Research Article

Which Side Are You On? Integration of Two Conflicting Ethnic Identities in Young Adults from Serbo-Croatian Mixed Marriages

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Abstract:
Young adults from Serbian-Croatian mixed marriages face challenges reconciling two potentially conflicting ethnic identities due to implicit and explicit tensions between these two ethnic communities. This article explores the process of reconciling these ethnic identities, focusing on the respondents' narratives about growing up in a Serbian-Croatian mixed marriage. Our sample consisted of 5 male and 3 female respondents born during the 90s, which were marked by brutal conflicts between Serbs and Croats. The results show that the participants went through the process of forming a coherent ethnic identity, which was marked by distancing from the dominant Serbian influence, and the majority of them opted for a specific identity position: cosmopolitan, Yugoslav, Serbo-Croatian, and a more integral form of the dominant Serbian identity.
Keywords: mixed marriages, ethnic identity, Serbo-Croatian conflicts, identity integration.

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Introduction

After the wars in the 1990s and the breakup of Yugoslavia, both implicit and explicit tensions still arise from time to time between the ethnic groups living in the areas of the former country. In such contexts, tensions between two ethnic groups reflect on people in mixed marriages and their children. The pressure to take sides and the stigmatization suggest that children of mixed marriages face a significant challenge in reconciling their conflicting identities in such tense circumstances. The subject of this research is the question of how people from Serbian-Croatian mixed marriages integrate their dual ethnic identities, and what it is like having two potentially conflicted ethnic identities.

Multicultural and bicultural identities

Berry and colleagues proposed one of the first theories concerning identity in a multicultural context. They approached this topic from the perspective of the acculturation of emigrants or minority groups within a community to which they have relocated or that represents the dominant culture. According to this conception, two dimensions of this process are important: 1) whether the members of the minority culture believe that their cultural identities and customs are valuable and should be preserved, and 2) how important it is for the members of the group to maintain positive relations with the dominant community and whether these relationships are something to strive for. The answers to these two questions lead to different acculturation strategies: integration, assimilation, separation, or marginalization.[1] We can understand bicultural identity as a result of integration.[2]

In broad terms, people who have been exposed to and internalized two cultures have bicultural identities,[3] whether they are emigrants who have moved to another country, ethnic minorities within the dominant community, or people who come from mixed marriages either in terms of

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[1] Joh Berry et al., "Acculturation attitudes in plural societies," *Applied Psychology* 38 (1989), 185–206.

[2] Que-Lam Huynh et al., "Bicultural identity integration," in *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*, eds. Seth J. Schwartz, Koen Luyckx, and Vivian L. Vignoles (Berlin: Springer, 2011), 827–842.

[3] Verónica Benet-Martínez and Jana Haritatos, "Bicultural identity integration (BII): Components and psychosocial antecedents," *Journal of Personality* 73 (2005), 1015–1050.

ethnicity or race.[4] People who have bicultural identities have the task of coalescing them into a coherent self.

Bennett-Martinezova et al. introduced the construct of bicultural identity integration (BII) to explain individual differences in the integration of bicultural identities. They proposed that people who score higher on the integration of bicultural identities perceive their dual identities as mutually compatible and do not consider the cultures they belong to as mutually exclusive and opposing. In contrast, people who score lower on the integration of bicultural identities perceive their dual identities as mutually opposing. Factor analysis has shown that bicultural integration is not a unique construct but consists of two independent dimensions: *cultural conflict versus harmony* and *cultural distance versus fusion*. Variations in BII may result from differences in these dimensions.[5]

The dimension of *cultural conflict versus harmony* shows how much a person feels tension or conflict between two identities on the one hand, or perceives harmony between them on the other. This dimension refers more to the emotional components of acculturation. Prejudice and rejection by one or both cultures a person identifies with can be predictors of cultural conflict.

Construct *cultural distance versus overlap* refers to the extent to which a person perceives that two cultures share common elements or that they are opposed to each other and have little in common. This construct reflects more on the person's attitudes and behaviors as accompanying elements of acculturation. Research shows that people with higher scores on the dimension of cultural overlap see themselves as typical representatives of both cultures.[6] People who score high on cultural distance tend to want to keep their two cultural identities separate so that they can simultaneously emphasize similarities and close ties with the minority group and differences with the dominant group.[7]

The BII conception of Benet-Martinez and Haritatos can be criticized in terms that they approached the process of integration of two or more cultural identities from a somewhat simplified perspective,

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[4] Amado M. Padilla, "Bicultural social development," *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 28 (2006), 467–497.
[5] See Benet-Martínez and Haritatos, "Bicultural identity integration (BII)."
[6] Daniel R. Miramontez, et al., "Bicultural identity and identity/group personality perceptions," *Self and Identity* 7 (2008), 430–445.
[7] See Benet-Martínez and Haritatos, "Bicultural identity integration (BII)."

reducing it to quantitative measures on one or two dimensions, which makes this phenomenon less complex and dynamic. Although Bennett-Martinez and Haritatos pointed out that identity integration is a dynamic process and that it is also influenced by some environmental factors such as prejudice and rejection of a person by the dominant culture,[8]   they did not devote enough attention to the dynamics of that process, neither theoretically nor empirically. One of the main goals of this research is to further explore the process of integration of bicultural identities and their complexity and dynamics by focusing on the narratives of individuals from Serbian-Croatian mixed marriages.

