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Cascades of Ethnic Polarization: Lessons from Yugoslavia

By MURAT SOMER

ABSTRACT: By building upon cascades literature, the author offers an explanation for rapid and massive polarization and applies it to the former Yugoslavia. The dominant images of ethnic categories in society change through cascades of individual reactions triggered by traumatic events, ideological shifts, or the activities of ethnic entrepreneurs. Polarization becomes self-propagating if the protagonists of a certain image of ethnic identities, called the divisive image, appear to have reached a critical mass. Downward ethnic preference falsification, people's concealment of their support for the divisive image in public, increases the severity of polarization. The article argues that downward falsification was significant in Yugoslavia before the 1980s due to policies that suppressed the public expression of the divisive image but insufficiently encouraged its elimination in private. In the 1980s, polarization reversed this trend and led to widespread upward ethnic preference falsification, the exaggeration of the support for the divisive image in public.

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ETHNIC polarization, which can be described for the moment, until the definition given below, as the division of a people into mutually exclusive and distrustful ethnic categories, is detrimental to development.¹ Violent ethnic conflict is a likely effect of radical polarization and brings high economic and humanitarian costs to the societies in which it occurs as well as to the international community. However, while its effects have been relatively well researched, a satisfactory explanation of ethnic polarization itself is surprisingly absent.

Often, ethnic polarization is considered exogenous to analysis; at times, ethnolinguistic diversity is used as a proxy, although some level of ethnic heterogeneity can at best be seen as a necessary but insufficient condition for the existence of ethnic polarization. Alternatively, research focuses on those societies that are already ethnically polarized.² For all practical purposes, ethnic divisions, especially those that arise after the occurrence of ethnic polarization, are treated as if they were constant and did not require explanation.

Yet, without explaining how ethnic polarization occurs and alters the nature of ethnic identities in society, one cannot understand how and when ethnic identities *become* inimical to development. Ethnic divisions undermine development only to the extent that people from different ethnic backgrounds distrust each other and exclude each other from their social, political, and economic interactions.

In this article, I present an explanation for rapid and massive ethnic

polarization and apply it to the former Yugoslavia.³ A major premise of the explanation is that the nature of ethnic identities in society is endogenous to changes in public opinion and public discourse. Accordingly, ethnic polarization is defined as a cascade process of individual reactions, whereby a particular image of ethnic identities, what I call the divisive image, is enhanced among the members of a multiethnic society. The divisive image implies a definition of ethnic identities as mutually exclusive and incompatible with belonging to the same nation. If a critical mass of people appears to hold the divisive image, people who secretly held it before, as well as those who now feel obliged to support it, follow suit. Hence, the divisive image becomes the norm, and it becomes inappropriate, even blasphemous, to defend interethnic mixing and brotherhood. Once these circumstances surface, outsiders' image of the society will also tend to change accordingly. Thus, many ex-post analysts will quickly assume that the society in question was always divided by deep-seated ethnic hatreds.

To those analysts, ethnic polarization will appear to be caused by mutually exclusive and antagonistic ethnic groups. In fact, however, ethnic antagonisms, and the perception of ethnic groups as mutually exclusive, are often products of ethnic polarization. The actors and social categories we observe after ethnic polarization are not those that existed before polarization. Subsequent to polarization, we observe ethnic groups with seemingly distinct identities, impervious group

boundaries, and historical hatreds. When we dig a bit deeper, however, we unearth a history of mixing and cooperation as well as conflict. Prior to polarization, we discover that different images of ethnic identities coexisted within public opinion and public discourse. Some of these images portrayed ethnic identities as inclusive of each other and compatible, and others as exclusive and incompatible. At some point during polarization, the latter become dominant.

Here, I do not examine the historical, political, and economic roots of the existence of the divisive image among any particular people—these roots can be very diverse, depending on the social and economic history and geography of each country. Instead, I focus on the process that leads to the divisive image's becoming the dominant image in society, at least in public.

ETHNIC POLARIZATION AS A CASCADE

The potentially explosive character of ethnic relations demonstrates that, once ethnic polarization reaches a critical level in a society, interpersonal dependencies, or snowballing or bandwagon effects, can become very influential.⁴ Hence the appropriateness of cascade models as a theoretical framework for the examination of ethnic polarization; these models formally incorporate interpersonal behavioral dependencies.

Cascades are self-reinforcing processes that change the behavior of a group of people through interpersonal dependencies. Cascade models

explain situations in which the individual's incentives for taking an action, holding a belief, or conforming to a norm depend significantly on the behavior of others.⁵ Consider the following example. Suppose you are an ethnic minority member who is contemplating whether to attend a separatist rally. Alone, your personal preferences favoring the cause of the rally are not strong enough to make you attend regardless of what others do. Therefore, in order to decide, you look to others who carry social, political, or economic importance for you. You know that the rally's supporters may ostracize you if you fail to attend but that attending will hurt your standing among opponents. The information you have at that time augurs a low turnout. Hence, you figure that the combined importance for you of the rally's cause and your standing among the rally's expected participants is not sufficient to compensate for the opprobrium that will be attached to participants by those who appear to condemn the rally. Such opprobrium could impair your personal safety and economic, social, and political relationships. Thus you decide to bypass tomorrow's rally.

However, hours before the rally's scheduled start, you see television footage showing a large crowd. This leads you to doubt your earlier expectation of a low turnout. Furthermore, you run into an acquaintance, whom you deem well informed and well connected, on his way to the rally. This makes you wonder whether people whose opinion you value will judge you as a traitor if you fail to attend a successful rally. New information increases the expected number of the

rally's supporters and adds to your worries about the social, political, and economic costs of not attending. At some point, you determine that these costs, combined with the personal value of the rally's cause, exceed the expected cost of attending. Hence, you decide to attend. Your behavior may trigger others to follow. If the number of people at the rally reaches a critical mass, this may result in bandwagoning of support for the rally and for its cause among the population. These dynamics are not only in play in ethnic rallies such as those that helped Serbian leader Milošević to come to power; more than a decade later they helped his opponent Kostunica to rally support to bring him down.

