Reaction to the Special Issue of AEER: War among the Yugoslavs

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To the editors:

I very much enjoyed your recent special issue on the "War among the Yugoslavs," and see it as an invaluable contribution to understanding the ongoing Balkan tragedy. I would, however, like to take issue with the conclusion of one article, "Seeing past the barricades" by Botev and Wagner, which argues that intermarriage rates in Yugoslavia were low and that therefore there was little social integration in the country. This conclusion is based on a serious methodological flaw.

As the article points out, the importance of intermarriage rates, according to sociologists, is that they are very accurate indicators of social acceptance and lack of discrimination. But the real question that should be addressed is not, what is the overall intermarriage rate in Yugoslavia as a whole, but rather, what was the rate in those places where violent conflict has taken place. The need to look at specific areas is especially important because marriage does tend to take place based on physical location, and in Yugoslavia "The greatest number of marriage is between people who live in the same place." [Demografski razvitak nacionalnosti u SR Srbiji, Institut drustvenih nauka, Belgrade, May 1967--marked "Za internu upotrebu" (for internal use)]. Clearly the number of marriages such as those between a Serb from Serbia and a Croat from Croatia, for example, were only a tiny fraction of all intermarriages. Although the authors claim to have adjusted their model to account for this fact, their use of overall Yugoslav rates as an indicator from which they draw their conclusions belies this claim.

Thus, the fact that the overall rate of mixed marriages was "only" 9.8 percent in "inner" Serbia as a whole, where 85 percent of the population in Serb, should not be surprising; very roughly speaking, the maximum such rate could be was 15 percent (if all non-Serbs who married took Serb spouses and assuming that all marriages took place between residents of inner Serbia). Taking this into account, it becomes apparent that fully 2/3 of the maximum potential number of intermarriages took place. Likewise in Croatia, which was 25 percent non-Croat, 16.9 percent of
the marriages were mixed, again 2/3 of the potential maximum; the figures from other relatively homogenous regions are similar.

Of course this is a rough estimate and some of these marriages were between minorities. But my main point stands. Clearly in areas with significant ethnic majority a true indicator of coexistence and social acceptance is the degree to which minorities intermarry with the majority. Thus, rather that drawing conclusions from the 12 percent intermarriages rate in all of Yugoslavia, it's necessary to look at rates in a much more sophisticated way; that is, looking at the intermarriage rates by region, and looking at the intermarriage rates of minority groups in those areas where there is a dominant majority.

Also of key importance is the need to break out rates for ethnically mixed regions within republics and provinces. Measuring the level of social tolerance in ethnically heterogeneous regions, where most of the violent conflict had taken place, is vital to understanding the causes of the violence. If rates were quite low, perhaps there was some deep underlying hostility which was easily provoked or which burst to the surface spontaneously. But if intermarriage rates in these regions are high, then the question becomes why did was break out in the exact regions? Clearly looking at aggregate intermarriage rates in all of Yugoslavia doesn't address this. Indeed, this perspective makes quite clear that more than a "few" Yugoslavs in those areas where warfare has taken place have spouses from an ethnicity "on the other side of the barricade."

For example, in Croatia throughout the 1980s about 30 percent of Serbs who married Croat spouses (Demografska statistika, Belgrade, annual, Table 5-3). Since 30 percent of Croatia's Serbs lived in areas that were majority-Serb (and were therefore less likely to take part in intermarriage), almost 50 percent of those Serbs who married and were form the very mixed regions of Slavonia, where warfare was the worst, took Croat spouses. Similarly, in very mixed parts of Bosnia, for example in the Sarajevo region, 25 percent of the marriages were mixed. As the author's own table 1 points out, in Vojvodina, the overall intermarriage rate did increase over time, to 28 percent in the early 1980s. In Kosovo, however, only 2 percent of Serbs who married took Albanian spouses (Demografska statistika). These regional figures accurately reflect the state of pre-war inter-ethnic tolerance and social integration, and are much more useful than taking aggregate Yugoslav-level figures and making broad generalization from them. It is also at this regional and local level that the authors' hypothesis about the three types of marriage patterns could best be tested.
To do a full study of intermarriage rates and the implications for interethnic relations, it would be necessary to identify regions (not republics) throughout Yugoslavia, perhaps using opstine/opcine; determine the ethnic structure of these regions; and look at the intermarriage figures from that perspective. In those regions with highly homogeneous populations and indicator of social acceptance would be the rate of majority-minority intermarriage. In highly mixed areas a more reliable indicator would be the overall intermarriage rate.

The most interesting facts of course would be rates for those areas and those groups who now are supposedly on "different sides of the barricade." If intermarriage rates are high, as in Croatia's mixed regions, then clearly the root of the conflict was not some pre-existing hatred, discrimination, or lack of social integration--which incidentally is the argument of extremists on all sides. Rather, the causes of the conflict must be sought elsewhere. Indeed, I would argue that the violence was an import from outside which purposefully targeted and destroyed those regions' social harmony and atmospheres of tolerance.