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## Intermarriage-born Millennials in the Whirlwind of the 1990s Yugoslav Wars

The goal of this paper is to investigate the role of family choices regarding the language of education in self-representations in the adult life of millennials, who grew up during the 1990s Yugoslav wars in Vojvodina. Although the armed conflicts of the 1990s Yugoslav wars avoided Vojvodina, the war had a profound effect on the region. For intermarriage-born millennials, one of the milestone events in their lives is their parents' choice of language of instruction when enrolling them in elementary school. The paper is based on an in-depth analysis of interviews conducted with millennials born in Serb-Hungarian intermarriage. The findings show the influence the choice of language of school instruction has on the millennials' identity and sense of belonging. Those who attended minority language tuition endured more ethnicity-based, nationalism-fuelled incidents during their schooling. This topic is important, since the experiences of intermarriage-born millennials in Vojvodina had previously been neglected because of the focus on Serb-Croatian-Bosnian relationships in conflict literature.

**Keywords:** intermarriage, education, language, 1990s Yugoslav war, ethnicity, identity, millennials, Vojvodina, Serbia.

## Otroci mešanih zakonov sredi vojne vihre na območju Jugoslavije v devetdesetih letih prejšnjega stoletja

*Prispevek proučuje vpliv izbire učnega jezika na samoopredelitev v odrasli dobi v primeru otrok, ki so odraščali v Vojvodini v času jugoslovanskih vojn v devetdesetih letih prejšnjega stoletja. Čeprav so neposredni oboroženi spopadi Vojvodino obsli, je vojna tudi to regijo močno zaznamovala. Za otroke, rojene v mešanih zakonih, je ena od življenjskih prelomnic tudi izbira učnega jezika ob vpisu v osnovno šolo. Članek temelji na poglobljeni analizi intervjujev, opravljenih z otroki, rojenimi v mešanih srbsko-madžarskih zakonih. Ugotovitve kažejo pomemben vpliv izbire učnega jezika v šoli na njihovo identiteto in občutek pripadnosti. Tisti, ki so obiskovali pouk v manjšinskem jeziku, so med šolanjem doživeli več incidentov, povezanih z etnično pripadnostjo in nacionalizmom. Tematika je vsekakor zanimiva, saj izkušnje vojvodinskih otrok iz mešanih zakonov doslej niso bile deležne večje pozornosti v strokovni literaturi, ki se je osredotočala predvsem na srbsko-hrvaško-bosanske odnose.*

**Ključne besede:** mešani zakon, izobraževanje, jezik, jugoslovanska vojna v devetdesetih letih prejšnjega stoletja, etničnost, identiteta, otroci, Vojvodina, Srbija.

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## 1. Introduction

Although during the 1990s Yugoslav wars there were no armed conflicts in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina (hereinafter, Vojvodina), the northern part of Serbia, the war still had consequences (Nađ 2006). Vojvodina is not a territorial autonomy on ethnic grounds, but a multi-ethnic region (Székely & Horváth 2014) with 25 different ethnicities,<sup>1</sup> among which the Hungarian ethnic minority is the largest and constitutes 13 per cent of the Vojvodinian population (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2012). During the wars in the 1990s, the living conditions of the Hungarians in Vojvodina changed significantly (Göncz 2004), since the 1990s were permeated by ethnic conflicts and the outbreak of hatred and hostility towards national minorities, or towards all those who differed from the majority nation (Savić 2006). These circumstances decreased the population of the ethnic minority communities due to large-scale emigration (Gábrity-Molnár 1997; Vékás 2008). Everybody had to cope with difficult economic and ever-changing social and political circumstances that were exacerbated by and associated with their minority fate and vulnerability (Göncz 2004). The number of Hungarians in Vojvodina decreased rapidly (Gábrity-Molnár 1997; Göncz 2004; Vékás 2008); by May 1992, 25,000 Hungarians had fled to Hungary, who were later legally deprived of their inheritance rights for avoiding military conscriptions. Many who stayed and refused to serve were dismissed from their jobs (Vékás 2008, 356).

Acculturation can be seen as an important concept in explaining the varied experiences of ethnic and cultural minorities (Trimble 2003, 5), which may involve the loss of some components of the ethnic minority identity in public relations, i.e., language loss, changing social networks, or evolving cultural values (Phinney 2003). Acculturation was always more prominent in intermarriage-born children. Moreover, those who were born in intermarriages and had mixed national identities found it challenging to decide whether to belong to an ethnic minority group or the majority during the turbulent time of the 1990s, as it became onerous to be a member of any ethnic minority community (Göncz 2004). Although Botev (1994) argued that the high level of intermarriages (between 1962–1989 the percentage of intermarriages in Vojvodina varied between 22.5%–28.4%, while in Kosovo it varied between 9.4%–4.7% in the same period) saved the province from the escalation of armed conflicts, the idea of intermarriage as a panacea for social harmony and cohesion may be overly simplistic (Rodríguez-García et al. 2016, 2), especially if they become weaponized and regarded as eroding forces attacking ethnic boundaries (Burić 2020).

Earlier studies on ethnic intermarriages in Vojvodina were based on publicly available statistical data analyses (cf. Petrović 1968; 1985; Botev 1994; Smits 2010; Sokolovska 2008; Lazar & Aćimov 2017), while scant attention was paid to ethnic-intermarriage-born individuals from a qualitative perspective

(Özateşler-Ülkücan 2020). To understand this phenomenon of heteroethnic millennials we need to adopt Hobsbawm's (2012, 10) approach<sup>2</sup> of analysing the nations and their constructions from above, i.e., in terms of political, technical, administrative, economic and other conditions; and from below by voicing individuals' assumptions and interests.

The paper presents the complex decision-making process that intermarried parents faced upon choosing their children's language of instruction at school (minority or majority). The stories were narrated from the perspective of intermarriage millennials (born in the 1980s) revealing breakpoints, much like the language of instruction. Millennials in post-socialist countries in Europe are in a particularly vulnerable, precarious position, as the transition from socialism to neo-liberalism has revived class, gender, and ethnic social differences (Ule 2012, 40). Additionally, the research focuses on the investigation of ethnicity-based discrimination and incidents which intermarriage-born millennials endured in their childhood and schooling during the 1990s Yugoslav wars. The analysis was based on semi-structured interviews with individuals from different parts of Vojvodina with either majority- or minority-dominant populations.