By the logic of cascade processes, if the number or social and political significance of the initial advocates of an action, belief, or norm reaches a critical level, the balance of incentives will tip in favor of that action, belief, or norm for a great number of people, who will change their behavior accordingly.⁶ Therefore, in the case of ethnic polarization, divisive ethnic entrepreneurs constantly try to tip the balance of incentives in favor of holding the divisive image and undertaking actions that directly or indirectly promote it. They are people who have, for political, economic, intellectual, or psychological reasons, a high level of interest in the diffusion of the divisive image and actively try to promote it. If they succeed, they trigger a chain reaction of individual responses. People who previously were indecisive about or opposed to the behavior

in question jump on the generated bandwagon along with those who had been advocating it all along.

Accordingly, Kuran (1998) rightly argues that the diffusion of ethnic norms can be explained by "reputational cascades," whereby people overstate their genuine attachment to these norms in order to maintain their social status. But he does not emphasize the distinction between divisive and non-divisive norms. The distinction is crucial for determining the social and political effects of the diffusion of ethnic norms. According to the argument here, the enhancement of ethnic norms will lead to ethnic polarization only to the extent that the ethnic norms simultaneously generate divisive changes in people's images of ethnic identities in their society.

DIVISIVE, CLASHING, AND COMPATIBLE ETHNIC IMAGES

What I call here images of ethnic identities refers to the fuzzy ways in which people imagine their ethnic identities relating to the other ethnic identities in their social environment and to their nation.⁷ The ways people imagine their ethnic groups and nations are, of course, diverse and complex. Whichever categorization is made, there certainly will be a great variety within each category. At the same time, however, a parsimonious theoretical categorization is crucial for making the unavoidable complexity of the social reality intelligible for analysts. I will attempt such a classification here by defining the divisive, clashing, and compati-

ble images of ethnic identities and by distinguishing between their private and public expressions. Table 1 summarizes the main characteristics of the compatible, divisive, and clashing images. A comprehensive discussion of all the characteristics in Table 1 is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, an example illustrating how the divisive image affects individuals' choices must suffice.

A Catholic Irish man who holds a moderate version of the divisive image may attend political activities or socialize with Protestants but would find it unacceptable to marry a Protestant woman. If a strong version of the divisive image were to take hold in society, the number of spheres of life in which it would become unthinkable for Catholic and Protestant Irish to interact would increase. Not only would the Catholic Irish man find it unimaginable to marry a Protestant woman, but he would also find it unthinkable to hire Protestant employees or vote for the same party as Protestants.

Once a strong version of the divisive image prevails in society, it takes only one more step for the clashing image to emerge. In the clashing image, ethnic identities are seen not only as mutually exclusive and incompatible with the membership of the same nation but as antagonistic. The effect of the divisive image is that people see members of other ethnic groups as "them" or "others." Consequently, the social distance between members of different ethnic groups increases. This leads to the dwindling of the information flow, less competition, and, ultimately, differential economic return rates

TABLE 1
**THE CHARACTERISTICS OF
 THE THREE DIFFERENT COGNITIVE
 MODELS PORTRAYING ETHNIC
 IDENTITIES IN A NATION**

	Cognitive Model		
	Compatible image	Divisive image	Clashing image
Mutually exclusive ethnic identities	No	Yes	Yes
Unfit to belong to the same nation	No	Yes	Yes
Antagonistic ethnic identities	No	No	Yes

across ethnic groups.⁸ Envy and perceived unfairness grow in interethnic group relations: "Successful ethnic groups tend to engender fear and jealousy on the part of outsiders, while members of ethnic groups with low returns tend to become stigmatized" (Wintrobe 1995, 44).⁹ Thus, actual social distance between ethnic groups and the development of separate feelings of belonging reinforce each other and lead to the growth of negative and hostile images. Social identity theory demonstrates that negative feelings and attitudes about "others" follow almost automatically the development of perceived separate group membership (Tajfel 1978; Turner 1982; Abrams and Hogg 1990; McAdams 1995).

DOWNWARD AND UPWARD
 PREFERENCE FALSIFICATION

For my purposes here, the term "public" will denote an activity or preference that is visible or easily knowable by others. The term "private" will indicate either that the

associated activity or preference is known only to the person herself or that it is known only to those people the person confides in, such as family members or people living in the same household.¹⁰

Consider a Mexican American who hangs a Mexican flag on the wall in his living room. Unless seen by strangers, this private activity will not have any consequence beyond cultivating his sense of identity. However, if the same individual puts a sticker of the Mexican flag on his car, possibly next to a sticker in English, it will serve as a badge of his ethnic identity and may affect other people's behavior to the extent that it is publicly visible. It may, for example, encourage others to carry similar symbols, or it may remind Americans of Mexican Americans. It may earn him contacts with other Mexican Americans, which may bring him social or economic benefits. Yet, unless observers perceive it as promoting a divisive image, it will not necessarily cause polarization.

Now imagine a hypothetical Mexican American who is in favor of California's secession from the United States. His activities conducted in the privacy of his home, such as reading ethnopolitical books, will not directly affect other people's behavior. Suppose that this Mexican American carries a Mexican flag at a rally at which no American flags are present and chants secessionist slogans. In this case, his activity will affect others' perceptions and actions. It will increase the salience of the divisive image of the American and Mexican American identities, both among Mexican and non-Mexican

Americans. It may contribute to the perception that the divisive image is becoming the norm for three reasons.

First, the more vocal and visible the rally, the more social pressures there will be on Mexican Americans to accentuate their Mexican identity and on non-Mexican Americans to accentuate their own ethnic identity. Second, if the demonstrators are sufficiently numerous, many may decide to ignore their own private information—namely, information indicating that most Mexican Americans hold a compatible image—and decide that most must have been privately holding the divisive image. Third, many will think that it may be economically and politically advantageous to side with the group that seems to be growing in size. All in all, the acts during the rally will induce the observers to take a side in a polarizing environment.

Thus, public ethnic activities and expressions affect the decisions of others, while private activities and expressions do not. The effects I am referring to here are instant or short-run effects. Once we allow sufficient time to pass, all of our choices, whether private or public choices, affect those of others. One's private beliefs and activities, for example, will certainly affect the upbringing of one's children. In that sense, all private choices are interconnected. However, private decisions do not immediately affect those of others because they are not immediately observed.