Previous studies on the experience of children from mixed marriages

Integration of ethnic identities is especially challenging for children from mixed marriages because, from birth, they are exposed to the influences of two ethnic communities, which may have varying degrees of tension between them. Growing up in such contexts implies that they are already facing problems with how to reconcile their ethnic identities, which can sometimes be particularly challenging. Several studies have focused on how people from mixed marriages deal with this challenge.

Slany and Strazmeck conducted a study on the experience of the national identity of children from Polish-Norwegian mixed marriages living in Norway. It suggests that they identify with Norway to a much greater extent and emphasize their Norwegian national identity, primarily since Norway is their primary place of residence, but also because they have very weak relations with Poland.[9] However, children's awareness that they come from a multicultural family makes them question where they belong and who they are, with themes of identity confusion being apparent in their narratives. Another dimension of the experience of children from mixed marriages refers to the extent to which they maintain contact with both cultures. Researchers drew two strategies related to encouraging multiculturalism in mixed families from the participants' narratives:

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[8] See Benet-Martínez and Haritatos, "Bicultural identity integration (BII)."

[9] Krystyna Slany and Stella Strzemecka, "Growing up multicultural: The experiences of children raised by Polish-Norwegian mixed couples in Norway," *Studia Migracyjne-Przegląd Polonijny* 166 (2017), 87–111.

1) Supporting multiculturalism by family members, which implies the willingness to take actions that lead to the encouragement of multiculturalism in their daily lives.

2) Discouragement of multiculturalism in the family, which implies passivity or aversion to encouraging multiculturalism.[10]

One of the reasons why children develop the Norwegian identity can be precisely the dominance of Norwegian culture in their everyday life, which occurs because multiculturalism is not sufficiently supported in the family. Additionally, this research shows that even at an early age children face the problem of reconciling their dual identities.[11]

Research on the experiences of children from mixed marriages between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews living in Israel suggests several relevant themes. One theme, 'dream children,' refers to the narratives of children from mixed marriages who adopted ethnic identities aligned with the ideologies of leading political structures. In the New Israel, these structures propose that the ethnic identities of individual Jewish groups should be overcome to create a new national Israeli identity. Some of the respondents express a post-ethnic and supra-ethnic identity and are not burdened by the individual ethnic identities of their parents. The "chameleon" theme reflects the experience of a person from a mixed marriage who can fit into both cultures and belong to both communities without problems. It is suggested that the fact that they belong to two cultures enriches their behavioral repertoire.[12]

However, as the interviews progressed, themes reflecting the interviewees' ambivalence, dissonance, and conflict in understanding their ethnic identities emerged. In addition, their narratives suggested that they have adopted ethnic stereotypes and hatred towards the other group. The interviewees resolved the ambivalence regarding their ethnic identities by choosing one side. It is important to emphasize that awareness of mixed origins and family history play an important role in choosing a future partner. They are aware that a lot will depend on their choice, from the way the holidays will be celebrated to the way their future children will be raised and what they will face in the end. This research illustrates that, although the participants managed to integrate

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[10] See Slany and Strazmecka, "Growing up multicultural."

[11] See Slany and Strazmecka, "Growing up multicultural."

[12] Talia Sagiv and Gad Yair, "The end of ethnicity? Racism and ambivalence among offspring of mixed marriages in Israel". *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47 (2019), 861–877.

their bicultural identities at first glance, conflicts still exist and are an integral part of their experience, showing us how complex the task of organizing dual identities is.[13]

In this research, the goal was to take a deeper look at the complexity of the process of integrating dual identities. We tried to achieve this by not only focusing on whether the participants felt they belonged to one or another ethnic group, but also on specific situations when they did not have difficulties with integrating their ethnic identities, but also when they felt a conflict between them. We also focused on factors that can influence the integration of dual identities, such as the perception of the ethnic communities to which people belong and the experience of certain characteristics and behaviors that are believed to be related to ethnicity. We also focused on the question of whether and how the process of integration of ethnic identities changed in different periods of their lives.

Ethnic identities of children from mixed marriages in Yugoslavia

Feđa Burić analyzed his diary entries from the period of the wars in the 1990s, which reveal parts of his experience as a child from a mixed marriage whose experience was affected by the war and conflicts of the ethnic groups to which his parents belong.[14] Buric's experience of mixed heritage can serve as an example of the distinction made by Roger Brubaker between nominal mixed marriage, in which spouses belonging to two ethnic groups do not feel the relevance of their ethnicities, and experiential mixed marriage in which, due to various factors, different ethnicities become socially relevant.[15]

Burić points out that he became aware of being a child from a mixed marriage in the early 1990s, when tensions and conflicts between the republics of Yugoslavia began to surface, SFR Yugoslavia was on the verge of disintegration, and it became extremely important to identify with a particular ethnic group. During this time, having a mixed heritage became particularly problematic.[16] Burić resolved his identity crisis by

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[13] See Sagiv and Yair, "The end of ethnicity."

