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A NEW EPISODE OF THE DIPLOMATIC CONFLICT OVER MUSCOVITE FUR AND MOLDAVIAN–POLISH–OTTOMAN RELATIONS IN MID–SIXTEENTH CENTURY

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Sable fur played an important role in Moldavian–Ottoman relations, the import of pelts being not a simple commercial transaction, limited to purchasing the goods and transporting them to the destination, but comprised a very important political dimension. In order to offer gifts to the sultan, the Moldavian rulers had to spend large sums and to conduct important diplomatic activities in Moscow and Poland. For Moldavians, access to Moscow was not easy and depended heavily on the evolution of Moldavian–Polish and Muscovite–Lithuanian relations.

Fur was of crucial importance at the Ottoman court, since the latter inherited a long tradition of the ceremonial use of furs from Central Asian sources and the Islamic area of the Middle East. The use of ermine and sable¹ to adorn the kaftans distributed by the sultan expressed visually the social position and the importance of the person, which explain the massive fur imports to the imperial capital.² For the Moldavian prince, furs were important for both the ceremonial at his own court and his relations with the sultan. Along with the tribute paid to the Porte, the Moldavian prince also provided the sultan and the high

¹ The Ottoman palace etiquette differentiated between summer and winter furs, ermine being used as a summer fur, while sable worn during winter, see Markus Koller, “The Istanbul Fur Market in the Eighteenth Century,” in Vera Constantini and Markus Koller (eds), *Living in the Ottoman Ecumenical Community: Essays in Honour of Suraiya Faroqhi* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), 128.

² Hülya Tezcan, “Furs and Skins Owned by the Sultans,” in Suraiya Faroqhi and Christoph K. Neumann (eds), *Ottoman Costumes: From Textile to Industry* (Istanbul: Eren, 2004): 63–79.

dignitaries with various objects, the practice gradually becoming a protocol obligation.³

The import of sable pelts was not a simple commercial transaction, limited to purchasing the goods and transporting them to the destination. Imported from Russia since the Middle Ages, furs featured prominently in the Novgorod commerce, but their importance would further increase with the rise of Muscovy: there was even a fee paid in sable.⁴ In the sixteenth century, especially after the conquest of Siberia during the reign of Ivan the Terrible, the exploitation of this economic resource intensified⁵ as the fur trade was also a way to acquire political influence, through the “imperial commerce”. Ermine and sable were among the products whose export was prohibited; they could be taken out of Muscovy only with the consent of the tsar⁶, thus requiring the doubling of commercial actions by diplomacy. Initiated at the end of the fifteenth century, Muscovite–Ottoman relations from the very beginning had an important commercial dimension, concerning commerce in the north of the Black Sea.⁷ In the sixteenth century, the merchants purchased from Moscow expensive furs and other valuable items for the Ottoman court. Caravans followed the old road connecting Caffa to Moscow, along the banks of Don and Volga rivers. However, towards the mid-sixteenth century, these trade routes became a target for Zaporozhian Cossacks. For this reason, the Ottoman merchants turned towards a much safer road, known as the “Moldavian route”, reaching Moscow through Moldavia and Polish–Lithuanian territories.⁸

In spite of its name, gaining access to Moscow through this route was not easy for Moldavian merchants, as it depended heavily on the dynamics of Moldavian–Polish and Muscovite–Lithuanian relations. Established during the reign of Stephen the Great and

³ Mihai Maxim, *O istorie a relațiilor româno-otomane cu documente noi din arhivele turcești*, vol. 1 (Brăila: Editura Istros, 2012), 84–5.

⁴ Janet Martin, *Treasure of the Land of Darkness: The Fur Trade and Its Significance from Medieval Russia* (Cambridge – New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 163–5.

⁵ Raymond H. Fisher, *The Russian Fur Trade, 1550–1700* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1943), 24–5.

⁶ M.V. Fekhner, *Torgovlia russkogo gosudarstva so stranami vostoka v XVI veke* (Moscow : Nauka, 1956), 106–13.