One consequence of this is that the divisive image can subsist without necessarily affecting public opinion and public discourse insofar as it

remains private. Though most people in a society hold the divisive image in their minds, they may prefer to act in public as if they embrace a compatible image. This appears to have been the case for many in the former Yugoslavia and, possibly, in the former Soviet Union. For instance, Roeder (1991, 210) argues that a significant portion of the ethnic elites in Soviet republics had “private primordial agendas,” which would be expressed only in private contexts or at “isolated, ineffective, small-scale events.”¹¹

Another important distinction between private and public expression is that the latter is falsifiable. Believing on the basis of the public acts of others that the value of ethnic attachments is rising, many people may choose to exaggerate their ethnic attachments in public. Kuran (1998) calls this phenomenon “ethnic preference falsification,” an extension of the general concept of preference falsification developed in his 1989 dual preference model. Individuals who falsify their ethnic preferences mislead people to deduce that ethnicity is becoming more important, inducing them to exaggerate their ethnic attachments in public. Kuran’s model explains how ethnic extremism could gather massive public support in the 1980s even though most Yugoslavs were not ardent ethnonationalists in private.

In addition to ethnic preference falsification’s exaggerating private attachments, we should account for ethnic preference falsification’s suppressing private attachments. The former kind of ethnic preference falsification, which leads to an ex-

TABLE 2
PRIVATE ATTACHMENT TO, AND PUBLIC EXPRESSION OF, THE DIVISIVE IMAGE AND DOWNWARD AND UPWARD PREFERENCE FALSIFICATION

	Publicly Held Compatible Image	Publicly Held Divisive Image
Privately held compatible image	No preference falsification	Upward preference falsification
Privately held divisive image	Downward preference falsification	No preference falsification

aggeration of ethnic identities, will be called here upward ethnic preference falsification. The reverse is also true: people can publicly underrate the private significance of their ethnic identities or a particular image of their ethnic identities. Ethnic preference falsification that underrates ethnic identities will be called downward ethnic preference falsification. Table 2 summarizes how different types of ethnic preference falsification occur with respect to divisive and compatible images.

As Kuran (1998) demonstrates, due to the possibility of ethnic preference falsification, changes in private and public realms do not necessarily coincide. Therefore, we should define two different types of polarization. Private ethnic polarization can be defined as the process whereby increasingly more people privately hold the divisive image. Similarly, public ethnic polarization is the process whereby more and more people publicly display the divisive image. Public ethnic polarization can occur without private polarization, and

vice versa. In cases where private polarization concurs with public polarization, the degree of the latter can exceed or fall short of the former. Similarly, private and public depolarization can take place separately or simultaneously, and in case they concur, they may be of different severity.

The more that downward ethnic preference falsification exists before a cascade of public ethnic polarization occurs, the greater the severity of the change in society resulting from polarization. Public polarization does two things. First, it adds new people to those who already promote the divisive image. Second, it removes the veil from some of those individuals who were previously concealing their private preferences. Hence, public polarization will be more severe the more people had been falsifying their preferences—more people will begin to express a preference they used to conceal. Downward preference falsification may also raise the likelihood that a state is caught off guard by radical polarization, if the government is unaware of the private importance of the divisive image.

After radical polarization, many analysts will conclude that the society was already filled with hatred and that ethnic disintegration was inevitable. This is only partly true. While public polarization leads those who used to downwardly falsify their preferences to reveal their preferences, it also induces many who think that the divisive image is becoming the norm to upwardly falsify their preferences. Moreover, polarization is preventable if those promoting the compatible image can

prevent divisive ethnic entrepreneurs from mobilizing a critical mass of people in favor of the divisive image. Ethnic polarization is reversible. If people who hold a compatible image can reverse public opinion before people internalize the divisive image, they can start a cascade of depolarization. In this case, many will cease to undertake upward preference falsification, and others will begin to undertake downward preference falsification.

Individuals are susceptible to changes in public opinion and public discourse to varying degrees. Everything else held constant, those who have a strong preference for the compatible image will be less likely to upwardly falsify their preferences even though public opinion may appear to favor the divisive image. Hence, governments interested in taking long-run measures against the possibility of ethnic polarization should focus on providing incentives for the entrenchment of the compatible image in private. At the same time, they should abstain from creating monopolies of information resources. Informational monopolies can be used by divisive ethnic entrepreneurs to disseminate the impression that the divisive image is becoming the norm as well as by those who want people to believe that everybody favors inter-ethnic solidarity. The failure to take such long-run measures ultimately cost the former Yugoslavia its unity.

ETHNIC POLARIZATION EXPLOITED: YUGOSLAVIA

We all said publicly that we wanted a mixed Bosnia and that we would defend it, but privately. . . .¹²

Despite all the research done on the subject, Yugoslavia's disintegration remains an unsatisfactorily comprehended phenomenon. Initially, a rich corpus of studies put the blame for Yugoslavia's disintegration on historic animosities peculiar to Balkanites (Connor 1993; Kaplan 1994; and, partly, Mojzes 1994 and Judah 1997). This approach serves more to satisfy the Western onlooker's own self-image by distinguishing between "them" (who are capable of great evil) and "us" (who are immune to conflict caused by ancient hatred) than to explain the real causes of the country's tragedy. Though the deep-seated-hatred argument still pervades popular and journalistic accounts, it has been sufficiently demonstrated that historical evidence indicates the opposite: cooperative and peaceful periods clearly outweigh violent periods in the history of the areas comprising the former Yugoslavia (Gagnon 1994-95; Akhavan 1995; Cigar 1995; Fearon and Laitin 1996; Malcolm 1998).¹³

Alternative views rightly stress the strategic decisions of the country's elites, who exploited ethnic sensitivities to consolidate their own power (Glenny 1993; Denitch 1994; Gagnon 1994-95; Carment and James 1996; Cigar 1995; Maass 1996). Accordingly, Yugoslavia is a case of failed transition from socialism to liberal democracy and market economy. In the power vacuum left by Tito's death in 1980, Yugoslav leaders chose to use ethnonationalism to attain or consolidate power, ultimately leading to their country's destruction. A series of studies has

argued convincingly that Serbian leader Milošević rose to power largely by manipulating Serbian nationalism, whereby his strategic exploitation of the sensitive issue of the Serbian minority in Kosovo played a crucial role (Malcolm 1998, 341-43; Mertus 1999). Indeed, divisive ethnic entrepreneurs played a key role in the fall of Yugoslavia.¹⁴

Even leaders such as Milošević, however, seem to have been surprised by the power of the polarization they helped create, suggesting that the dynamics of rapid and massive polarization were in play. Hence, the theory of ethnic polarization presented in this article can shed light on three aspects of Yugoslavia's dissolution that have been insufficiently explained. The first is the speed at which Yugoslavia disintegrated and the degree of violence and apparent hatred that was created during the process. Interethnic problems in Yugoslavia had been known to exist, yet it was hardly expected that Yugoslavs could turn against each other so fast and so violently.