[14] Feđa Burić, "Becoming mixed: Mixed marriages of Bosnia-Herzegovina during the life and death of Yugoslavia" (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2012).

[15] Roger Brubaker, "Ethnicity without groups," *European Journal of Sociology/Archives européennes de sociologie* 43 (2002), 163–189.

[16] Feđa Burić, "The lies my diary told: use of autobiography in the study of mixed marriage in the former Yugoslavia," in *Politics of Identity in Post-Conflict States*, eds. Éamonn Ó Ciardha and Gabriela Vojvoda (Milton Park: Routledge, 2015), 73–82.

choosing his father's Bosniak identity and renouncing his mother's Croatian identity. However, despite this, his diaries contain narratives of guilt related to the feeling that he is hurting his mother, as well as narratives of fear that his dual identity will be revealed.[17]

Azra Hromadžić conducted research ten years after the war ended, and she talked to children from mixed marriages in Mostar. One young man, who comes from a Serbo-Croatian marriage, unable to reconcile his identities, started identifying with a Bosniak group. The young people she talked to were faced with numerous problems such as discrimination due to ethnic origin and the inability to achieve a romantic relationship due to mixed origin. Such children are constantly choosing between two sides and are being classified into one group, usually the ethnic group of their father. Although the war ended long ago, its consequences on the division of the people who participated in it remain and continue to affect individual experiences.[18] This research illustrates how the historical context of the conflict in Yugoslavia is still relevant to the experiences of children from mixed marriages.

Studies on the experiences of people from mixed marriages from Ex-Yugoslavia are mostly focused on the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is a multicultural environment. However, no research has yet been conducted on the experiences of children from Serbian-Croatian marriages who grew up or live in Serbia, which is a significantly less multicultural environment. Consequently, these children are exposed to dominant cultural resources (national symbols, religion, national history, customs, and traditions) that are imposed by the environment as an integral part of ethnic identity. In addition, everyday life in Serbia is characterized by implicit and explicit political and social tensions with neighboring countries. Therefore, in this research, we will examine how the social context in Serbia influences the integration of ethnic identities among individuals from Serbian-Croatian marriages.

Research goals

This research aimed to understand and describe the process of integrating and reconciling two potentially conflicting ethnic identities of children from Serbo-Croatian mixed marriages. This is achieved through

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[17] Feđa Burić, "Confessions of Mixed Marriage Child'. Diary in the Study of Yugoslavia's Breakup," *Südost Europa* 64 (2016), 325–343.
[18] Azra Hromadžić, *Citizens of an empty nation: youth and state-making in postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

the analysis of their narratives. Attention was drawn to individuals who play an important role in the process of ethnic identification, the practices followed by the respondents that are important for this process, significant events and experiences, cultural resources, and how people position themselves in narratives. The general goal is broken down into several questions that were addressed in this research:

● How do people from mixed Serbian-Croatian marriages identify in terms of ethnicity?

● How do they perceive their dual identities: as mutually conflicting or as harmonized?

● Was there a crucial point when they realized that they were raised in mixed marriages? What roles do other people, such as family members and the wider community, play in their identification? Were they exposed to both cultures because of these influences?

● Did their ethnic identity change throughout their life? What life experiences and situations were particularly significant for shaping and/or changing their ethnic identity?

Method

Since the goal of this research was to present the complexity and dynamism of the process of integrating ethnic identities, and given the focus on the experience of growing up in a mixed marriage through participants' narratives, a qualitative methodological framework was chosen. This approach is justified due to the unique nature of each participant's experience, as they all grew up in specific family contexts and had distinctive formative experiences. These factors, in general, could impact how they cope with the process of integrating ethnic identities.

Sample[19]

In this research, a purposive sample was used, consisting of individuals from Serbian-Croatian marriages who grew up and live in

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[19] This research has an ethics approval issued by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), at the Department of Psychology, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, Serbia. Protocol #2021-32.

Serbia. Participants were gathered using the snowball method and through posts on social media. Initially, the planned sample size was 10 participants. The number of participants was determined based on the principle of theoretical sampling, which emphasizes the importance of sampling a sufficient number of experiences to achieve theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation represents the point at which all important dimensions of experience are included and the experiences of new participants reflect something that has already been discovered. Research shows that if the sample is homogeneous in terms of relevant characteristics, a sample size of up to 12 respondents can be sufficient to obtain detailed and fundamental knowledge about the experiences of the participants, i.e. to theoretical saturation.[20] In addition to the criteria of theoretical saturation, practical limitations were taken into account in determining the sample size. Although 10 interviews were conducted, 2 interviewees did not make it into the final sample, even though they currently live in Serbia, primarily because their upbringing, unlike the other interviewees, was related to the context of Croatia or Bosnia and Herzegovina, and such a context of growing up and socialization complicated the analysis and comparison with other participants in the research.

The average age of the participants was 25.5 years, the youngest participant was 21, and the oldest was 29. The age of the interviewees was chosen based on their belonging to a generation that was born and grew up during a period of mass nationalism awakening, large-scale ethnic conflicts and animosity, and civil war. This context makes their dual identities potentially conflicting and adds a new dimension to their experience of reconciling these identities, which we want to explore. Additionally, individuals born during this period make up the emerging adult population. They are in the developmental process of identity stabilization but are mature and introspective enough to discuss their experiences.