⁷ K.V. Bazilevici, *Politica externă a statului rus centralizat în a doua jumătate a secolului XV* (Bucharest: Editura Academiei, 1955), 357–60.

⁸ Alexandre Bennigsen and Chantal Lemercier-Quelquejay, “Les marchands de la cour ottoman et le commerce des fourrures moscovites dans la seconde moitié du XVI^e siècle,” *Cahiers du monde russe et L*

Ivan III and based on confessional identity – further consolidated through a matrimonial alliance, – Moldavian–Muscovite diplomatic relations since the beginning aimed at providing a counterweight against the Polish–Lithuanian union.⁹ In order to thwart the political and military actions of their adversaries, Polish kings denied Moldavian and Muscovite envoys, for certain periods, transit through their lands. As a reprisal, the Moldavian princes detained Polish envoys heading towards Istanbul and made their passage conditional on granting the passage towards Moscow for Moldavian envoys. In addition, in order to circumvent the ban, Moldavian princes appealed to the services of Ottoman merchants to purchase expensive fur, but the latter were also stopped when the Polish authorities had suspicions that they worked as agents of the Moldavian princes.¹⁰

Alexander Lapușneanu came to the throne after Elias Rareș's conversion to Islam and after Stephen Rareș's assassination by the boyars, with the support of the Polish king, with whom he maintained cordial relations. Lăpușneanu became a vassal of the King of Poland, swearing the oath in Bakuta, without altering his relationship with the sultan.¹¹ Even under these conditions, the procurement of Muscovite pelts by the Moldavian prince was no easy task due to the conflict between Muscovy and Lithuania, and internal issues within the Polish–Lithuanian union. In 1554, the Lithuanian assembly informed the Moldavian envoy that they would not allow him to pass to Moscow, since the Moldavian Prince had taken the oath of fealty to Sigismund Augustus only in the latter's capacity as the King of Poland, and not as the Grand Duke of Lithuania. The ban was to be lifted only after the signing of a separate Moldavian–Lithuanian treaty.¹² This took place soon afterwards, in December 1554, when King Sigismund August ratified the treaty of alliance

⁹ Ilona Czamańska, *Moldavia i Wołoszczyzna wobec Polski, Węgier i Turcji w XIV i XV wieku* (Poznań : Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 1996), 364; Liviu Pilat, "Solia pârcalabului Mușat la Moscova și implicarea Moldovei în lupta pentru coroana Ungariei," in Gheorghe Cliveti (ed.), *Clio în oglindiri de sine: Academicianului Alexandru Zub omagiu* (Iași: Editura Universității "Alexandru I. Cuza" din Iași, 2014): 420–2.

¹⁰ Constantin C. Giurescu, "Relațiile economice dintre români și ruși până la Regulamente Organice," *Revista Istorică Română* 17 (1947): 13–4.

¹¹ Gheorghe Pungă, *Țara Moldovei în vremea lui Alexandru Lăpușneanu* (Iași : Editura Universității "Alexandru I. Cuza" din Iași, 1994), 46–7.

¹² Ilie Corfus, *Documente privitoare la istoria României culese din arhivele polone*, vol. 1 (Bucharest: Editura Academiei R.S.R., 1979), 191–2.

with Moldavia, this time as the Grand Duke of Lithuania.¹³

However, this resolution did not immediately pave the way for Moldavian envoys to procure Russian pelts. This explains why Alexander Lăpușneanu searched for an alternative route, calling for the support of the sultan and the Crimean khan. On 21st May 1560, the sultan wrote to the Moldavian prince, assuring him that he had received the letter concerning the travel of Moldavian envoys to Moscow through the khan's domains.¹⁴ The following day, Süleyman addressed Khan Devlet Girey, instructing him to protect Moldavians on their way to Muscovy to purchase sable pelts and walrus fangs during their passage through Tatar territories. The Sultan mentioned that previously the envoys used to go through Poland, but because they are hindered by the war between the Poles and the Muscovites, they are looking for a new route across the Tatars territory.¹⁵ The Moldavian prince had not completely abandoned the usual route and took steps necessary to allow his people to pass through Poland. On 5th January 1561, Sigismund Augustus issued an act which guaranteed Moldavian envoys – Grigore Drăgan and Ioan Chirca – free passage and exempted the goods they bought from Moscow from customs duties.¹⁶ The simultaneous negotiations for the passage of the envoys through Poland and the Tatar territories can be explained not only by Alexander Lăpușneanu's immediate need to buy gifts for the sultan, but also by the incidents involving Ottoman merchants returning from Moscow which took place at that time in Poland. In February 1560, Süleyman asked the Prince of Moldavia to confiscate some merchandise stolen from the imperial merchant Mustafa, as he was returning from Moscow, at the Moldavian-Polish border.¹⁷