The research is unique in two aspects. Firstly, it offers an insight into the Serb-Hungarian relationship during the 1990s war through the lens of the historical overview of political and social events, which serves to shift the focus from the literature that looks at Serb-Croat-Bosnian ethnic relations, but also to add a new dimension to it. Thus, the questions this paper ought to answer is: to what extent do intermarriage-born millennials preserve their ethnic minority identity components (ethnic minority language use) and did the language of school instruction induce any ethnicity-based atrocities during the 1990s for intermarriage-born millennials?

## 1.1 Intermarriage as a Panacea of Social Cohesion

There is no clear-cut definition of intermarriage. There exist different types of intermarriage, for instance, racial, ethnic, or religious, but they may coincide, so the boundaries between them are often blurred.

The literature on who marries whom is dominated by two themes: marriage as an exchange of social, economic, and personal relationships between spouses, and marriage as an indicator of assimilation or social distance (Schoen et al. 1989, 617). Intermarriage has long been seen as a reflection of intergroup relations and the strength of group boundaries (Gordon 1964). It also serves as the main indicator of acculturation or even assimilation (Merton 1941; Blau et al. 1982; Labov & Jacobs 1986), and, as it challenges people's ideas about dividedness, is still controversial (Osanami Törngren 2016). It is not clear whether intermarriage is a result of integration, or vice versa – integration is seen as an outcome of intermarriage (Song 2009). Integration needs to be differentiated

from assimilation. Namely, assimilation implies the diminishing of ethnic characteristics, while integration refers to the social aspect, indicating “the overall acceptance into the mainstream” (Song 2009). In writing about the assimilation process, Gordon (1964) defines three steps: cultural assimilation or acculturation, structural, and finally, marital assimilation, highlighting that this process may result in the disappearance of an ethnic group as a separate entity.

According to Peach (2005), the rate of intermarriage depends on the degree of segregation – a higher degree of segregation implies a lower degree of integration and, hence, a lower number of intermarriages. High rates of intermarriage between a minority and majority group simultaneously indicate the acceptability of the minority to the majority, and the blurring of the smaller group’s distinctiveness (Schoen et al. 1989, 618).

What also affects intermarriage rates is the location of creating such unions. The nature of the heteroethnic relationship also plays a significant role. Merton (1941, 361) suggests that “rates and patterns of intermarriage are closely related to cultural orientations, standardized distributions of income and symbols of status”. Ethnic minority members might try to “get closer” to the majority population in their homeland via intermarriage (Kemp 2006), i.e., choosing a spouse from the majority nation (Hoóz 2002). A minority spouse may become more deeply integrated into the majority society’s structures, institutions, or social networks through intermarriage.

In some cases, families value both heritages equally, thereby practising a “hybrid family culture” (Caballero 2007). It may happen that the minority spouse’s culture is dominant in some families or diminished in others. Consequently, the children born in these unions very often do not identify themselves as members of a single ethnic group and their cultural distinctiveness is rather decreased (Harris & Sim 2002). Their tendency towards the majority, minority or mixed positions is the result of both individual and contextual factors (Osanami Törngren et al. 2021). For instance, in the regions where racial categorization is not state-driven, persons from mixed marriages identify themselves as “neither-nor”, as coined by Brubaker (2016), i.e., “in a space outside the parameters of origin and ethno-racial background” (Osanami Törngren et al. 2021, 773), which could easily be applied to the situation of the heteroethnic background as is common in Central and Eastern Europe.

Because marriage is regarded as a mechanism for the transmission of ethnically specific cultural values and practices to the next generation, intermarriage may fundamentally affect the boundaries and distinctiveness of ethnic minority groups (Barth 1969). Intermarriages indicate that social, cultural, and other barriers are falling (Coleman 1994). Intergroup social categories and boundaries can be transcended with the creation of hybrid and transformative identities (Özateşler-Ülkücan 2020). If we accept that intermarriage signals the genuine social acceptance of others as equals, then we may also conclude that it reveals a

genuine decrease in ethnic and racial prejudice toward minority groups in society (Song 2009, 333). For these reasons, intermarriage is usually regarded as an indicator of a minority group's success and social acceptance (Song 2009).

Intermarriage between members of different social groups calls into question another aspect of this kind of union – its function as a connecting element in society. This is because intermarriage not only links two individuals, but also the larger groups to which these individuals belong (Smits 2010, 421). Accordingly, intermarriage concerns not only the married couple, but whole families whose members may develop the most personal relationships with each other (Hoóž 2002, 1090).

Families constitute important contexts for the social interaction and mutual acceptance that occurs between ethnic groups in society and may foster the maintenance of ethnic group boundaries (Huijnk 2011, 15). Preece (2008, 57) suggests that the use and maintenance of heritage language has a gender dimension that applies to ethnic minority women, thus apart from bearing the task of symbolizing their nation collectively, women are expected to reproduce it culturally (Yuval-Davis 1997, 196). Women bear the burden of being “mothers of the nation” (Bracewell 1996), they reproduce the boundaries of ethnic/national groups, transmit culture, and are the privileged signifiers of national difference (Kandiyoti 1994, 377). In family units with patriarchal male heads, the role of women is to reflect traditional notions of femininity, which in the case of ethnic minority women can also result in their absorption into the majority nation (Thomson 2020).

## 1.2 Intermarriages in Yugoslavia with Special Focus on Vojvodina

Botev (1994) argues that intermarriages in the former Yugoslavia were influenced by the cultural tradition of spouse selection preferences and that the Hungarian ethnic minority had the lowest barriers for ethnic intermarriages in Vojvodina. They were the most open to ethnic intermarriage with other ethnically different members of Yugoslav society. The fact that mixed marriages were condemned and ridiculed during the 1990s wars in Yugoslavia by Bosnian politicians is an apt example of the weaponization of a peaceful and voluntary union of two cultures represented by a husband and wife (Burić 2020). Intermarriages in the former Yugoslavia were influenced by the cultural traditions of different peoples and the states in which they lived, which greatly affected the choice of spouses (Botev 1994). Ruža Petrović began researching and writing about mixed marriages in Yugoslavia in the 1960s. Using statistical data, she stated that mixed marriages were a rare occurrence between the two world wars, because of church clerical rules, as religion had a far greater influence and significance compared to the later period (Petrović 1985). After World War II in Yugoslavia, the number

of mixed marriages began to grow owing to the introduction of socialist policies, such as compulsory civil marriage, urbanization, and education.