The sample consisted of 5 male and 3 female participants. Another factor considered was the ethnic origin of the parents: the sample included 5 respondents whose mothers were Croats and fathers were Serbs, as well as 3 respondents with the opposite parental ethnic origins. Additionally, the participants grew up and live either in the capital of

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[20] Greg Guest et al., "How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability," *Field Methods* 18 (2006), 59–82.

Serbia, Belgrade, or in larger cities and towns in Vojvodina or South Serbia.

Data collection

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. In this research, an agenda was used and designed based on previous studies.[21] Part of the questions referred to the participants' upbringing, while others focused on their current lives. The goal was to obtain material in the form of the interviewees' life stories. The interviews were conducted from April to July 2021, and the agenda used in the research can be found in Appendix 1. Personal information about participants was removed and they were assigned pseudonyms.

Data analysis

Narrative analysis was used to analyze the data obtained from the semi-structured interviews.[22] During the analysis, the focus was on different strategies of ethnic identification, significant life experiences that impacted this process, close relationships that influenced these processes, the issue of changing ethnic identities at different life stages, and the dominant resources that aided in ethnic identification.

Results and discussion:

Emergence of awareness of mixed origins

Most of the respondents became aware of their origins only during their primary or even secondary school years. This is likely due to the fact that most respondents grew up in a family context where little attention was paid to questions of ethnic origin, and there was generally not much discussion about it. Additionally, some respondents come from families in which a parent belonging to the Croatian ethnic community assimilated into the Serbian environment, so their heritage was not emphasized. The majority of respondents became aware of their mixed heritage primarily through interaction with peers. Therefore, we can conclude that most of them needed to step outside their family context, where mixed heritage

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[21] See Slany and Strazmecka, "Growing up multicultural."

[22] See David Hiles and Ivo Cermák, "Narrative psychology," in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*, eds. Carla Willig and Wendy Stainton Rogers (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2008), 147–164 and Carla Willig, *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology* (London: Open University Press, 2008).

was normalized, to interact with peers who grew up in different family contexts and gain a full understanding of their origins in that way.

Strategies of ethnic identification

Most of the respondents do not place great importance on questions of ethnic belonging and identity, at least not in the present day. However, despite this, all respondents have opted for some form of belonging to a broader social community. Based on the narratives of the respondents about their experiences growing up in mixed marriages, we can identify four identification strategies: 1) those who chose and developed a cosmopolitan identity; 2) those who adopted a supranational Yugoslavian identity; 3) those who chose to belong to and identify with both ethnic communities simultaneously; and 4) those who predominantly identify with the Serbian community. In the narratives of all respondents who chose a cosmopolitan identity, we notice an absence of national consciousness and national belonging in a general sense. If we approach the entire issue from the perspective of Berry and his colleagues' conception,[23] we can say that these respondents have opted for a strategy of marginalization in relation to both ethnic communities:

> *For a while, during the census, I declared myself as an atheist, and then I started to declare that I have no national affiliation because I don't feel like a Serb (Ksenija).*

However, respondents choose cosmopolitan identities for various reasons. On the one hand, we can identify narratives that suggest that a cosmopolitan identity can serve as a substitution for individual ethnic or supranational identities (*I consider myself European because Yugoslavia doesn't exist; if it did, I would be Yugoslav*.) On the other hand, individual narratives testify to a cosmopolitan identity that aligns with globalist attitudes and reflects someone who genuinely feels like a citizen of the world (*It's probably also influenced by the media I consumed at the time; the media has a strong cosmopolitan aspect that leads to the dissolution of cultures*).

Several respondents opted for a supranational Yugoslav identity. However, the respondents who chose this strategy differ in terms of what directed them toward these supranational identities. Some feel a specific conflict related to choosing which community to belong to and, to avoid this conflict, they choose a Yugoslav identity. This identity encompasses

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[23] See Berry et al., "Acculturation attitudes in plural societies."

both communities, thereby freeing them from having to choose between them:

> *I think maybe the closest thing to a national identity I've ever felt would be as a Yugoslav, but I really can't say I'm either Serbian or Croatian. I've never felt that way. If someone asked me to choose, it would be like someone asking me to choose between my mom and dad. They're good people, so I wouldn't give up either one.*

Others feel that they belong to both communities and perceive themselves as representatives of a larger community that includes both individual communities:

> *So, I didn't feel like both Serbian and Croatian, but rather as part of that one nation, let's say Yugoslav or whatever you want to call it.*

Based on these examples, it becomes clear that one should not only focus on the outcome of ethnic identification but also on the process itself, as the same result can be reached in different ways.

In the sample, only one respondent's narrative can be recognized as a true integration of both ethnic identities, meaning belonging to and identifying with both communities. However, despite finding a way to integrate these two ethnic identities into a coherent self-concept and feeling both half-Serbian and half-Croatian, the respondent cannot feel equally as a member of both communities and cannot declare themselves as both Serbian and Croatian. This feeling arises primarily because the respondent is aware that they didn't have enough contact with Croatia, demonstrating that mere heritage is not a sufficient condition for ethnic identification (*Well, I don't have a problem considering myself as both, but I keep coming back to the question of whether I can consider myself a Croatian, even though I'm now a citizen of Croatia because I didn't grow up there*).