A second and related issue is the way common people indirectly contributed to the escalation of ethnic tensions. It is true that elites misused the state's control of mass media, especially television, as a propaganda tool to foment interethnic grievances and that wars were launched by armed forces directed from above, not by ordinary civilians (Malcolm 1998, xxvii, 342). Yet, elite strategies of inciting ethnonationalism found a large and responsive audience among common people, which is a factor that needs to be

explained not by resorting to ostensible ancient visceral hatreds but by examining ethnic and national self-images in modern Yugoslavia and the policies that cultivated them.

The third task is to explain how the dominant public discourse could take such a sharp turn during the 1990s. How could the once-dominant public discourse emphasizing unity and brotherhood turn into one that emphasizes radical ethnonationalism? Similarly, the paucity of dismal predictions about Yugoslavia before the polarization contrasts with the abundance of ex-post explanations of how inevitable and foreseeable the tragic outcome was.

In response to these questions, here it is argued that in Yugoslavia, policies that nurtured downward ethnic preference falsification and provided insufficient incentives for the development of an overarching Yugoslav identity created a public that was vulnerable to radical ethnic polarization. In general, while Yugoslav policies aimed at eradicating the public expression of the divisive image of ethnic relations in the country, apparently to maintain the regime's safety and Yugoslavia's unity, they insufficiently encouraged the development of the compatible image in private. The result was two-fold: downward preference falsification, which understated the private popularity of the divisive image in the public sphere, and insufficient cultivation of the Yugoslav national identity as opposed to ethnic identities. Hence, when elites began to exploit ethnic sensitivities in the 1980s, the public was already susceptible to their discourse. People

indirectly contributed to ethnic disintegration by such acts as voting for ethnonationalist leaders, attending ethnonationalist rallies, or revealing ethnically biased views in reaction to inflammatory events. These activated the interpersonal dependencies that bred public polarization.

The pace and severity of the ensuing polarization exceeded everybody's expectations mainly for two reasons. First, prior downward preference falsification concealed, to most observers, the private importance of the divisive image, which rose to the surface during public polarization. Second, even analysts who had a fair idea about the private significance of the divisive image were surprised by the severity of polarization because interpersonal dependencies triggered by the polarization process led to upward preference falsification.

The argument about downward preference falsification differs in fundamental ways from the argument that the deep-seated hostilities, which resembled a tinderbox, were suppressed before the 1980s and exploded as soon as the Yugoslav state weakened. First, the latter argument implies that the divisive and clashing images dominated private opinion in the former Yugoslavia. According to the argument here, this is not true. Although the private significance of the divisive image was certainly underrepresented by the official discourse, the compatible image was widespread and developing, although insufficiently from the point of view of Yugoslavia's long-term cohesion. Hence, the antagonistic public discourse that became

dominant as a result of polarization is as misrepresentative of people's true self-images as the prepolarization official discourse that championed unity and brotherhood. The argument here can be refuted if it can be shown that the divisive and clashing images were indeed dominant among common Yugoslavs before the polarization. Evidence provided here indicates that they were not.

The second way the argument here differs from one based on suppressed antagonisms is in regard to the implication of the latter argument that Yugoslavia's eventual disintegration was inevitable. In contrast, the present article argues that it could have been prevented. This would have happened if those Yugoslavs who held a compatible image could have stopped the social dynamics leading to polarization, reversed the process to one of depolarization, and, in the long run, launched policies that encouraged the cultivation of the compatible image.

It is understandable that today the compatible image of interethnic relations in the former Yugoslavia has little credibility for the average Yugoslav. As a result of ethnic polarization, views and beliefs in support of the compatible image became increasingly unfit to express publicly from the late 1980s onward. As polarization persisted and ethnic conflict ensued, the compatible image also became unthinkable. Today, the compatible image is in the gradual and uncertain process of becoming unthought, both due to the influence of social and political pressures prevalent under authoritarian-nationalistic governments and because of the

vivid memory of ethnic war and the fading memory of the time before.

Most ex-post accounts that paint too gloomy a picture of the ethnic relations in the former Yugoslavia can be seen as a product of ethnic polarization. These accounts generalize the feelings and expressions in a postpolarization environment to a long prepolarization history, which entailed strong unifying forces as well as divisive dynamics.

Was there a Yugoslav nation?

There were myriad reasons for believing that Yugoslavia was a successful salad bowl (if not a melting pot) whose ingredients were integrating. First, as Table 3 demonstrates, about 13 percent of all marriages in the country were mixed marriages, in that they were between people from different ethnic backgrounds.¹⁵ A comparison with the percentage of interracial marriages in the United States may be revealing. As seen in Table 3, only 2.4 percent of all married U.S. couples in 1994 could be identified as interracial; marriages between whites and blacks were only 0.5 percent of all married couples. The percentage of black-white interracial couples was only 0.1 percent in 1970, where all interracial couples made up 0.6 percent of the whole in the same year (Saluter 1996, viii, A-5). Even writers who are skeptical about the significance of the intermarriage ratio in Yugoslavia highlight that there was virtually no marriage barrier between the Croats and Serbs, who were later involved in a brutal war

TABLE 3
**INTERMARRIAGE RATES IN THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA
 AND THE UNITED STATES (PERCENTAGE)**

	1962-64	1970-72	1980-82	1987-89	1994
United States (interracial)					2.4
United States (black-white interracial)					0.5
Former Yugoslavia	12.7	11.7	13.1	13.0	
Bosnia-Herzegovina	11.4	9.5	12.2	11.9	
Montenegro	17.9	14.6	13.4	13.1	
Croatia	15.8	15.4	17.1	17.4	
Macedonia	13.5	9.9	8.2	7.8	
Slovenia	7.7	7.8	11.0	13.0	
Serbia (total)	12.3	11.9	13.1	12.9	
Serbia proper	8.5	7.8	9.9	10.4	
Vojvodina	22.5	25.3	27.6	28.4	
Kosovo	9.4	7.7	6.1	4.7	

SOURCES: Botev 1994 (469); Saluter 1996. Reprinted by permission of the American Sociological Association.

with each other (Botev and Wagner 1993, 30).