Although Petrović believed that mixed marriages in the former Yugoslavia had become a means of ethnobiological as well as ethnocultural homogenization (Petrović 1985), Burić (2020) states that a 1967 study conducted by Petrović with respondents in each of the republics and two autonomous provinces (Vojvodina and Kosovo) showed that regardless of the extent to which they varied in distrust of other ethnic groups, all respondents quickly dismissed members of other ethnic groups as possible spouses (Burić 2020). Religion remained a particularly important factor in choosing a spouse, as Petrović (1985) observes, and most ethnically mixed marriages were between spouses of the same religion (for example, Kosovo Albanians with Turks, Bosniaks with Kosovo Albanians). Montenegrins, who were mostly religiously undecided by that time, more often chose Serbs as their spouses compared to the non-Orthodox population (Burić 2020).

Instability characterized intermarriages in Yugoslavia. Petrović (1968) noticed that disagreement and differences on ethnic grounds were the root causes of the instability in mixed marriages. Burić (2020) added here an important observation: that mixed marriages were more common in cities, between spouses with a higher level of education, between whom divorce was certainly more frequent than in the rural population. Namely, mixed marriages between spouses of lower educational levels in rural areas were extremely unstable and resulted in a higher level of divorces than in those from urban areas (Burić 2020).

When it comes to multi-ethnic Vojvodina, in the period from 1956 to 2004, Sokolovska (2008) concludes (also based on statistical data) that ethnically heterogeneous marriages were entered into by all ethnic groups in the territory of Vojvodina, mostly with Serbian women. She found that the most numerous minority group, Hungarians, prefer to marry Serb women rather than Serb Hungarian women (1.06 % vs. 0.89 %), and that religion is not crucial for Hungarians in this process (Sokolovska 2008). The Hungarian national minority had the lowest barrier to conclude ethnically mixed marriages in Vojvodina, that is, it was most open to ethnically mixed marriages with other ethnically different members of Yugoslav society (Botev 1994). This practice dates back to the time of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, in which Hungarians were more open to marrying members of ethnic groups (Botev 1994).

The 1990s brought many socio-cultural changes, and this period was of great importance for discussion on the level of acculturation of minorities through mixed marriages in Vojvodina. As a result of the wars in the 1990s, a large number of (Serb) refugees arrived from Bosnia and Croatia, which led to a significant change in the demographic structure (Sokolovska 2008). It is interesting to point out that Botev believes that the wars of the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia bypassed Vojvodina partly because of its large number of mixed

marriages (Botev 1994). Recent research conducted after 2010, also based on statistical data, indicates that the highest rate of ethnically mixed marriages can still be found in Vojvodina, which is to be expected, given the heterogeneity of the ethnic structure of the population (Lazar & Aćimov 2017), but also given the above-mentioned cultural tradition of the population of Vojvodina.

### 1.3 The Choice of Intermarried Parents: Ethnic Minority or Majority Language of Instruction and its Effect on Ethnic Identity

A sense of belonging is an important part of identity, and as such is essential to citizens as they develop bonds with a particular territory or nation (Örkény 2005, 46). In the case of former Yugoslavia, a “supranational Yugoslav identity was built, an identity pattern which embodied the principle of brotherhood and unity” (Godina 1998, 416), and which was free from ethnic and class difference (Tóth 2019). Today, individuals born from ethnic intermarriages must choose between different ethnically-marked alternatives (Kiss 2018, 483) and in this way, artificially affirm one of their identities to the detriment of the other. It is interesting to note that members of the Hungarian minority had greater affiliation with the former Yugoslavia than Serbs (Perunović 2016).

As regards Vojvodina’s inhabitants, they developed multiple identities that did not necessarily exist in a hierarchy, but rather were awarded priority depending on the context (Šaračević 2012, 3) – this might be because ethnic communities in Vojvodina have different group characteristics (Ilić & Cvejić 1997). The Vojvodinian-Hungarian identity was developed and built during the socialist era (Losoncz 2018), in parallel with the building of a supranational Yugoslav identity. However, it only fully developed after the disappearance of Yugoslavia, and it can be “clearly differentiated from that of the wider (perhaps original?) Hungarian nation” living in Hungary (Bálint 2012, 454).

In order to preserve one’s ethnic minority identity in a nation-state, education in one’s mother tongue is crucial (Papp 2017). Education maintains the cultural and linguistic shape of the nation state (May 2012, 132), thus, ethnic minorities tend to seek the formal institutionalization of mother-tongue education and use their language at school as a means of preventing or reducing language assimilation (Papp 2014). In the Transylvanian-Hungarian context, schools play a key role in the generational reproduction of the Hungarian world in Cluj-Napoca (Brubaker et al. 2018). For mixed families, choosing the language of school instruction can have real, long-term, and far-reaching consequences – for example, in terms of choosing the child’s ethnic identity (Brubaker et al. 2018). In Transylvania, for minority Hungarians, it is not even a question of which language their children speak at school, they enrol their children in Hungarian schools by default, as this is a way of maintaining the “ethnic minority word”, but when

it comes to mixed marriages, this is not unambiguous (Brubaker et al. 2018). Some children born in intermarriages may begin their education in a Hungarian primary school and then transfer to the Romanian system in high school or in upper secondary school (Brubaker et al. 2018). In some countries, like Slovakia or Ukraine, parents of Hungarian minority children may feel that a minority Hungarian-language education would not provide their children with as many opportunities, thus they might opt for majority language schooling. If parents choose the majority language for school instruction, they may do so to better integrate their children with the majority nation, as the former is important if children are to prosper and build a career in the country in which they were born (Papp 2017, 97). Opting for majority language schooling affects the minority community on multiple levels. It narrows down the possibility for ethnic minority language schooling, because if there are not enough pupils enrolled in a class (at least five), the school will cancel the ethnic minority language class. For example, in Novi Sad (Serbia) there are currently three elementary schools and four high schools that offer instruction in Hungarian. Earlier, when more first graders were enrolled in Hungarian, more elementary schools had instruction in Hungarian. High schools also struggle with a low number of pupils in class. Some researchers argue that minority language schooling can be detrimental, since in Serbia, the teaching of all classes in primary and secondary education in the minority language, with only a few hours per week of Serbian as the majority language, created generations of unbalanced bilinguals, characterized by a very low level of Serbian language proficiency (Filipović et al. 2007). This lack of majority language proficiency resulted in a high rate of educational migration from Vojvodina that was strengthened by the fact that ethnic minority high school graduates can obtain an EU university degree in their kin-states (Lendák-Kabók et al. 2020). If they choose to stay in their home country, most of them first need to overcome the language barrier (i.e., to gain Serbian language proficiency) when starting their studies, which requires time, effort, and sacrifice (Lendák-Kabók 2021). The language barrier mostly develops in Vojvodinian municipalities, where the minority population is in majority.