We also notice in the narratives of some respondents a sense of belonging to the Serbian community:

> *I always felt more like a Serb because I spent more time here, mostly socializing with Serbs, but later I was aware that I also have Croatian heritage, and it didn't bother me at all. (Ilija)*

These narratives suggest that even though some respondents have opted for assimilation as a strategy for ethnic identification, it does not

mean that they have completely disregarded the other side. Instead, they have tried to find a way to integrate it into their Serbian identity. Their narratives indicate that they are well aware that, even though they consider themselves Serbs, they are still connected to Croatia, and when discussing their ethnic identity, they emphasize having Croatian roots. However, some narratives indicate that their dual heritage can be approached from a pragmatic perspective, which means that regardless of how they feel and declare themselves, they believe it's essential to take the best from both communities.

Additionally, some of the narratives point out the significance of Croatian citizenship as something that, to some extent, represents an additional connection to Croatia for them. We can conclude that the respondents make a distinction between citizenship and ethnic belonging, but for different individuals, these two phenomena can be in different relationships. Thus, citizenship and ethnic identity can be mutually independent, as evidenced by narratives in which we can identify themes related to the opportunistic and pragmatic significance of Croatian citizenship, which does not have significant implications for how they feel about their ethnic identity: *Croatia entering the EU influenced me to feel glad because I have Croatian citizenship, and I can use that later if I need to go somewhere. (Ilija)*

However, other narratives illustrate how these two phenomena are not always independent, and there can be a specific relationship between them, i.e. citizenship can serve as a link to another ethnic community (*I only started talking about it when I got citizenship. I started discussing it in the sense that I hadn't mentioned it to people I was meeting*).

Harmony *vs* identity conflict

One of the conclusions we can draw based on the respondents' narratives is that a substantial portion of them do not have an active identity conflict because they managed to overcome it. In this study, we started with the assumption that respondents would face a challenge when reconciling their identities coming from Serbian-Croatian mixed marriages, as they might feel a conflict between two ethnic identities. We can observe this type of conflict in only a few respondents, and various factors contribute to its occurrence. In some cases, the conflict between two ethnic identities results from seeing the question of ethnic affiliation as a choice between their parents. Some respondents, due to feeling distanced from the Croatian community, perceive certain differences

between Serbia and Croatia that prevent them from reconciling their dual heritage (*And I don't know, they've always been different to me, and I could never merge them. Oh, I'm from here and from here, never*).

However, a larger number of respondents do not have a problem reconciling their Serbian-Croatian heritage, primarily because they do not perceive themselves as bearers of dual identities and do not identify with the Croatian ethnic community due to limited contact with it. Consequently, they do not believe they have ever experienced a conflict or uncertainty about their affiliation:

> *I've never felt like a Croatian, and it's really hard for me to tell you that it's true because I have no connection to Croatia. I can feel like a Serb or not feel anything, that's it; I can't say I feel any conflict* (Ksenija).

From the narratives of the respondents, we can also conclude that specific contexts in which they grew up influenced their lack of conflict regarding their dual heritage. Some respondents were raised in multicultural families where mixed ethnic backgrounds were normalized and not given significant importance. These factors helped the respondents accept the fact that they have mixed heritage without experiencing major conflicts or doubts. Additionally, some of the participants grew up in multicultural environments like Vojvodina, where mixed marriages were not an unusual occurrence. This significantly facilitates the process of reconciling two ethnic identities.

Furthermore, some interviewees had close friendships and intimate relationships with people who also came from mixed marriages. It is entirely possible that growing up in such a context contributed to them having a kind of social support, and this could be another reason why they did not feel conflicted about their mixed heritage and did not have much trouble reconciling their connections to both the Serbian and Croatian communities.

The narratives of the respondents suggest that when we talk about the conflict between two identities, it is not solely about whether one belongs to the Serbian or Croatian community and whether they identify as Serbian or Croatian. Instead, we can discuss a conflict between traditional and rigid Serbian identity and a more inclusive cosmopolitan or supranational identity.

You take for granted that you are a Serb and that Serbs have certain values and attitudes associated with being Serbian. Of course, I was influenced by that paradigm, but you also have other paradigms that influence you, and you weigh between the two realities and choose one (Aleksa).

Furthermore, for some participants, the conflict does not necessarily occur between two identities but is primarily associated with internal barriers that prevent them from fully identifying with one ethnic community.

It's entirely on a personal level, in my head. I haven't experienced anything of theirs, I haven't lived there [in Croatia], I haven't had any encounters with their laws, their culture (Emilija).

Based on examples like these, we can conclude that identity conflicts felt by individuals who have grown up in mixed marriages are much more diverse and complex; they often go beyond the issue of reconciling two ethnic identities. Hence, focusing solely on this question would reduce complexity and not provide a complete picture of the situation.