During the same period, the sultan addressed the King of Poland with regard to the caravan of the merchant Mehmed of Tokat, killed by 'Polish brigands.' The King was asked

¹³ Aleksander Jabłonowski, "Sprawy wołoskie za Jagiellonów: Akta i listy," in *Źródła dziejowe*, vol. 10 (Warsaw: Gebethner i Wolff, 1878), 152–3.

¹⁴ Mihail Guboglu (ed.), *Catalogul documentelor turcești*, vol. 2 (Bucharest: Direcția Generală a Arhivelor Statului, 1965), 25, doc. 79.

¹⁵ Lia Lehr, "Comerțul Țării Românești și Moldovei în a două jumătate a secolului XVI și prima jumătate a secolului XVII," *Studii și Materiale de Istorie Medie* 4 (1960): 282; Guboglu, *Catalogul*, 29, doc. 80.

¹⁶ *Istoricheskie sviazi narodov SSSR i Rumunii v XV–nachale XVIII v.*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Nauka, 1965), 126–7.

¹⁷ Guboglu, *Catalogul*, vol. 2, 26, doc. 70; Mihnea Berindei, "Contribution à l'étude du commerce ottoman des fourrures moscovites. La route moldavo-polonoise, 1453-1700," *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, 12, no. 4 (1971): 401.

to draw a complete inventory of the stolen goods and return them to the Ottoman Porte.¹⁸ Under these circumstances, the mission of the Moldavian envoys was very difficult as they traveled with a great amount of money and – upon their return – with expensive goods. Nor did the passage through the Tatars territories eliminate the Cossacks threat. Prince Dymitr Wiśniowiecki was preparing a massive offensive in Crimea in the spring of 1560, and the Prince of Moldavia wrote to the sultan about the brigands who had settled at the borders of Muscovy.¹⁹ In the end, the Moldavian envoys went to Moscow via Poland, but the trip was not without incidents. Upon return, the Moldavian envoys were detained in Lwów as a result of the political turmoil in Moldavia, where Alexander Lăpușneanu was dethroned by Jacob Heraclid, supported by the Habsburgs. The Polish King's decision to detain the mission was meant to lend support to Lăpușneanu and, at the same time, to show to the sultan that Poland was not involved in the events unfolding in Moldavia.

In the context of the war between the Ottomans and the Habsburgs, the passage of Jacob Heraclid's mercenaries through Poland could be interpreted by the sultan as a violation of the peace treaty between the Ottoman Empire and Poland. In addition, the Poles were convinced that the Porte would not accept a Habsburg agent on Moldavian throne, and Lăpușneanu would retake the throne with Ottoman military support. Their predictions proved to be wrong later because they underestimated the diplomatic abilities of Jacob Heraclid (usually known as Despot) and his connections in Istanbul. 'Subtle and slippery as a snake,'²⁰ according to the expression used by the imperial agent who oversaw him, Despot was a Greek adventurer with an impressive biography.²¹ Armed with imaginary aristocratic claims recognized by the Roman emperor and the king of Poland, Despot came to Moldavia in 1558, where he presented himself as a relative of Alexander Lăpușneanu's wife. In a short time he mastered the language and joined a group of boyars, with whom he

¹⁸ Bennigsen and Lemerrier-Quelquejay, "Les marchands," 379.

¹⁹ Chantal Lemerrier-Quelquejay, „Un condottiere lithuanien du XVIe siècle. Le prince Dimitrij Višnovckij et l'origine de la Seč Zaporogue d'après les Archives ottomanes”, *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, 10, no. 2 (1969) : 273.