Based on the above-presented contextual framework, the paper's aim is to approach the 1990s war from the perspective of intermarriage-born (Serb-Hungarian) millennials. In this sense, the paper will explore the following questions: what is the role of family choices regarding language of education in the self-representations of millennials in their adult lives? How were millennials affected by the 1990s Yugoslav wars in Vojvodina?

## 2. Methodology

The study is based on eight interviews with millennials born into Serb-Hungarian intermarriages. The snowball method (Esterberg 2001) was used when

choosing the respondents. The interviews were conducted from September to December 2019 in Hungarian and Serbian. The interview excerpts included in the paper were translated by the author from Hungarian and Serbian into English. The respondents were born between 1981 and 1989 and raised in different parts of Vojvodina. To secure the anonymity of the respondents, pseudonyms were used. The municipalities in which the interviewees from minority communities were born and raised make a difference in terms of understanding their attitudes towards ethnicity and language. These municipalities differ in regard to their ethnic compositions: in Novi Sad and Čenej, the majority of the population is Serb, thus it is more challenging for the interviewees to preserve their minority language and identity, while in Ada, Mali Idoš and Mol, Hungarians are in the majority, thus it is easier to preserve the Hungarian ethnic minority language and identity.

The interview grid consisted of twenty questions that built on each other and were divided into five main topics, namely: (1) childhood; (2) schooling; (3) the 1990s in Vojvodina; (4) ethnic identification; and (5) cultural differences in partnership and family. In this paper, we focus on topics number (2), i.e., the language of schooling, family reasons for choosing minority or majority schooling and its effects, (3) exploring the turbulent times of the 1990s, and part of topic number (4) on ethnic identification, which some respondents attached to either schooling or to their narrative about the 1990s.

Coding methods designed by Saldaña (2013) and MacQueen et al. (2009) were followed when analysing the qualitative data. First, attribute coding (MacQueen et al. 2009) was applied to code the place of birth, the place of origin, the ethnic belonging of their name and maiden name, their mother's and father's names, the language of their elementary and high school, their dominant language today, and their experience with ethnic-based conflicts. Their dominant language was the one they expressed as being dominant when the author of this paper asked them to decide. In most cases, they chose to speak in their dominant language during the interview, but some of the interviewees spoke in the minority language, even though it was not their dominant language. Narrative analysis (Law 2004) was applied to analyse the interviews, as narrative research discusses the ways in which individuals and groups interpret the social world and their place within it (Law 2004).

### 3. Empirical Findings

The findings section will present the narratives of intermarriage-born millennials. Their parents choose either majority or minority language instruction. The reasons behind these decisions will be discussed. We also analyse the ethnicity or language-related incidents which happened to our respondents during the turbulent 1990s and were somehow related to schooling.

As the analysis focuses on a special group of people in an under-researched area in Europe, it begins with a short introduction of the interviewees, presenting their family background and the place they were raised. Hobsbawm's approach (2012) is adopted, suggesting that nations should be analysed from below by voicing individuals' assumptions and personal perspectives on events, which was the author's intention as well. First, we analyse the narratives of the respondents who finished at least elementary school in Hungarian, followed by the narratives of the interviewees who finished their schooling in the majority language (i.e., in Serbian).

**Table 1: Attribute codes for respondents**

Code	Date of birth	Place of origin	Ethnic belonging of their name	Ethnic belonging of their maiden name	Father's ethnicity	Mother's ethnicity	Language of elementary school	Language of high school	Language of the interview	Dominant language	Experienced ethnic-based atrocity
Ljubica	1981	Mali Iđoš	Serb	Serb	Serb	Hungarian	Hungarian	Hungarian	Hungarian	Hungarian	Yes
Ivan	1982	Mol	Serb	-	Serb	Hungarian	Serbian	Serbian	Hungarian	Serbian	Yes
Eva	1982	Novi Sad	Serb/ Hungarian	Hungarian	Hungarian	Serb	Serbian	Serbian	Serbian	Serbian	No
Tara	1983	Čenej	Serb	Serb	Serb	Hungarian	Hungarian	Serbian	Serbian	Serbian	Yes
Teodora	1984	Novi Sad	Serb	Serb	Serb	Hungarian and Croatian	Serbian	Serbian	Serbian	Serbian	No
Zorana	1986	Novi Sad	Serb	Serb	Serb	Hungarian	Hungarian	Hungarian	Hungarian	Hungarian	Yes
Katarina	1986	Ada	Serb	Hungarian and Serb	Hungarian	Serb	Serbian	Serbian	Serbian	Serbian	No
Emma	1989	Novi Sad	Serb and Hungarian	Hungarian	Hungarian	Serb	Hungarian	Serbian	Hungarian	Serbian	Yes

Source: Empirical data.

In the continuance of this paper, the narratives of the respondents whose parents chose minority education for them will be presented together with the ethnic conflicts that occurred in the 1990s. Table 1 shows that four respondents went to elementary school in Hungarian and only two continued their high school in Hungarian as well.

Choosing minority-language education was the result of diverse motivation in my respondent's parents. Some attended school in Hungarian because their mother was Hungarian (Ljubica, Zorana and Teodora – all three of them have Serb names), whereas one had a Hungarian father (Emma), who insisted that she went to elementary school in Hungarian. However, he did not require her to attend high school in Hungarian as well, so she continued her education in Serbian.