The second factor that was thought to suggest the successful integration of Yugoslav society is the significant number of those who identified themselves as Yugoslavs rather than as members of any ethnonational group. Denitch (1994, 14) notes that these people were more numerous than were Slovenes and Macedonians. As seen in Table 4, in 1981 approximately 8 percent of all people in Bosnia identified themselves as Yugoslavs, by refusing to associate with any ethnonational group.¹⁶ This apparently low percentage is still important because, were they given the option of revealing both an ethnic and a national (Yugoslav) identity, more people could have identified themselves as Yugoslav along with their ethnic identity. For people who hold a compatible image, ethnic and national identities need not be mutually exclusive. However, the Yugoslav national identification was first

introduced in the census in 1961 and then qualified with the explanation "having no identifiable [ethno]-nationality" (Hodson, Sekulić, and Massee 1994, 1542-43).¹⁷

The interethnic peace, international respectability, and relative economic and political contentment that the former Yugoslavs enjoyed until the late 1980s also contributed to the image of Yugoslavia as a working multiethnic state. Economically, Yugoslavia was more liberal and prosperous than other Communist-led states. According to World Bank data, in terms of gross national product (GNP) per capita, Yugoslavia was the most prosperous country among Communist Balkan states and, among all the Communist states, trailed closely behind Czechoslovakia. The Yugoslav economy grew at a respectable 6.1 percent annual rate between 1965 and 1973 and 6.4 percent between 1973 and 1980. The economic crisis Yugoslavia experienced during the 1980s was severe, as revealed by its negative

TABLE 4
**PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE WHO
 SELF-IDENTIFIED AS YUGOSLAVS**

	1961	1971	1981	1991
Yugoslavia	1.7	1.3	5.4	3.0
Bosnia-Herzegovina	8.4	1.2	7.9	5.5
Montenegro	0.3	2.1	5.3	4.0
Croatia	0.4	1.9	8.2	2.2
Macedonia	0.1	0.2	0.7	n.a.
Slovenia	0.2	0.4	1.4	0.6
Serbia (excluding Kosovo and Vojvodina)	0.2	1.4	4.8	2.5
Vojvodina	0.2	2.4	8.2	8.4
Kosovo	0.5	0.1	0.1	0.2

SOURCES: Sekulić, Massey, and Hodson 1994 (85); Cohen 1993 (175). Reprinted by permission of the American Sociological Association and Westview Press, a member of Perseus Books, L.L.C. Data in the column for 1991 are from *Broken Bonds: The Disintegration of Yugoslavia* by Leonard J. Cohen. Copyright © 1993 by Westview Press.

average growth rate and hyperinflation, and greatly contributed to a political crisis. However, economic crisis can be only a catalyst for, not a cause of, ethnic conflict. Moreover, all countries in transition sooner or later experience hyperinflation and contraction of output.

More consequential for ethnic relations in Yugoslavia were regional inequalities that gradually became a source of interpublic tension. In 1988, GNP per capita was \$5918 in Slovenia and \$3230 in Croatia, while it was \$662 in Kosovo, \$1499 in Macedonia, and \$2238 in Serbia proper (Ding 1991, 2).¹⁸ Prosperous regions, especially Slovenia, pressed for more autonomy, even independence, in order to reduce their contribution to backward regions through central government transfers. Impoverished regions, in

return, complained that they were being exploited as a provider of raw materials and wanted more assistance from the federal government. Ethnic entrepreneurs amply exploited these disputes to promote the divisive image and to incite ethnonationalism. The divisive image, of course, reinforced the perception of interregional inequalities as equivalent to interethnic inequalities.

Nevertheless, except for the case of Slovenia, it was not expected that economic inequalities would cause disintegration, as Ding (1991) argued:

Although it is possible that Slovenia, which is economically the most developed and ethnically the most homogeneous, is really demanding independence and will succeed in the end, a total breakup of the rest of Yugoslavia does not seem likely given its history, racial, and territorial intermingling, at least in the foreseeable future. (4)

Despite the lack of liberal democracy, the country also fared better than other socialist countries in terms of social and political freedoms; one foreign observer once admitted that he had “never been in a country with so much freedom and so little democracy” (reported in Crnobrnja 1994, 76). As a leading state of the nonaligned movement—of which Tito became a champion after breaking with Stalin between 1948 and 1951—and as the pioneer of market socialism (self-management) from the 1960s onward, Yugoslavia was highly esteemed abroad, especially in the Third World.

Underneath this surface of harmonious coexistence, however, there

were troubling signs. There were tensions between ethnic elites and occasional leakages of demands for more expression of ethnic particularities through the iron facade of Yugoslav nationalism. In addition, it was expected that the weakening of socialism could give rise to some degree of ethno-political mobilization because the long-lasting ideological monopoly of the Communists eliminated alternative vehicles of political expression.¹⁹

What was unimaginable at that time was the speed of ethnic mobilization and the degree of violent hatred that it could later unleash. Prior to the outbreak of war, analysts who were aware of this mixture of tendencies suggested that the weakening of socialism could lead to ethnonationalist crisis, yet they could not imagine, let alone predict, that the Yugoslavs could become polarized to the extent that civil war would result. Accordingly, Glenny (1993), an esteemed observer of the Yugoslav civil war, recounted later, "Though everybody knew the rotten ship of the Yugoslav state was entering troubled seas, nobody in their wildest fantasy would have predicted that within a little more than a year Croat soldiers would massacre innocent Serbs, while Serbs would mutilate innocent Croats" (19).

Similarly, Mojzes (1994) confesses that, although "mounting [ethno]nationalist tensions were evident, [he] did not anticipate that they would lead to the partition of the country" (xvii).²⁰ In order to counter the claims of the ethnonationalists that the Yugoslav idea never worked, he argues,

At that time "never again" seemed convincing. Surely no one would ever again set these people against each other considering the many intermarriages, a sizable movement of ethnically different people settling in one another's areas, the purchase of properties along Dalmatian coasts by members of all [ethno]nationalities, [and] the successful integration of sports teams that represented the country in myriad international competitions. (3)²¹

Indeed, in 1985, when signs of rising ethnonationalism were evident, a respected scholar, Rusinov, concluded that the tensions would not lead to a grave crisis. He wrote, "Scholars including myself have been unable to justify the contention that the current situation is already analogous [to a period of political crisis and ethnic tensions in 1970-71] and that a similar crisis is likely to ensue" (1985, 32). However, in the years following Rusinov's reassurance, ethnic polarization in Yugoslavia exploded, eventually producing civil war and ethnic cleansing.