²⁰ Maria Holban, M. M. Alexandrescu Dersca-Bulgaru and Paul Cernovodeanu (eds), *Călători străini despre Țările Române*, vol. 2 (Bucharest: Editura Academiei R.S.R., 1970), 171.

²¹ Emile Legrand, *Deux vies de Jacques Basilikos, seigneur de Samos, marquis de Paros, comte palatin et prince de Moldavie* (Paris : Charles-Emile Ruelle, 1889); Adina Berciu-Drăghicescu, *O domnie umanistă în Moldova – Despot vodă*, Bucharest, 1980; Andronikos Falangas, *Jacques Vasilikos-Despote (Despot Vodă) : un grec, voievode de Moldavie* (Bucharest : Omonia, 2009).

began to collude to take over the throne. His plan to poison Lăpușneanu which involved the Ecumenical Patriarch, Rüstem Pasha²², and the prince's young Italian physician, was discovered in Istanbul and Despot was forced to flee the principality.²³ Returning at the helm of a mercenary army, Despot captured the throne in November 1561 after the Battle of Verbia, but he was recognized by the sultan as the legitimate ruler only in March 1562.²⁴

During this time, the two candidates fought to influence the decision of the sultan, using gifts, bribes and promises to give hundreds of thousands florins. Despot conducted a fierce diplomatic campaign in Istanbul, relying mainly on the Greeks from the Ottoman capital and individuals from Prince Selim's entourage.²⁵ He even asked the Polish king to support him at the Ottoman Porte, but the king continued to support Lăpușneanu. In February 1562, the Polish envoy, an old Armenian, brought to Istanbul the king's letter demanding the removal of Despot; however, the request fell on deaf ears as the sultan suspected that Sigismund August had orchestrated Despot's campaign.²⁶ At the same time, Despot's envoy offered to swear an oath of fealty to the Polish king, but he did not receive any answer.²⁷ Restoring the good relations with Poland was necessary not only to secure the release of Moldavian envoys detained in Lwów, but also due to the new prince's need for goods purchased from Muscovy in his negotiations with the Sultan. To get in their possession, Despot even promised to the Polish king sizeable military aid against Moscow²⁸, as evidenced by a later document. Despite the generous offer, Poland's refusal was constant due to the complications generated by Despot's presence on the throne of Moldavia. The situation was particularly serious for the king's nephew, the Prince of Transylvania, who, following Lăpușneanu's banishment, was caught between two enemies. In January 1562, John Sigismund wrote to the king about the events occurred in Moldavia, exposing the difficult situation of Transylvania and asking his kin to mediate a two-year armistice with

²² Eudoxiu de Hurmuzaki (ed.), *Documente privitoare la Istoria Românilor*, vol. 8 (Bucharest: Socec, 1894), 89–90.

²³ Nicolae Iorga (ed.), *Nouveaux matériaux pour servir à l'histoire de Jacques Basilikos l'Héraclide, dit le Despote prince de Moldavie* (Bucharest : Institut d'arts graphiques Charles Göbl, 1900), 34–7.

²⁴ Constantin Rezachevici, *Cronologia critică a domnilor din Țara Românească și Moldova*, vol. 1 (Bucharest : Editura Enciclopedică, 2001), 642–55.

²⁵ *Călători străini*, vol. 2, 170.

²⁶ Hurmuzaki, *Documente*, vol. II/1, 395.

²⁷ Andrei Veress (ed.), *Documente privitoare la istoria Ardealului, Moldovei și Țării Românești*, vol. 1 (Bucharest : Cartea Românească, 1929), 209.