As is shown in Table 1, four respondents finished their elementary and high school education in Serbian (Ivan, Eva, Teodora and Katarina), three of them (except Ivan) spoke in Serbian during the interview, stating in the beginning that they felt more comfortable to speak in Serbian, which was a sign of acculturation (Phinney 2003). My respondents did not recall any specific discussions about the choice of tuition language within their family; the decision had come naturally, which they accepted without questioning it later on.

In order to understand the respondents' social status and the environments they grew up in, their backgrounds will be presented in chronological order, considering their date of birth, starting with the respondents who finished their elementary (and high school) in Hungarian (Ljubica, Tara, Zorana and Emma) and continuing with the respondents who finished their schooling in Serbian (Ivan, Eva, Teodora and Katarina).

### 3.1 Ljubica

Ljubica (1981), whose father is Serbian and her mother Hungarian, always lived with her mother in a mid-sized, mostly Hungarian town in the north of the Bačka (in Hungarian: Bácska) region in Vojvodina. Her parents were separated, and her father lived in southern Serbia. She finished all her schooling in Hungarian, as it was left to her mother to choose the language of instruction. In her narrative, she identified with the Vojvodinian Hungarian ethnic minority group, but her Serb identity was also important for her. She recalled a period during the 1990s, when her Serb name either helped her or had its downside. In the following passage, she recalls a strong memory of an incident when her friends from school were bullied because of their ethnicity:

My Serb name once helped, because when we were going home from high school by bus once, Lovćenac and Mali Idoš were in a big fight. Then, in the late 1990s, when Lovćenac and Kishegyes were battling, they came with chains and there were

big fights. It didn't last long, but a lot of kids were beaten [...] it lasted a few months. Then we did not dare to cross through Lovćenac, or we went through Lovćenac very fearfully. In Lovćenac, the Montenegrins would not let the girls get off the bus in Mali Idoš, they would hold them and poke them. They did not hurt me because they looked at everyone's name on our ID cards, and they did not hurt me because they thought I was theirs. There were also downsides to my Serbian name. I did not get a Hungarian scholarship from Kosztolányi [school] once because I have a Serbian name, although I finished all my schooling in Hungarian (Ljubica, see Table 1).

### 3.2 Tara

Tara (1983) has a different background, as she grew up in a small Serbian settlement near Novi Sad. Her mother is Hungarian, was born in Hungary and came to live in Serbia when she met Tara's father. Tara had a Serb name and surname, just like Ljubica, but spoke in Serbian during the interview. The language of the interview was an immediate question of hers when we started the interview, as she explained that nowadays it is much easier for her to speak Serbian, which showed a clear sign of acculturation. She went to Hungarian elementary school, switching to a Serbian high school, where she remembers having language-related difficulties. The most traumatic experience for her in the 1990s was the NATO bombing in 1999<sup>3</sup> that resulted in moving to Hungary with her mother and sister, to her mother's sister. They stayed there for a while, and she also went to school. In Hungary, children were mean to her at school, she was othered because she came from Serbia – for example, they posted notes on a bench telling her to go home to Serbia.

Then it was very difficult for me because it was difficult for my class to accept me in high school, because it took me a while to switch from the Hungarian to the Serbian language. It was also hard in '99, when the war started, the bombing, then our mother packed us up and we went to Hungary to live with our aunt, but my aunt's husband spoke out openly against Milošević,<sup>4</sup> which made us even more anxious [...] we didn't know what was going on, we weren't aware of it, and mom took me and my sister away for only two or three weeks until everything calmed down a bit. In the end, we stayed there for three months, and they enrolled us in school – I went to high school, my sister went to elementary school, and I think my sister didn't have any problems at all. She hung out there with those children, because they were younger, so I guess they weren't aware. My case was different, children left me messages on the bench: "Go back to Serbia!", you know, written in pencil (Tara, see Table 1).

### 3.3 Zorana

Zorana (1986) has a Serb name, but spoke in Hungarian during the interview, and has no difficulty with either the Hungarian or Serbian language. She consid-

ered herself truly bilingual. Her late father was Serb and her mother is Hungarian. She was born and raised in Novi Sad, which is a city predominantly inhabited by the majority population. She completed all her schooling in Hungarian, including at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad, where she had an opportunity to study and have exams in Hungarian in certain subjects that were taught by professors of Hungarian origin.<sup>5</sup> Although she wanted to enrol in a high school specialising in languages, the environment was rather competitive and she was not accepted, therefore she enrolled in one Hungarian class at a grammar school. Her high-school education in the Hungarian language was a second choice for her, since the competition for enrolment was not as fierce as it was in some high schools in Serbian, since the “minority world” (Brubaker et al. 2006) does not struggle with oversubscription of students, as there are ever fewer ethnic minority Hungarian students at every level of schooling. Her father wanted her to be educated in Hungarian during elementary school, as he was aware of the advantages of bilingualism. Later, bilingualism became her main trump card in life, as she got all her jobs because she was bilingual.

I went to primary and secondary school in Novi Sad, and to the University of Novi Sad, Faculty of Philosophy, I studied journalism, I chose the Hungarian group. Education in Hungarian was my father's wish, and my sister and I went to a Hungarian school, he thought that if we chose schooling in Serbian, we would forget Hungarian (Zorana, see Table 1).

When it comes to the 1990s, which divided people on an ethnic basis, Zorana narrated an occasion when their female neighbour, who was Hungarian, but who hid her origins by not speaking Hungarian at all, posted an offensive message on a tree. The female neighbour had probably rationalized her position by highlighting her success at being socially accepted by the majority population (Song 2009), thus accepting the cultural badge (Kalmijn 1998) of her husband in a majority environment, and in a tension-filled moment even denying her ethnic origin:

It happened at school in general. I felt that when my mom and I were going somewhere by bus, I somehow felt the negative energy in the air because they used to look at us for a moment. They did not speak. There was one occasion that I remember, at school [...] a little Serb girl came up to me and said that I should speak Serbian because I had a Serb surname and name. I will also say that we had a Hungarian neighbour in our building, her son was Serbian, she stopped speaking in Hungarian, and her husband was also Serbian. On one occasion, a piece of paper was glued to a tree with the printed message “Hungarians under the ice!”<sup>6</sup> My dad also wrote an article about this at the time<sup>7</sup> which also appeared in the newspaper. They were very upset because of that (Zorana, see Table 1).

