ştirbei's career reveals how the elites of small states in the empire's peripheral regions absorbed and reinterpreted the empire's reform discourse. His career shows that the Eastern Question was not only a struggle between great powers, but also a testing ground for local political experiences. Thanks to figures such as Ştirbei, the principalities along the Danube became not only objects of European diplomacy, but also its interlocutors. Although his reforms were inspired from outside, he concretely expressed the search for legitimacy in a world where sovereignty had become negotiable. In conclusion, Ştirbei's *Mémoire* should be considered not as an act of submission, but as a manifesto of strategic adaptation. This work converted dependency into a disciplined programme of autonomy and adapted imperial rhetoric to the discourse of modern governance. By merging obedience with reform, morality with calculation, Ştirbei embodied the political wisdom of a borderland that strove to modernize without rebellion, to sustain its existence through reform, and to defend national dignity in the empire's periphery.

Araştırma ve Yayın Etiği Beyanı

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Extended Abstract

This article examines Barbu Dimitrie Ştirbei's work entitled *Mémoire sur le système administratif de la Valachie* (1827) as an essential document situated at the intersection of imperial rivalry, administrative reform, and local political authority in the Danubian Principalities in the early nineteenth century. This work argues that the memorandum should be interpreted not only as a critique of corruption or a show of respect for Russian authority, but rather as a strategic response to the changing imperial order shaped by the decline of Ottoman authority and Russia's efforts to expand its sphere of influence. By expressing a reformist vision that sought to reconcile internal modernisation with external protection, the memorandum reinterpreted Wallachia's political legitimacy within a framework of dual sovereignty. The paper begins by situating Wallachia within the complex geopolitical structure of the 1820s. Although officially under Ottoman sovereignty, the Danubian Principalities, increasingly exposed to Russian military and diplomatic influence, constituted a transition zone between empires. Following the decline of Phanariot rule and the Greek Revolt, Russia progressively strengthened its position as protector of Orthodox Christians in Southeast Europe. In this context, Ştirbei, a member of the Wallachian elite who had been educated in Paris and was familiar with Enlightenment administrative thought, composed a memorandum in French and submitted it to the Russian Consulate General in Bucharest. The work argues that the *Mémoire* served as a well-crafted political text that brought Wallachia's reformist goals into line with Russia's self-assigned mission of civilisation.

A significant part of the work focuses on Ştirbei's intellectual evolution and political career. As a member of the powerful Craiovești dynasty who studied law and political science in Paris, Ştirbei represented a generation that made the transition from the moral criticisms of the Phanariots to bureaucratic rationalism. His early contact with post-Napoleonic French administrative culture profoundly shaped his understanding of governance, law, and fiscal order. Upon returning to Wallachia towards the end of Phanariot rule, Ştirbei entered the boyar bureaucracy and ascended to the position of chief treasurer. Thanks to this privileged position, he wrote the *Mémoire*, which foreshadowed the language and institutional issues of the later *Regulamentul Organic*. The article stresses that Ştirbei's later princely period (1849-1856) should be interpreted as a continuation of the ideas expressed in 1827, although it was more technocratic and cautious. The uprisings of 1848 curtailed his previous reformist optimism and led him to adopt a conservative model of modernisation that emphasised administrative efficiency, legal regulation and infrastructure, rejecting the idea of radical political participation. This intellectual evolution, extending from moral criticism and enlightened dependency to disciplined autonomy, reflected the comprehensive transformation of Wallachia's modernisation. The article argues that Ştirbei's legacy lies not so much in revolutionary nationalism as in his ability to transform dependency into a tool for state-building.

The historiography section situates Ştirbei within shifting interpretative contexts. Early-twentieth-century Romanian historian, Nicolae Iorga, described him as an enlightened and stability-providing ruler whose reforms contributed to the teleological emergence of the modern Romanian state. Marxist historiography later reinterpreted his reign as a phase of bourgeois reformism, criticizing its social limitations while acknowledging administrative progress. Since the 1990s, comparative and transnational perspectives have repositioned Ştirbei within the dynamics of inter-imperial governance, emphasising reform through dependency and pointing to parallels between his administrative projects and the Ottoman Tanzimat reforms. Despite their differences, Russian and Turkish historiographies increasingly accept the role of local elites in shaping reform programs under imperial conditions.