²⁸ Corfus, *Documente*, vol. 1, 203.

the Habsburgs.²⁹

The gifts offered by the Moldavian voivode to the sultan and to Ottoman dignitaries were usually interpreted as financial obligations related to the *dar al-'ahd*³⁰ status, but they also had an important political role, namely that of stating the prince's position vis-à-vis the sultan and the Ottoman hierarchy. In this respect, it has been noted that falcons presented to the sultan had a symbolic connotation that expressed both submission to the sultan and friendship between the two monarchs (a relationship whereby the subaltern is treated as a "son" of the sultan).³¹ The importance of the gifts offered to the sultan and Ottoman dignitaries can be better understood by setting aside the perspective of the attraction exercised by the exotic and luxury goods,³² and replacing it with what economists call "positional goods." These are characterized by welfare, prestige, and power, namely the elements through which power consumption is achieved.³³ As positional goods, sable pelts serve the same purpose as falcons and define the position of the Moldavian prince towards the Ottoman political hierarchy and society. The Moldavian voivode offered gifts that most subjects of the sultan were unable to provide, leading to his acknowledgement as a powerful and rich prince with a privileged status. Whereas the sultan stated that Moldavia was his

²⁹ Veress, *Documente*, vol. 1, 205–6; N.C. Bejenaru, *Politica externă a lui Alexandru Lăpușneanu* (Iași : Presa Bună, 1935), 106–7.

³⁰ Ion Matei, "Quelques problèmes concernat le régime de la domination ottoman dans les Pays Roumains", *Revue des Études Sud-Est Européennes*, 10, no. 1 (1972), 74.

³¹ Andrei Pippidi, "Șoimii împărătești. Un aspect al obligațiilor Țărilor Române față de Poartă," *Studii și Materiale de Istorie Medie*, 14 (1996) : 16.

³² Unfortunately, for many scholars a simple inventory of precious objects and artifacts represents history of luxury. Many approaches are centred on objects and considering that the objects reveal a great deal about the ideas and cultural practices (See recently Peter McNeill and Giorgio Riello (eds), *Luxury. A Rich History* (Oxford – New York : Oxford University Press, 2016). In fact, luxury is an idea specifically to Western thought, a system of discourse which embraces a network of fluctuating social, philosophic and theological presuppositions (J. Sekora, *Luxury. The Concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollett*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). The evolution of the idea of luxury may be correlated with the circulation of goods and with consumption (see Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth Century Britain*, (Oxford – New York : Oxford University Press, 2007), but when a historian assess an item as luxury, using criteria specifically to modern time, he makes a great confusion.

³³ F. Hirsch, *Social Limits to Growth* (Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 1976), 32–6; Ugo Pagano, "Is Power an Economic Good? Notes on Social Scarcity and the Economics of Positional Goods," in S. Bowles, M. Franzini and Ugo Pagano (eds), *The Politics and Economics of Power*, London-New York : Routledge, 1999) : 53–67.

possession and considered it part of the “abode of Islam,”³⁴ in reality the Islamic law did not apply there, and Muslims were prohibited from constructing mosques.³⁵ The prince benefited from the attributes of sovereign rule, but this sovereignty was limited,³⁶ as it is exercised at the sultan’s pleasure. For this reason, expensive gifts – whose value exceeded that of the tribute – constituted a political means for asserting and confirming sovereignty. In his turn, the sultan offered gifts to the Moldavian prince, including *kapaniçe* (a ceremonial costume adorned with sable fur, reserved only to the sultan and high Ottoman dignitaries, such as the Grand Vizier and the Aga of Janissaries).³⁷ The importance of sable furs as an expression of the relationship between the Moldavian prince and the sultan is illustrated by an episode that took place in the first half of the seventeenth century. In order to restore Moldavian economy after a period of turmoil, Prince Vasile Lupu requested the sultan a three-year deferment of tribute payments, which would subsequently be paid out in a single instalment. During these three years, the prince refrained from wearing clothes adorned with sable fur, using a humbler fox instead. After the conclusion of the period, Lupu sent sable pelts to the sultan and the officials of the Porte as a sign of gratitude and resumed his old clothing habits.³⁸ In other words, Vasile Lupu renounced temporarily his status of a wealthy and powerful prince, which he restored afterwards – a fact expressed by paying the tribute and wearing sable fur again.