### 3.4 Emma

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Emma (1989) spoke in Hungarian during the interview, although she was somewhat reserved and spoke in short sentences. Clearly Serbian was her stronger language, but even though the researcher offered to continue the conversation in Serbian, she did not accept. Her father was Hungarian and her mother Serb, while her maiden name and surname were both Hungarian. She was born and raised in a predominantly Serbian city, a majority Serbian environment, where she completed kindergarten and elementary school in Hungarian but graduated from a prestigious grammar school in Serbian. In her narrative, she was less positive about ethnic minority language schooling – she said that her class in elementary school was small, with fewer than ten pupils, which she experienced as a disadvantage because of the lack of opportunity to socialize and make friends of her preference, which would be normal in a bigger class. This was because of the Yugoslav war, as by the time Emma started elementary school in 1995, a lot of ethnic minority Hungarians had left Serbia, owing to difficult economic and unstable social and political circumstances (Göncz 2004). In her Hungarian class, she felt discomfort due to her mixed origin and used a strong word for the chauvinism that she also used to feel later in a Serbian environment. Namely, at the elite grammar school, for not being an ethnic Serb. Emma attended Hungarian classes at another grammar school in order to maintain her minority-language skills and learn about Hungarian grammar and literature. This was her father's wish. Thus, she completed four years of Hungarian language and literature studies and passed the graduation exam in Hungarian as well. It should be noted that her father was a university professor, therefore more conscientious of his ethnic belonging and with the positive side of bilingualism. She spoke of her experience in the following passage:

I went to kindergarten and primary school in Hungarian, but I finished grammar school in Serbian, while also going to Hungarian classes in parallel at another school. At the end of each year, I took an exam in the Hungarian language and literature. That is how I have a high-school degree in Hungarian language and literature as well. I felt the chauvinism of a few teachers in elementary school, whose behaviour differentiated between 'pure' Hungarian and mixed-origin students. And in high school, I felt Serbian chauvinism from a teacher because I was not a 'pure' Serb. At high school, where there were about thirty of us, the environment was much healthier (Emma, see Table 1).

### 3.5 Ivan

Ivan (1982) had a Serb name and surname. He spoke in Hungarian during the interview. His father is a Serb and his mother is Hungarian, and even his father's mother was Hungarian. His parents divorced during the 1990s. He and his sister

went to school in Serbian in a predominantly Hungarian environment. In his narrative, he did not recall whether his parents discussed his going to a school in Serbian. He did not question their decision. It could be argued that his father's (partial) belonging to the majority nation was a cultural badge worth wearing and following (Kalmijn 1998). He had both Hungarian and Serbian friends, regardless of going to a Serbian school, because he lived in an environment that had a Hungarian majority. His work required him to use both Hungarian and Serbian, and his minority language competency served as an advantage when finding work. He talked about the language choice of his schooling in the following excerpt:

I finished my elementary and high school in Serbian. This was because of my father. Although he does not declare himself a Serbian – his mother was also Hungarian. Somehow it was like that. I do not know if my parents discussed this, but it came as natural to them. I went to kindergarten in Hungarian, and I developed this bilingualism, even then, and since then I have been bilingual [...] my Serbian is a bit stronger, but my Hungarian language is also quite good. The language that I use for business purposes is also Hungarian (Ivan, see Table 1).

Ivan talked about always being somewhere “in-between”, or neither-nor (Brubaker 2016). As he went to a Serbian class but had many Hungarian friends, when ethnicity-based gang-fights took place in elementary school, he had to avoid choosing sides, and because of his Serbian schooling, he may be seen as being in the “anteroom of becoming a member of the majority nations” (Öllös 2012). He recalled that ethnicity-based fights were not significant clashes. When he was a student in Novi Sad, at the beginning of the 2000s, there was a situation in a bakery where comments were made about him and his friends because they were speaking in Hungarian. He approached the person and sorted out the situation. The following is an excerpt of his narrative:

During the 1990s there were ethnic conflicts which ended up in fights, but organized or exaggerated hatred was not the case. I heard that there were situations like this in Novi Sad in the '90s, but when I studied there between 2003 and 2009 nothing like that happened [...]. Once we were in a bigger group and went into a bakery or diner, someone muttered in the background about us speaking in Hungarian. So, I went up to him and told him how things were, so that was the only case that I can mention from my personal experience (Ivan, see Table 1).

Although Ivan does not explain in his narrative what he did exactly to sort out the minority-language use incident, the fact that Vojvodina was and still is a multilingual and multicultural region means that people can refer to this fact when such incidents occur, i.e., they expect a certain level of tolerance.

### 3.6 Eva

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Eva (1982) spoke in Serbian during the interview. She has a Hungarian name, and her maiden name was also Hungarian, but when she married her husband (ethnic Serb) she took his last name. Her mother was Serbian and her father Hungarian, they are both deceased. In her narrative, she emphasised how they used both languages at home (Hungarian with her father, and mostly Serbian with her mother and sister, thus in her family the most used language was Serbian). She went to school in Serbian in a majority Serbian city environment. Her school did have a Hungarian class as well, but her parents decided to enrol her and her sister into a Serbian class. This was also something natural for her; she never asked questions or wondered too much about her parents' decision. The decision may have been connected more to her older sister, as the family moved around the city when the girls were small, and the first school in which her parents enrolled her sister was close to their home but did not have Hungarian language instruction. In her case, geographical distance played a role in the choice of language of instruction. When intermarried couples live on the periphery of a region inhabited by an ethnic minority group, like in Novi Sad, they often live further away from the limited number of schools that offer minority-language tuition. Therefore, like in Eva's case, intermarried parents may make their school choice based on their perceived level of comfort and enrol their children into majority language schools which are nearby. Afterwards, Eva and her sister transferred to a school that had a Hungarian class, but their parents did not change their daughters' language of instruction, as that would have required a language transition for the children, thus both of them continued tuition in Serbian. Although Eva emphasized that her sister had friends from the Hungarian class with whom she is still in contact, Eva did not mention having the same experience.

Yes [I finished my schooling in Serbian], my sister too. She had friends then, and today she has friends from the Hungarian class as well from the Petefi<sup>8</sup> school. My parents decided to enrol us in a Serbian class mostly to make it easier for us later [...] since I started ballet when I was five, and I knew from a young age that would be my occupation when I grew up [...] and we moved a few times because my parents were subtenants at the beginning (Eva, see Table 1).