At the centre of the article is a detailed analysis of the *Mémoire* itself. Ştirbei depicts Wallachia as a state suffering from widespread corruption, arbitrary taxation, unprofessional officials, and a lack of legal security. However, the article stresses that this administrative criticism cannot be separated

from a broader political strategy. According to Ştirbei's narrative, this disorder was not only the result of local failures but also of the uncertain status of the principality under Ottoman sovereignty and Russian protection. Referring to the Treaty of Akkerman and the Ottoman *hatt-ı şerif* of April 1827, Ştirbei reframed reform as an obligation derived from international law and imperial promises. Thus, his appeal to Russia emerged not as a request for annexation, but as a call for enlightened supervision that could restore rational order where Ottoman administration had failed. The article also illustrates how Ştirbei used the language of administrative science and political economy to reconceptualise dependency as conditional dependency. His recommendations, such as establishing a gendarmerie, rationalising taxation, protecting property rights, and establishing independent courts, amounted to a proto-constitutional programme. These reforms, while opposing Phanariot practices, brought Wallachia into line with contemporary European models of governance. Expressing the reform in a language consistent with Russia's bureaucratic culture, Ştirbei positioned the Wallachian elite as an active partner in the empire's modernisation project.

An important contribution of the article from an interpretative perspective is its emphasis on the rhetorical and epistemic innovations of the memorandum. Unlike previous moral critiques, Ştirbei's analysis was founded on empirical reasoning, institutional analysis, and financial calculations. His use of statistics, budget breakdowns, and functional explanations of ministries reflected the spread of Enlightenment administrative sciences across imperial domains. In this sense, the *Mémoire* marked a transition from moral exhortations to technocratic governance, reframing the nobility not as hereditary intermediaries but as professional officials integrated into a rational apparatus of state. The article also examines Ştirbei's criticism within a broader context, such as the decline of the Ottoman Empire and Russian reformism. Following the abolition of the Phanariot regime in 1822 and the ensuing Russian-Ottoman conflicts, Russia gained unrivalled influence in the principalities. *Mémoire* aligned with Russia's line by depicting intervention as protective rather than coercive. However, the article highlights that Ştirbei was not a silent collaborator. On the contrary, he used imperial rhetoric to promote a vision of 'protected autonomy' whereby Wallachia would maintain its internal autonomy under foreign protection. This vision anticipated the hybrid constitutional order of the *Regulamentul Organic*, which came into force under Russian occupation in 1831-1832.

Economic analysis represents another central component of the article. Ştirbei described trade restrictions and Ottoman supply monopolies as structural causes of Wallachia's stagnation. Formulated in pragmatic rather than ideological terms, the call for free trade connected economic liberalisation with legal clarity and administrative order. Based on the principles of liberalism grounded in financial necessity and productivity, Ştirbei harmonized Wallachia's interests with Russia's administrative rationality. Thus, economic reform became another area where dependency was transformed into a justification for modern governance.

In the final section of the article, the *Mémoire* is interpreted as both an administrative report and a political manifesto. This reveals a broader phenomenon in nineteenth-century Southeast Europe, where local elites negotiated sovereignty through reformist rhetoric rather than open rebellion. Ştirbei's appeal to the 'Russian Imperial Court' as the guarantor of justice effectively reinterpreted legitimacy while preserving the official appearance of Ottoman sovereignty as required by European diplomacy. The result was a kind of representative modernity in which reform and dependency were dialectically intertwined. The article suggests that Ştirbei's *Mémoire* holds a very important place in the intellectual and political history of the Danubian Principalities. It reveals that the Eastern Question was shaped not only by the competition of the great powers, but also by local actors who could turn imperial policies into concrete reform programmes. By transforming dependency into a disciplined autonomy project, Ştirbei developed a model of modernisation without revolution, seeking to maintain prestige and effectiveness within the constraints of the empire.