Such informed and experienced observers would have duly predicted the pace and severity of the impending polarization if Yugoslavia's disintegration had been inevitable. This would have been the case if the divisive image was preponderant privately or if the compatible image had no support, as ex-post analyses emphasizing ancient antagonisms imply. In fact, the truth lay somewhere in the middle: the compatible image was quite strong and was developing in private, though public opinion overrated its strength.

*Institutional incentives and
Yugoslavia's vulnerability
to ethnic polarization*

Economic and political institutions and governmental policies of the former Yugoslavia provided mixed incentives to people for cultivating a compatible image and for reconciling their ethnic identities with Yugoslavness. On the one hand, the particular federal structure encouraged, especially after 1966, the creation of separate ethnonational elites and the regionalization of political interests. It also insufficiently encouraged the development of a Yugoslav national identity. On the other hand, the public expression of ethnonationalist tendencies was harshly repressed. Tito strongly suppressed the public discourse of nationalism except, of course, for that of Yugoslav nationalism. The official ideology and formal education promoted, or at least praised rhetorically, "brotherhood and unity." In addition, the cultivation of a Communist ideology and the creation of a national economy based on the self-management system were supposed to foster the image of national unity by fragmenting ethnic allegiances.

Competition for public offices and for most governmental positions was limited to group members, rendering ethnic identities a political asset and creating vested interests in their preservation. The positions of a vast number of people were closely associated with their ethnonational origin. To quote Denitch (1994, 38), "Rigid use of an affirmative action ethnic 'key' assured a near-equal distribution of cabinet posts, ambassador-

ships, and other important federal appointments between cadres from the republics' provinces. The parliament and other federal institutions made major efforts to be multilingual," although linguistic differences were minor at best. More significantly, competition for constituencies from different regions, and thus from ethnonational groups, was curtailed, reducing the incentives for building interethnic alliances.

Consequently, the articulation and aggregation of interests in Yugoslav politics were regionalized (Burg 1988, 20).²² Some writers further maintain that the system "rejected the idea of the creation of a new Yugoslav nationality to replace Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs." Tito's emphasis was on "brotherhood," which implied equality and mutual respect between the ethnic groups, not necessarily the intermingling of the groups. Hence people who self-identified as Yugoslavs were "mildly discouraged" from it (Crnobrnja 1994, 69). The definition of the Yugoslav national identity as a residual in national censuses was a reflection of this overall policy.

While certain Yugoslav institutions nurtured ethnonational identities at the expense of Yugoslav identification, others severely limited the public expression of ethnonationalism, especially of the divisive image. These institutions also suppressed the development of ideologies other than socialism. Tito used mutual guilt to underline the history of ethnonational conflicts and neutralize ethnonationalism: "The expression of [ethno]national interests had to take place in a peculiarly circum-

cribed fashion. While the Croats were haunted by the Ustasha ghost, the Serbs were haunted by the specter of the accusation of Great Serbian Hegemonism" (Judah 1997, 145). Any public expression of ethnic discord and mistrust was stamped as renegade ethnonationalism reminiscent of the atrocities experienced during World War II and was sanctioned.

Hence, people who were not encouraged to abandon their ethnic attachments in favor of Yugoslavness (they were even encouraged to maintain their ethnic attachments) yet were prohibited from publicly expressing ethnonationalism opted for an obvious alternative: they actively conformed to the Yugoslav idea in public, even though they were not enthusiastic about it in private.

The institutional incentives and policies minimized the public expression of the divisive image and constrained any expression of it to the private realm, but they did not eliminate its existence in private. In other words, they generated downward ethnic preference falsification.

As a sign of the existence of significant private polarization, issues that should not have become a problem within a cohesive society became controversial in Yugoslavia. For example, Serbs resented the recognition of Kosovo's status as an autonomous province, while Kosovar Albanians acclaimed it as an insufficient yet proper status (Malcolm 1998; Mertus 1999). As Malcolm (1998) argues, Serbs regarded Kosovo's autonomy as a "punitive truncation of Serbia by the half-Croat, half-Slovene Tito." More significantly for our purposes

here, Malcolm observes that such feelings "would not be expressed in public until Tito's death; but their existence was not a secret in ruling circles." When Dobrica Ćosić, a Serbian novelist and senior Communist, complained in a 1968 meeting of the Serbian Central Committee about policies accommodating Kosovar Albanians, he was dismissed from that body later in the year as a result (329).

The monopolistic structure of information dissemination also reinforced the country's susceptibility to ethnic polarization. Those who controlled the few sources of public information could easily influence public opinion and expectations.²³ State radio and television were widely used by Milošević to disseminate an ethnocentric view of the developments during the 1980s and 1990s.

Private polarization in the 1980s

In the early 1980s, two changes that the Yugoslav society underwent stand out as likely instigators of initial, private polarization. The first is the consecutive deaths of two prominent figures in Yugoslav history. Kardelj, the Yugoslav Communist party's leading ideologist and Tito's most prominent successor, died in 1979. Then, Tito, whose name and personality were largely identified with Yugoslavness, died in 1980, marking the end of an era.²⁴ The second probable contributor to private polarization is the gradual yet remarkable descent of communism both worldwide and in Yugoslavia. These two changes, coupled with widespread unemployment, were apt

to generate a strengthening of ethnic identities in a Communist country where very few other allegiances were allowed to flourish. When the Yugoslav and Communist self-images were fading away and unemployment impaired the occupational identities of many, some portion of the people turned to their secured and available identities such as their ethnic identities.