Formative experiences and changes in ethnic identity across different life stages

The narratives of the respondents can be classified into two groups. Some respondents mention specific formative experiences and situations that influenced the shaping of their ethnic identity. Consequently, we can observe changes in their perception of ethnic identity at different life stages. These experiences share a distinctive feature, primarily related to the family context in which they grew up. In their families, there is an explicit division between the more conservative Serbian side and the more liberal Croatian side:

On my dad's side, his mother was very Serbian-oriented. She supported the Chetniks during World War II. But, my mom's side was communist. My grandpa is from Hvar, and my grandma is from Brezovica, which is Slovenia, both of them were atheists, and my mom considers herself a Yugoslav (Ksenija).

Growing up in such a family context undoubtedly influences the development of ethnic identity through several distinct stages. The initial stage in this process is associated with childhood and adolescence, marked by the dominant influence of conservatism. This influence directs

them towards religion and tradition, and to some extent, they accept Serbian identity as a given. The next stage in this process is associated with adolescence and early adulthood, marked by their need to distance themselves from the conservative side of their family and everything they have inherited as a given through it, triggering certain dilemmas and introspection. A significant step in the process of introspection is turning towards the more liberal side of their family, whose views and perspectives on the world align more with their own. This side of the family will serve as a resource through which they further affirm their liberal attitudes. The third and final stage is marked by their need to align with their liberal attitudes, either by choosing a cosmopolitan identity or by integrating both ethnic identities into a more coherent sense of self.

Experiences like these suggest that ethnic identities should not be viewed as static and fixed entities but rather as the outcomes of complex processes that are constantly subject to introspection and transformation.

However, we can also identify a group of respondents whose process of forming their ethnic identity does not show distinct stages linked to specific formative experiences, but we can recognize specific situations in which their ethnic identities become more salient. These situations are mainly related to sports events in which respondents feel the need to support the Serbian and/or Croatian national teams and experience a unique sense of pride and belonging to one or both communities during those moments.

The significance of others in the process of ethnic identification

When discussing the influence of other people on the process of ethnic identification, it is not surprising that parents and family members played the most significant roles. Based on the respondents' narratives, we can classify these influences into two types.

The first type of influence that stands out among most respondents is the influence of parents on the formation of certain social attitudes or worldviews. These attitudes or worldviews then guide the respondents toward ethnic identities that align with them.

The initial attitude or reasoning I had was cosmopolitan, the first stance I had was that I considered all people equal, and that's a political, ideological stance, and I probably wouldn't have come to that conclusion in the same way if I hadn't been in a mixed community, but my parents, first and

foremost, told me that all people are equal and that they can be divided into good and bad (Filip).

It should be noted that in addition to parents, partners with whom the respondents entered into romantic relationships played an important role in shaping certain attitudes that would guide them toward an ethnic identity aligned with those attitudes.

But my husband (who is Croatian) had quite an influence on my overall perception. Somehow, I started with this whole anti-Serbian sentiment, especially regarding the 90s, after starting a relationship with him, because there are some things that we may not know, or maybe he's a bit biased, and from his perspective, I may have understood something (Ksenija).

Based on the narratives of the respondents, we can conclude that their friends also influenced their attitudes and, thus, indirectly played a role in the process. However, the significance of friends is not so much in shaping the actual attitudes but rather in their affirmation, as respondents chose to surround themselves with people who share and support their opinions.

Of course, the influence of other people is not only reflected in the formation of specific attitudes, but we can also see that parents and family members played a role in determining the extent to which respondents would be exposed to the influences of both ethnic communities. However, most parents did not actively engage in exposing their children to the influences of both cultures, and they did not appear to consider it overly important. Instead, they often acted as mediators through which their children became familiar with the influences of both communities through socialization. Even so, in some narratives, we can identify the active efforts of one parent to expose their child to the influences of their community, while the other parent does not make such efforts, which can result in the child being exposed to the influences of only one community, most often the Serbian one:

It was somewhat important to my mom, there was no pressure, but it was more like, 'Let's give it a try,' so to speak, and since we liked it, we continued because of ourselves (Ilija).

Only in the narratives of a few respondents can we recognize the efforts of parents to expose their children to the influences of all the

communities they belong to by origin: *Generally, the situation is such that they had to have an influence because we come from all sides, and they simply had the option either never to meet that part of the family, but thank God they are normal, so I met all of them (Luka).*

In some narratives, we recognize that parents and other family members satisfy the children's active need to learn about certain cultural practices, resources, and elements by answering their questions and bringing them closer to the communities they belong to.

The importance of cultural elements in the process of ethnic identification

It is interesting to note that each strategy of ethnic identification corresponds to specific cultural elements. For example, participants who chose a cosmopolitan identity also prefer cultural elements with a global character. In the narratives of participants who opted to integrate both Serbian and Croatian identities, we can recognize elements of both cultures. Participants who chose a Yugoslav identity often refer to cultural elements from the Yugoslav legacy. Those who identified primarily as Serbian emphasize the significance of Serbian cultural elements in their identification. When discussing the types of cultural elements that play an important role in shaping ethnic identities, popular culture elements are most frequently mentioned, with popular music being the most common. Participants also mention movies and TV series, though to a lesser extent. Elements of high culture (such as literature, architecture, and art) and traditional heritage (including holidays, gastronomy, and traditional music) are referred to less often. However, prominent figures from Serbian culture, sports, or science can indirectly influence the formation of ethnic identity. Participants expressed pride in sharing a common ethnic origin with these figures, which further connects them to the Serbian community and may strengthen their identification as Serbians.