For Eva, Serbian was her dominant language – she did not even talk in Hungarian for ten years. This changed when she gave birth to her first child and decided to introduce him to the minority language through speaking with him in Hungarian. Notably, when she and her husband enrolled their children into a Hungarian kindergarten, she also started working in a Hungarian-speaking environment, which was also a trigger for awakening her mixed identity characteristics, of which one part was the Hungarian ethnic minority identity, which she mostly connected to the Hungarian language.

Eva did not recall experiencing any inconveniences because of her mixed identity, but she emphasized the importance of speaking Serbian flawlessly, without an accent. Failure to do this is, in her opinion, the biggest disadvantage of homogenous Hungarian ethnic minority families (cf. Russo et al. 2017). Not speaking the language grammatically correctly may simply be a result of “imbalanced bilingualism” (Filipović et al. 2007) because parents do not invest sufficient effort into acquiring perfect majority language skills. Eva’s interview excerpt follows:

Both because of the accent and because of insufficient language skill, how can I say, you know, grammatically insufficiently correct, and because you always have the impression you know, they pretend they cannot master it, you know, my Serbian friends asked me “How is this possible?”. I think if we moved to Sweden, and our children went to school there in Swedish, they would have to learn Swedish. How is it possible that someone living in Serbia does not know Serbian well enough?! It is simply a big mistake for them not to teach their children Serbian, so I think it would be easier for them to live in this country until they decide they want to go somewhere else, you know, when they are old enough, because it [a lack of language skills] kind of holds you back because [...] if you understand me [...]. I mean this is of course not my opinion, I generally tell you what I heard from those who said this to me [...] (Eva, see Table 1).

Eva’s narrative included a critique of parents who live in a homogenous ethnic minority marriage and do not emphasise the need to acquire perfect knowledge of the Serbian language, which might result in their children leaving the country they were born in (Lendák-Kabók et al. 2020). A lack of understanding of the ethnic minority Hungarian groups’ problems with Serbian language learning was also noticeable in her narrative: Eva compared the Hungarian ethnic minority to an immigrant group in Sweden, which would have a different status compared to that of an ethnic minority in Serbia.

### 3.7 Teodora

Teodora (1984) had a Serb name and surname and she spoke in Serbian during the interview. Her mother is from a Hungarian family, and her father is Serbian. She was brought up by her single mother. They lived with their grandparents who lived in an urban area where mostly Hungarian families lived. Within her family they spoke Hungarian, but with Teodora they spoke in Serbian. Thus, when her mother enrolled her in a Hungarian-language kindergarten, she felt uncomfortable and refused to learn the minority language. Afterwards, she attended school in Serbian, where there was a Hungarian class as well. She had extracurricular Hungarian classes at school but did not learn to speak Hungarian. Later, when she moved to another area of the city, where there were block houses in the 1990s, she felt alienated from other children, as she was not one of

them, because of having an interethnic background. Moreover, she was Catholic, not Orthodox as the Serb majority, which meant that she did not celebrate the same religious holidays. It was a rather traumatic experience for her, since at her new school, she was not accepted by the other children. She connected this with a period of absolute chaos, when children were infected by the nationalist propaganda coming from the media, but also from their parents. The following is an excerpt of her interview:

I think that in the new part of the city it was [the alienation] more present than elsewhere because ethnicities are quite separated, whereas among the children – especially among them – a considerable amount of harassment was there (Teodora, see Table 1).

Teodora does not consider herself a part of the Hungarian ethnic minority today. The only string that connects her to her minority nation is her religion.

### 3.8 Katarina

Katarina's (1986) father is Hungarian, and her mother is Serb. She was educated in Serbian, in a predominantly Hungarian environment in a mid-sized town in Vojvodina. Her maiden name had Serbian and Hungarian elements, as her last name was Hungarian and her name Serbian. Her parents connected the decision about her schooling in Serbian to her mother's availability – she was the one who spent more time at home helping the children with their school assignments. Kandiyoti (1994, 377) states that it is women who transmit culture, and they are the privileged signifiers of national difference, therefore, in intermarriages, they may interpret this role through culturally reproducing their own identity via schooling. Katarina spoke in Serbian during the interview, discussing the importance of acquiring perfect knowledge of the Serbian language. This is important for her, as she lives in Serbia and does not feel anything towards Hungary: as she emphasized in her narrative, it is not a kin-state for her. She did not learn to write and read in Hungarian, which she regrets now, as it would have opened new possibilities for her. The following is an excerpt of her interview:

Yes, because one of their ideas [...] because my mother was more at home, she could help with our studying, as well as because we live in Serbia, they thought it was very important to know how to speak Serbian correctly so that we might not have problems later. I always asked them why they sent me to a Serbian class because I thought that if I went to a Hungarian class I would learn to write and read. Their answer was that my [Serbian-speaking] mom was at home more and she could study with me. Believe me, after that, I didn't ask them about it anymore, and I don't know if there was any other reason for it [...] (Katarina, see Table 1).

Katarina did not experience any discrimination because of her intermarried origin, namely a mostly Hungarian environment, where people are used to living together with neighbours with different ethnic backgrounds. Peaceful living together with other ethnic groups was why Ilić & Cvejić (1997) argued that Hungarians in Vojvodina did not focus their dissatisfaction on confrontation with the Serbian majority, but rather their dissatisfaction involved worsening economic and social conditions, which were the result of the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s (Ilić & Cvejić 1997). Katarina did not opt for one or the other forms of ethnic belonging but spoke about how she told people she had two identities, although this is something she only said to people with whom she became close, and who were able to understand regional ethnic diversity. She was always proud of being half Serbian and half Hungarian:

I have never had problems there because I am half Serbian, half Hungarian, because people who live there are used to being both, and there have never been any problems, I have never felt any kind of discrimination at any point in my life because I am half Hungarian. I am very proud of my origin in general, both Serbian and Hungarian, so when I introduce myself to someone, I always say I am both (Katarina, see Table 1).

She talked about how she came by her current job because she speaks both languages and that even though she never thought that she would need the Hungarian language in her professional life, she relied on it to get her first position.