However, in order not to escalate the situation, the Polish king promised the Moldavian prince that the goods bought in Moscow would be returned to him. In a conversation with imperial agent John Belsius, Despot accused the king of failing to return his sable pelts and walrus ivory under a deceitful excuse. According to him, the king had received the information that an envoy sent from the Porte with princely insignia was accompanied by 3,000 janissaries, and his true mission was to kill Despot and install Lăpușneanu in his stead.

³⁴ Viorel Panaite, “The Legal and Political Status of Walachia and Moldavia in Relation to the Ottoman Porte,” in Gábor Kármán and Lovro Kunčević (eds), *The European Tributary States of the Ottoman Empire in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Leiden–Boston : Brill, 2013) : 9–41.

³⁵ Maria-Magdalena Székely and Ștefan S. Gorovei, “Autour des relations moldo-ottomanes,” *Medieval and Early Modern Studies for Central and Eastern Europe*, 5 (2013) : 149–92.

³⁶ Dariusz Kołodziejczyk, “What Is Inside and What Is Outside? Tributary States in Ottoman Politics,” in Gábor Kármán and Lovro Kunčević (eds), *The European Tributary States of the Ottoman Empire in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2013) : 421–32.

³⁷ Berindei, “Contribution,” 395.

³⁸ Ion Neculce, *Opere. Letopisețul Țării Moldovei și O samă de cuvinte*, ed. Gabriel Ștrempel, (Bucharest : Editura Minerva, 1982) : 177–8.

The sultan also threatened to invade Poland, using the pretext that the king permitted Despot to pass through his territories.³⁹ Though Despot had doubts about the king's sincerity, he did not ignore his warning. He refused to go out into the open field to meet the sultan's emissary claiming to be unable to do so due to illness. Only after he had ascertained Ferhad Pasha's true intentions did Despot meet with the envoy and partook in the enthronement ceremonies.⁴⁰ However, Despot had serious reasons to doubt the king's sincerity.

Still, the investiture provided the prince with a new diplomatic instrument which he did not hesitate to use. In May 1562, Sultan Süleyman intervened on Despot's behalf, writing to the Polish King on the matter of Moldavian mission detained in Lwów. As the sultan emphasized that Moldavia and its inhabitants are under his rule, and as such enjoy the same status as other Ottoman subjects. Thus, the stipulations of the Polish-Ottoman treaty apply to them and the mission's forced sojourn in Lwów infringed upon the peace between the two polities. In the name of peace and friendship, the sultan asked the king to immediately release the detained Moldavians and their possessions.⁴¹

Obviously, the sultan's request did not go unanswered. In July 1562, the Polish king wrote to the sultan, in order to justify his action. Sigismund August argued that his decision to detain the mission returning from Muscovy stemmed from the fact that they had been sent by Lăpușneanu and he undertook measures necessary to protect the wares belonging to the Moldavian prince. However, when Despot informed him that the sable furs were intended for the sultan, the king ordered their immediate release. In conclusion, Sigismund expressed hope that the incident would not affect the peace between Poland and the Ottoman Empire. On the same day, the king sent a letter to Despot informing him that, as a result of his request, he ordered the release of the Moldavians returning from Moscow, and exempted them from paying any custom duties. In exchange, the king requested the release of his Armenian servant detained in Moldavia.⁴² Despot not only summoned the sultan's support, but also detained the Polish envoy returning from Istanbul.

³⁹ *Călători străini*, vol. 2, 154–5.

⁴⁰ Rezachevici, *Cronologia*, 655.

⁴¹ Corfus, *Documente*, vol. 1, 199–201.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 201–2.

Despite these efforts, the goods in question never reached Despot. It is possible that Poles may have delayed the release, or that Moldavian envoys, loyal to Lăpușneanu⁴³, refused to leave. An indication in this respect is Lăpușneanu's attempt to claim the goods for himself; the ousted ruler, in his exile in Rhodes, knew of the envoys' detention in Lwów and sought to contact them. In September 1562, acting on Lăpușneanu's behalf, the Prince of Transylvania addressed the King of Poland with regard to the Muscovite furs detained in Lwów. The letter mentions that boyar Drăgan had been dispatched by Lăpușneanu to Moscow, along with 5,000 florins, in order to buy sable pelts and walrus fangs. The king was urged to proceed in such a way that the goods to be sent to Lăpușneanu rather than fall into Despot's hands.⁴⁴ When compared with enormous sums that both pretenders promised during to sway the sultan and the Porte, the value of goods brought from Moscow is modest, making it difficult to understand Despot and Lăpușneanu's considerable efforts to claim them. However, their importance stemmed not so much from their price, but rather the sable pelts' symbolic value within the logic of Moldavian–Ottoman relations and the difficulty of procuring them.