*Well, at that level, it seems silly to put Djokovic and Tesla in the same category, but for example, in those moments, I feel even more like a Serbian. When we talk about Tesla, I like to say, 'We are both Serbs.' **In those moments, I can say that I prefer being Serbian more than usual** (Luka).*

Concluding Remarks

The main conclusion of the research is that the ethnic identities of individuals from mixed marriages should not be seen as static and fixed phenomena but as the results of dynamic and complex processes of questioning certain given factors imposed by the environment. The outcomes of this questioning process represent a commitment to one of four ethnic identity strategies: cosmopolitan, Yugoslav, Serbian-Croatian, or predominantly Serbian identity Therefore, it is important to refer to Berry and his colleagues' concept of different acculturation models. As we have seen, most respondents opted for the strategy of marginalizing both ethnic identities, identifying themselves as not belonging to either community, or assimilating into the Serbian community.

Examples of the integration of two ethnic identities can be observed in the narratives of only a few respondents. These examples may indicate certain limitations in the concept of Bicultural Identity Integration,[24] presented in the introductory part of the article. Based on the assumptions outlined within this concept, one could conclude that the narratives of respondents in this group suggest they do not feel a conflict between their two ethnic identities and perceive the two cultures as practically identical. Therefore, they have managed to reconcile and integrate the two ethnic identities to a large extent. However, despite these conclusions, the process of integrating the two ethnic identities is not complete. The respondents' narratives still indicate that the Serbian ethnic community holds some degree of primacy. These findings illustrate how complex the process of reconciling two ethnic identities can be and how many different levels it can encompass.

While this research was initially meant to answer the question of what the process of reconciling two conflicting identities looks like, this focus was reinterpreted throughout the research process to explore how individuals from mixed marriages form their ethnic identities. A series of insights show that most respondents underwent a process to form their ethnic identities as a reflection of belonging to a community. However, this process does not only involve choosing between two alternatives and questioning which of the two communities they actually belong to. It is more general and includes either reconsidering and distancing oneself from the influence and values of the dominant environment or reevaluating how one perceives their own ethnic identity.

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[24] See Benet-Martínez and Haritatos, "Bicultural identity integration (BII)."

We can also conclude that the majority of respondents take an active stance towards their experience. It seems that active struggle and questioning have contributed to the fact that, even though respondents faced identity conflicts and upheavals during the process of forming their ethnic identity, these conflicts are mostly resolved in their current life perspective. However, in the narratives of respondents who do not actively question and who are more passive regarding their experience elements of conflict related to the issue of ethnic belonging can be recognized. This unresolved conflict is evident in their need to distance themselves either from the issue of ethnic identification, which they consider conflictual, or from the other ethnic community, as they have not yet found a way to fully integrate it into their own identity experience.

Furthermore, most of the respondents are not overly interested in the question of ethnic identification. This, along with their expressed agency, may suggest that the study was conducted on a very specific sample of respondents. The fact that most respondents have an agentic role in their experience suggests that they position themselves in a specific way in relation to it, meaning they are critically oriented, thoughtful, and reflective about it. This positioning towards their own experience may be a result of the fact that most participants have gone through the process of identity formation and resolved all the conflicts it carries with it, allowing them to distance themselves from it and critically examine it. Additionally, all respondents belong to the college-educated population, and their education may have contributed to developing their critical position and reflection skills regarding their experience. Based on this, it is entirely justified to question whether the same findings would be obtained from a sample that is actively questioning or is not as critically oriented toward their experience. Because of this, it is recommended that future researchers study the process of forming the ethnic identity of individuals from Serbian-Croatian mixed marriages using a sample from the adolescent population, as their identity conflicts may not yet be resolved. It would also be advisable for the sample to include respondents who do not possess the educational and critical resources to position themselves critically in relation to their experience.

It is also important to address the specificity of the sample of respondents, which somewhat contributed to redefining their conflict regarding ethnic identity and, consequently, the research question. Most of the respondents were born in Serbia, and the dominant environment during their upbringing was Serbian, so contact with Croatia did not have significant formative importance for them. Furthermore, the respondents'

biographies suggest that despite being born into mixed marriages where one parent identifies as Croatian, most of their parents were also born and raised in Serbia. Therefore, contact with Croatia was not formative for the parents either. Of course, a few respondents grew up in families where one parent was born, raised, and socialized in Croatia and moved to Serbia only in adulthood. However, even in these cases, their parents spent several years in Serbia before the respondents were born and assimilated to a large extent into the dominant environment. These biographical characteristics contributed to the fact that the respondents do not perceive themselves as members of the Croatian community. Even in cases where they feel some sense of belonging, they cannot fully identify with it. Therefore, the process of forming ethnic identity does not involve reconciling Serbian and Croatian ethnic affiliations or balancing between these two positions.