#### 4. Discussion

The findings show that the respondents whose schooling was in Serbian departed from the ethnic minority group more, and even if they cultivated the ethnic minority language, it became a means of acquiring a job or for further career advancement, i.e., cultural capital transformed to economic capital (Bourdieu 1991), not for forming bonds with the minority group.<sup>9</sup> Those who finished both elementary and high school in a minority language preserved stronger bonds with the ethnic minority group. The environment also had a significant influence on (not) preserving the minority language; those who grew up in a mostly minority-inhabited environment had a better chance at preserving the minority language. Nevertheless, when it comes to ethnic minority language loss, for most of them, Serbian became the dominant language with a clear fading or even loss of the minority language. Minority language loss was also visible from the results presented in Table 1, since for six respondents (out of eight) Serbian became their dominant language. One respondent stated that for her both languages were equally strong, and for another Hungarian was the stronger language, which underpinned previous findings, which state that intermarriage may fundamentally affect the boundaries and distinctiveness of ethnic minority

groups (Barth 1969). Even though some of the respondents finished their elementary education in Hungarian, their continuation of their high-school education in Serbian and the environment they were brought up and lived in contributed to the loss of their minority language skills (Phinney 2003). Consequently, they avoided speaking Hungarian in public, preferring to speak only in Serbian, which was reflected in the choice of language of the interview (see Table 1).

When it comes to parents' choice of tuition language, a gender dimension occurred. Namely, in families where the mothers were from the majority community, children went to school in the majority language – as women are entrusted with the supervision of their children's schooling, thus they are the ones reproducing cultural boundaries (Yuval-Davis 1997, 196). In intermarriages, this meant that the tuition language was the same as the mother's language. We might argue that this arrangement made it harder for minority fathers whose majority (Serbian) spouses did not speak the minority language to choose a minority language education for their children, which would mean that they would have to break the patriarchal norm and oversee their children's education. However, in some cases of family units with patriarchal male heads, the role of women is to reflect traditional notions of femininity (Thomson 2020), which meant that the father's choice is to be respected when it comes to the choice of language of schooling.

In one case, an ethnic minority father insisted on the minority language education of their children, as he identified the knowledge and use of an ethnic minority language as a tool which he wanted to cultivate in their children. The influence of ethnic minority mothers in intermarriages was less visible in terms of choosing the language of instruction at school. More specifically, only a single mother was able to influence and/or make that choice. Choosing the language of instruction for children is a long-term decision, which has a strong impact on identity development, thus, in a patriarchal society, this choice is made mostly by men. In the case of single mothers, they are the ones with more social power within the family (freed of the male head of the family), as they are the ones taking care of the children most of the time, while fathers are less involved. In this scenario, they can choose the minority language for their children more freely.

## 5. Conclusion

The supranational Yugoslav identity (Godina 1998) disappeared during and after the 1990s Yugoslav wars, which made intermarriage-born millennials' position harder, as they had to choose their ethnic belonging. Their choice of ethnic belonging was associated with the language of the school instruction their parents choose for them; thus, this was the milestone event in their lives. The choice of language of instruction at school was in a way choosing a side and becoming closer to the majority nation or to the minority.

Intermarriage-born millennials faced additional ethnic tension during the 1990s, as this period was permeated by ethnic conflicts and an outbreak of hatred and hostility towards national minorities, or towards all those who differed from the majority nation (Savić 2006). Only those who had gone to school in Serbian stated that they had not experienced any ethnically-based atrocities, which brings us to the conclusion that finishing elementary school during the 1990s in an ethnic minority language was a source of discrimination for the respondents, which inevitably left its traces in their upbringing.

In the end, we should note that there are considerable limitations when using interviews and when relying on a qualitative study, especially with the small number of interviews. However, the author hopes that this article will open a discussion on how ethnic intermarriage exists and evolves society in Vojvodina nowadays, and that more research will be done from a qualitative perspective.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Serbs, Hungarians, Slovaks, Croats, Romani, Romanians, Montenegrins, Bunjevci, Rusyns, Macedonians, Ukrainians, ethnic Muslims, Germans, Albanians, Slovenes, Bulgarians, Gorani, Russians, Bosniaks, Vlachs, ethnic Yugoslavs, Others, Regional identity, Undeclared and Unknown (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2012).
- <sup>2</sup> Hobsbawm's (2012) approach was applied by Brubaker et al. in their book *Nationalist politics and everyday ethnicity in a Transylvanian town* (2018).

- <sup>3</sup> The NATO bombing of Yugoslavia was a military operation against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia during the Kosovo War. The air strikes lasted from 24 March 1999 to 10 June 1999. The bombings continued until an agreement was reached that led to the withdrawal of Yugoslav armed forces from Kosovo and the establishment of the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo, a UN peacekeeping mission.
- <sup>4</sup> Slobodan Milošević was the Serbian dictator who was charged by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) with war crimes in connection with the Bosnian War, the Croatian War of Independence, and the Kosovo War.
- <sup>5</sup> There is no comprehensive Hungarian language university in Vojvodina, however at the Faculty of Philosophy, some subjects can be studied in Hungarian because of the willingness of the professors who are of Hungarian origin and speak Hungarian, but also because of the openness of the management, which is not against this practice.
- <sup>6</sup> This offensive note may be associated with the Raid (*Pauzija/Racija*), which was a military operation carried out by the *Királyi Honvédség*, the armed forces of Hungary during World War II, after the occupation and annexation of the Vojvodinian territories that belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire before World War I. It resulted in the deaths of approximately 4,000 civilians in the southern Bačka (Bácska) region in Vojvodina. The victims in both Novi Sad and the wider region were mostly Jews and Serbs, although several Hungarians were killed as well. In Novi Sad, victims were forced to march across the frozen Danube, only to perish when the ice sheet was shattered by shelling from the shore. Some victims were pushed into holes in the ice sheet, causing them to drown or succumb to hypothermia, while others were shot in the streets. The retribution committed by the Partisans against Germans, Hungarians, and Serbs was severe in 1944–45; at least 55,973 people died. The vast majority of victims were summarily executed without trial.
- <sup>7</sup> Her father was a journalist.
- <sup>8</sup> The school is named after Hungarian poet József Attila (in Hungarian: József Attila), who lived in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- <sup>9</sup> The same tendencies can be observed also elsewhere, see for example Naceva (2021), Riman & Novak Lukanović (2021) and Zorčić (2020).

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