According to surveys in which respondents were anonymous and which were thus able to capture changes in people's private preferences, the 1980s weakened the overarching Yugoslav identity. Table 4 illustrates these changes. Between 1981 and 1991, the percentage of Bosnians who declared themselves as Yugoslavs fell from 7.9 percent to 5.5 percent, signifying a 30.3 percent decrease. Considering all the citizens of the former Yugoslavia, the percentage of those who self-identified most with being Yugoslav decreased from 5.4 percent in 1981 to 3.0 percent in 1991, representing a decline of 44.4 percent. The statistics from the other republics of the former Yugoslavia all indicate similar decreases in self-identification with the overarching Yugoslav identity, except for those from Vojvodina, where a slight increase was observed. The most radical decrease, a 73.2 percent fall, was observed in Croatia, where the percentage of the people who embraced the Yugoslav identity more than any ethnic identity diminished from 8.2 percent in 1981 to a mere 2.2 percent in 1991 (Cohen 1993, 175).²⁵ Cohen (1993) rightly concludes that these changes

display a "marked return by many Yugoslavs to their specific ethnic group origins" (176). He does not explain, however, how a small change in private identities could generate the radical, public polarization that occurred.

Public polarization

Public polarization far exceeded private polarization, rapidly dividing the society socially, psychologically, politically, and, finally, militarily. A full account of the public events underlying this period is outside the purview of this article.²⁶ Fairly detailed accounts of this era are given in various sources published on Yugoslavia's disintegration; a review of these sources is sufficient to demonstrate that the era from 1980 to 1990 was marked by a striking upsurge in the public expression of the divisive image. First, long-suppressed issues resurfaced, almost with a vengeance. Serbian poets described the Croats as "pro-Ustasha" and "there was talk of" the Orthodox ancestry of the Croatian Dalmatian population, while the Croats accused the Serbs of "Stalinist" or "Chetnik" leanings (Ramet 1996a, 22). There was a renewed interest in the past and in ethno-national histories. The media and academia ethnified and, in many cases, began to promote a divisive image. A prominent Slovenian journal, *Nova revija*, published a series of articles, which, inter alia, protested the second-class status of the Slovenian language in Yugoslavia (Ramet 1996a, 24). Notoriously, the

Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences penned in 1986 the Serbian Memorandum—many writers of which later became key political figures—promoting the idea of a greater, unified Serbia; controversial best-seller authors such as Vuk Draskovic evoked, “in a bending of scholarship,” hostile stereotypes about Muslims (Cigar 1995, 22-30).

The divisive ethnic entrepreneurs, whose efforts were concentrated on capturing the Communist party apparatus in order to divide Yugoslavia into ethnonational units, succeeded in creating an atmosphere in which downward preference falsification was replaced by upward falsification. One indirect sign of this was that, in 1989, when public polarization had reached an advanced state, anonymous surveys continued to reveal that interethnic tolerance levels were high by global standards. These levels apparently increased with the degree of diversity in one’s region, urban residence, age, and mixed parentage but decreased with unemployment and religiosity (Hodson, Sekulić, and Massey 1994).

Thus, while the public discourse was becoming increasingly more divisive and less tolerant of interethnic differences, private attitudes remained quite tolerant of interethnic differences. Moreover, if all interethnic hostilities expressed during the war had been genuine, one would have expected the most severe hostilities to have occurred in the less tolerant regions. In fact, most atrocities occurred in regions that were found to be more tolerant during the surveys. This suggests

that violence could not be attributed to genuine hatred but to ethnic polarization. In fact, the highest levels of tolerance were found in Bosnia, the site of the most violent crimes.²⁷

Desertion and call-up evasion were very common during the civil war when public support for the divisive image was at its peak. This may also attest to the existence of upward preference falsification, although this kind of behavior might also have been caused by economic motives or simply by fear. However, it certainly shows that the division of Yugoslavia did not have sufficient support in private to make young people risk their lives for it. When authorities ordered a mass mobilization of reservists, only 10 percent showed up—others avoided the conscription by sleeping in different places every night (Glenny 1993, 131). Accordingly, Denitch (1994) argues that “widespread refusal to serve in the armed forces in this combination of civil war and war of aggression against Croatia and Bosnia is testimony to its unpopularity. In Belgrade 85 percent of the reservists were refusing the call-ups in the fall of 1991,” while many were staying abroad to avoid serving (62-63).

The nationalist revivals in Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia eventually brought to power nationalist leaders, Milošević, Tudjman, and Kucan, who, in the first free elections of the country in 1990, received electoral majorities. Once in power, Milošević reinforced polarization by, for instance, increasing the amount of Cyrillic in the alphabet, letting the Serbian Orthodox church build new

churches and restore old ones, and appointing nationalist and loyal figures to important political and administrative positions. One consequence of public polarization was that interethnic parties were gradually driven out of politics. In Bosnia, for example, the elections resembled a census of the three major ethnonational groups, and "the programmatic parties were completely marginalized" (Denitch 1994, 67).²⁸ Perhaps more fundamentally, however, the Yugoslavs "lost the ability to understand each other, each others' values, concerns, each others' perceptions" (Ramet 1996a, 29).

Pressures to undertake upward ethnic preference falsification peaked during the war. In provocative accounts of the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, one renowned journalist reports cases where some soldiers who were "ordered" to rape Muslim women declined to obey the orders but instructed the women to say otherwise in order to avoid appearing on the side of the enemy (Gutman 1993, 69). The point here is that while some Serbian soldiers could willingly commit such terrible crimes, others were either falsifying their preferences or trying to escape from having to commit such inhuman acts. There are numerous reports about the persecution of disloyal Serbs, some of whom even fought alongside Muslims or Croats, by other Serbs.²⁹ Similarly, tolerant Muslims or Croats faced social pressures and persecution by their own group.

At least partly, the seeds of the radical outcome in Yugoslavia were sown by previous policies that sup-

pressed the public expression of the divisive image but insufficiently encouraged its elimination in private. Hence, the analysis here highlights the significance of social and political institutions in forming individuals' ethnic identities and in encouraging or discouraging downward and upward preference falsification. By analyzing the relationships between institutional incentives, ethnic identities, and preference falsification, one can better understand the dynamics of ethnic disintegration as cascades. The examination of these dynamics serves to remedy a popular misconception that is implicit in many journalistic and political accounts of ethnic conflict in the Balkans, Africa, and the Middle East: the impression that these conflicts are inevitable products of ancient hatreds.³⁰ In fact, most of the accompanying expressions of interethnic hatred are generated by polarization; similarly, the changing public image of these societies that portrays them as if they had always been ethnically divided should be seen as a product of ethnic polarization.