Having said that, and to conclude, it is important to highlight that this research had an exploratory character, as it was one of the first studies in this region aimed at shedding light on the process of organizing and forming ethnic identities of individuals from Serbian-Croatian marriages who have grown up and live in Serbia. And, as such, it can also offer recommendations for future studies focused on the process of reconciling two potentially conflicting ethnic identities of individuals from Serbian-Croatian marriages. Firstly, we can assume that the phenomenon of reconciling two potentially conflicting ethnic identities would be more noticeable if the research were conducted on a sample of respondents who were born in the 1980s. This generation grew up in Yugoslavia and remembers it, so the breakup of Yugoslavia likely had greater personal consequences for them. Additionally, the generation born in the 1980s was in their adolescence during the Yugoslav Wars or shortly after their end. Therefore, they may have been more aware of and affected by the events than members of the generation born in the 1990s, who were in early childhood during the war. Additionally, since the community in which individuals are born and raised plays an important role in determining how individuals from mixed marriages feel about their ethnic affiliation, it would be desirable to conduct research with respondents from Serbian-Croatian mixed marriages who were born and raised in Croatia. Research should also include respondents from such marriages who spent part of their lives in Serbia and part in Croatia. It should be noted that future researchers might face challenges similar to those encountered in this study, such as recruiting participants. The target population must fulfill specific criteria, and some potential participants may not want to take part in the study due to the sensitivity of the topic.

Data Availability Statement

The data for this research has been derived from interviews with individuals from Serbo-Croatian mixed marriages. It can't be publicly shared because the author doesn't have permission from the participants to share the transcripts in their entirety.

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Appendix 1

The Agenda for the Interview

[English translation, the original interviews were carried out in Serbian]

Experience of mixed origin

1.Were you aware during your upbringing that you came from a mixed marriage?

2.Do you remember when you realized this, and how did it happen? What was happening at that moment? How did you feel about it? What did you think? How significant was that moment for you? Was anyone else present at that moment, and who? How did they contribute to your understanding that you were from a mixed family?

Ethnic belonging

1.How would you describe how you felt during your upbringing - equally as a Serb and as a Croat, or more as a Serb or as a Croat? Did you ever feel like you didn't belong to either? Did you almost always feel that way, or did that feeling change sometimes? When? In which situations? What do you think contributed to this? And how would you describe how you feel now?

2.Do you remember any specific situations when you felt particularly like a Serb? What do you think led you to feel that way in that situation? Were there any specific situations when you didn't feel like a Serb? Are there such situations now?

3.Do you remember any specific situations when you felt particularly like a Croat? Were there any specific situations in which you didn't feel that way? Are there such situations today?

Exposure to culture and other people that contribute to identification

1.How much were you exposed to both Serbian and Croatian cultures during your upbringing? Was there something you liked most in both cultures? Was there something you didn't like as much, specifically related to one of the cultures?

2.Were there any cultural elements that were particularly important to you during your upbringing, such as national symbols, movies, music, or books? Did your family celebrate the religious holidays of both ethnic communities to which your parents belong? Did everyone in the household participate in holiday celebrations? Are there still elements of both Serbian and Croatian culture present in your daily life? Provide some examples of them. Are some of these elements particularly important to you?

3.What role did your parents play in exposing you to the influences of Serbian and Croatian culture? Did it seem important to them? How did they show that? Did your parents coordinate on this and participate together (e.g. in holiday celebrations), or did each of them try to introduce you to the culture they belong to individually?

4.Did anyone else besides your parents and family contribute to making you feel like a Serb or Croat? Who were they, and how did they contribute? Are there still significant people who influence you to feel like a Serb or Croat now? Who are they?

5.Did other people, like peers and friends, know that you come from a mixed marriage? How did they find out? Do you think they treated you differently because of it? How did you feel about that? Do you think they, in any way, influenced you to feel more like you belong to one nationality? Or do both, or neither? How do people react to your mixed background today? Has anything changed compared to your childhood?

Perception of cultural similarities/differences and harmony vs. identity conflict

1.How often did you visit Croatia? How did you feel while staying there? How did other people react to the fact that you came from a mixed marriage when you were in Croatia? How did you perceive those reactions? And what about today?

2.Were there any differences in how you felt in Serbia compared to how you felt in Croatia? Did you feel comfortable and at home both in Croatia and in Serbia, or not? What contributed to these feelings? Do you now feel at home both in Croatia and in Serbia? Has anything changed compared to your upbringing?

3.During your upbringing, how much did you perceive Serbia and Croatia as similar? And how much did you see them as different?

4.Did you recognize any personal characteristics or behaviors during your upbringing that were closer to one culture and others that were closer to the other? What were those characteristics? How did you feel about those traits or behaviors? And today? Has anything changed compared to your upbringing?

5.Do you remember any specific situation in which you felt that the two cultures were particularly similar? Did you feel at that time that you didn't have significant issues reconciling your affiliation with both cultures? Are there such situations today? How do you feel about them?

6.Do you remember any specific situation when you felt that the cultures were particularly different? Did you have trouble reconciling your affiliation with both Serbian and Croatian cultures at that time? What do you think specifically contributed to your feelings in that situation? Are there such situations today? How do you feel about them?

The importance of origin

1.Was it significant for you during your upbringing that you come from a mixed marriage? How important is it to you now?

2.Do you think it has shaped you in any way? How do you feel about it? How does your background affect your lifestyle today?

3.