The intervention of the Transylvanian Prince took place at a time when Despot had already won the sultan's confidence through political overtures, including his promise to fight against the Habsburgs. However, the confidence quickly dissipated when it was revealed in Istanbul that Despot had taken the throne with Albert Łaski's money, whom he repaid with the castle of Hotin.⁴⁵ Still, Despot did not give up on the furs seized in Lwów. By the beginning of 1563, Despot prepared a predatory raid against Halich,⁴⁶ in order to retaliate against Sigismund August's refusal to release the goods. In June, a Polish envoy sent to the Porte was instructed to ask the sultan to order Despot to respect the peace with Poland and the Polish–Ottoman treaty.⁴⁷ However, the mission was unable to proceed due to the events in Moldavia. An invasion of the principality, led by Dymitr Wiśniowiecki – another candidate for the throne – was followed by a boyar rebellion headed by Stephen Tomșa. After Despot's demise and Tomșa's flight to Poland, the Sultan restored Alexander

⁴³ Very probably the envoy Drăgan is the same person with the chancellor Drăgan appreciated by Lăpușneanu for his fidelity (Nicolae Stoicescu, *Dicționarul marilor dregători din Țara Românească și Moldova în sec. XIV-XVII* (București : Editura Academiei R.S.R., 1971), 303).

⁴⁴ Veress, *Documente*, vol. 1, 226–7.

⁴⁵ Bejenaru, *Politica externă*, 109.

⁴⁶ *Călători străini*, vol. 2, 215.

⁴⁷ Corfus, *Documente*, vol. 1, 205–6.

Lăpușneanu back on the throne. But in the context of the revenge against the boyar traitors,⁴⁸ Lăpușneanu's relations with Poland deteriorated, necessitating a new intercession by the sultan to release the envoys detained at Lwów.

In December 1564, Suleiman the Magnificent sent a new letter to the Polish king demanding the release of Drăgan and the goods detained in Lwów. The letter mentioned Alexander Lăpușneanu's complaints on the matter, pointing out that Drăgan, along with pelts and walrus fangs acquired in Muscovy, had been in Lwów for a very long time.⁴⁹ Finally, after four years, Drăgan returned home from his mission. Despite having spent more than three years in captivity, he was lucky to come back alive unlike the Moldavian envoys from 1546!

The episode shows that in the middle of the sixteenth century the import of Muscovite fur was primarily a political affair rather than a commercial one. The documents make it impossible to determine whether the period witnessed a shortage of furs, caused by high consumption and limited quantities available, or by excessive valorization, particularly due to their status as diplomatic gifts in Moldavian–Ottoman relations. Some clues suggest the former, but the two are by no means mutually exclusive. In the last decade of the sixteenth century, the conquest of Siberia and the end of the Muscovite–Polish conflict created favorable circumstances for the development of fur trade. In 1587, an Italian from Ragusa, who was in the service of the Wallachian prince, noted that the sable fur was cheaper in Venice.⁵⁰ At the same time, Ottoman caravans brought important quantities of expensive fur from Moscow, the main requirement being their high quality.⁵¹ However, the fact that diplomatic incidents of this kind are not found in the following period shows that the fur trade became easier, even though their importance remained the same.

⁴⁸ Pungă, *Țara Moldovei*, 108–13.

⁴⁹ Guboglu, *Catalogul*, vol. 2, 37.

⁵⁰ *Călători străini*, vol. 3, 226.

⁵¹ Bennigsen and Lemerrier-Quelquejay, “Les marchands,” 387–8.