Notes

1. Theoretical analyses predict that ethnic polarization increases transaction costs, intergroup envy, rent seeking, and political instability (Bates 1974; Landa 1981, 1994; Cornell 1995; Wintrobe 1995; Cornell and Welch 1996). Accordingly, cross-country empirical analyses indicate that ethnic polarization increases corruption and government instability and decreases economic growth, investment, and interpersonal trust (Mauro 1995; Easterly and Levine 1997; Knack and Keefer 1997). Collier and Gunning (1999, 9) argue that eth-

nic and religious diversity bear deleterious effects only under undemocratic governments.

2. An important and valuable strand of research examines institution building for achieving trust and credible commitment between rival ethnic groups in *divided* societies (Fearon and Laitin 1996; Weingast 1998; Fearon 1998; Rotschild and Lake 1998).

3. The theory is explained in full in Somer 1999.

4. Many writers have described ethnic divisions as prone to massive and violent conflict and have attributed this characteristic to the fact that ethnic ties are based on a putative "blood tie." See, for instance, Horowitz 1985, chap. 2; Connor 1993.

5. For a review, see Kuran and Sunstein 1999, 687-91. For early examples of contributions to this literature, see Leibenstein 1950; Schelling 1978; Granovetter 1978. The contributions to this literature have over time become specialized in four types of cascades, each focusing on a different motivational mechanism. The cascades are not mutually exclusive. For informational cascades, see Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer, and Welch 1992, 1998; Banerjee 1993; Anderson and Holt 1997. For reputational cascades, see Akerlof 1976; Kuran 1989, 1995, 1998. For availability cascades, see Kuran and Sunstein 1999. For networking cascades, see Arthur 1994 and, partly, Laitin 1992.

6. Cascade models have been applied to explain, among other things, social movements, residential choices, consumption, fads and rumors, ethnic norms, and language preferences (Schelling 1978; Granovetter and Soong 1986, 1988; Kuran 1989, 1998; Laitin 1992; Banerjee 1993; Hirschleifer 1995; Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer, and Welch 1992, 1998).

7. For nations as imagined communities, see Anderson 1983. Above all, images of ethnic identities are mental models of one's social environment. With respect to their economic consequences, they are comparable to potential "governance structures," which define group boundaries and the "sets of acceptable contracting partners." A governance structure is likely to prevail if it can provide economic rents for insiders (Yarbrough and Yarbrough 2000). To the extent that governance struc-

tures become the norm as a result of cascades, however, there is no guarantee that the more efficacious structure will prevail. Cascades can render the divisive image dominant within a group as an unintended consequence of individual chain reactions, that is, although the divisive image is less advantageous for the average individual than other images.

8. "Weak social relationships" such as those between simple acquaintances can be crucial in determining one's economic and political opportunities. Hence Granovetter's argument (1982) on "the strength of weak ties." See also Landa 1981, 1994.

9. Polarized groups exhibit differential rates of economic return and different patterns of income distribution, which lead to divergent median voter preferences over issues such as taxation, provision of public goods, and government policies including income transfers from rich to poor. Inefficiencies caused by competitive rent seeking, political deadlock, and secessionist demands follow (Alesina and Drazen 1991; Alesina and Rodrik 1994; Easterly and Levine 1997; Bolton and Roland 1997).

10. For related definitions, see Kuran 1998.

11. See also Beissinger 1993; Beissinger highlights the complexity and plasticity of the various images of the Soviet Union that underlay people's private and public identities.

12. Quoted in Judah 1997 (195) from a personal interview with a Bosnian Serb.

13. See also Goodwin 1999.

14. In addition to the elite-based explanation, Posen 1993, Fearon 1998, and Weingast 1998 highlight the security threats that ethnic groups posed to each other and rightly emphasize the lack of institutions that could provide credible commitments between groups in the absence of Tito's iron fist. Other explanations emphasize cultural differences and the dissimilar structures and goals of the Serbian, Croat, and Slovenian nationalist ideologies (Ramet 1996a); increased influence on Serbian politics of the rural population, the "idiocy of rural culture," which accompanied Milošević's coming to power (Ramet 1996b); the opposition generated in reaction to the centralist, unitarist state apparatus (Bose 1995); and the high economic cost caused by economic austerity programs and untimely de-

cisions on the part of the international organizations and Western states (Woodward 1995; Danchev and Halverson 1996).

15. See Botev 1994; Petrović 1991. See also Botev and Wagner 1993, which, in contrast to Petrović, interprets the data differently in that it downplays the integrative consequences of mixed marriages.

16. See the table in Sekulić, Massey, and Hodson 1994, 85. The same statistic was 5.4 percent for the whole of Yugoslavia.

17. The "Muslim" identification was first included in the census in 1971.

18. See also Bookman 1991; Kraft 1992.

19. In the late 1980s, when signs of ethnic tensions were evident and the decline of Soviet socialism was under way, some analysts suggested that the main threat to European security in the 1990s would come from ethnic conflict and political fragmentation in the Balkans (Larrabee 1990-91, 59).

20. Similarly, Denitch (1994) confesses that his optimistic feelings about Yugoslavia's prospects for survival were "an honest mistake, shared with most non-Yugoslav and Yugoslav analysts up to the mid-1980s" (20).

21. Note that, in the Yugoslav context, the term "nationality" is used to denote one of the ethnic groups that constituted the former Yugoslavia.

22. See also Bose 1995, esp. pp. 101-6, for the argument that the republic-based politics of the Yugoslav Communist party prevented the development of political movements that transcend ethnic lines. Denitch (1994) argues that "the system paid far too much attention to the issue of multinationalism and thus kept the fact of [ethno]national identity central in determining career paths of at least two generations of politicians and civil servants" (39).

23. For example, Maass 1996 (227-25).

24. The psychological impact of Tito's death was remarkable because, in Larrabee's (1990-91) words, "his personality [had] kept the system together and [given] it cohesion" (67).

25. The same numbers are given in more detail in Petrović 1992.

26. For a description of the public events of the era, see Ramet 1996a, esp. chaps. 1-5; Cigar 1995; Malcolm 1998.

27. See the table in Hodson, Sekulić, and Massey 1994, 1548.

28. By 1986, the same author argues, "the revived and in some cases invented national questions [had] either [driven] all other issues from the political arena or distorted them" (Denitch 1994, 39).

29. See, for instance, *Washington Post*, 24 Aug. 1992.

30. For recent accounts of historical cooperation and cultural mixing among the ethnic groups in the Balkans and the Middle East, see Malcolm (1998); Goodwin (1999).

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