Match-making across enemy lines

The anthropologist Armanda Hysa researched 13 cases (out of an esteemed 350) of unlikely couples: Serbian husbands and Albanian wives living in the largely rural Sandžak region, in Southern Serbia. “When the existence of a traditional family faces the danger of extinction, the rigid borders of nationalist ideology are easily overcome. It is everyday life’s triumph over the seemingly untouchable barriers of political ideology”, she tells LSEE’s blog editor Tena Prelec.

A mafia woman turned match-maker

In 2006, Vera was a key component of a wide smuggling network in the Southern Balkans. During the 1990s, they dealt with oil, iron and cigarette contraband across Northern Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia. Occasionally, one of the members of the network complained to Vera that he couldn’t find a woman who would accept to marry him and go live with him in his remote village in Serbia. “Serbian women are disobedient, selfish, and only want to live in the city” – was the usual grumble. Vera was then reminded of her divorced niece living in Northern Albania, who was unable to find another husband in her home country. She put the two of them in touch, and the first of a string of match-made loves between a Serbian groom and an Albanian bride blossomed (this one, however, did not last very long; soon enough, Vera’s niece fled from southern Serbia to marry a Macedonian).

It was immediately clear to Vera that this was a looming business opportunity, and she was determined not to leave it untapped. This “mafia woman”, as she is sometimes referred to in Serbia, had all the necessary contacts: she knew the customs officers personally could reach out to unhappy Serbian singletons and knew a fair amount of fellow Albanians on the lookout for a decent husband. For 4,000 euros, Serbian grooms-to-be could have the whole package: bribed customs officers, instructed and paid-for taxi drivers, abundance of gold in dowry – as required by the Albanian tradition. And, of course, a beautiful, obedient and hard-working Albanian wife. To achieve these aims Vera lied, and lied a lot: about the conditions of the Serbian villages, about the age of the men, about their wealth. She did not operate a refund policy and got very cross if someone tried to muscle in on her business or resorted to ‘DIY’ matchmaking.

The visa regime between Serbia and Albania opened up in 2010, and Vera lost her monopoly. There is now an official matrimony agency, Maruel 2008&co, as part of the Serbian and Montenegrin minority association in Albania. Since Serbia issued an arrest order against Vera, she does not dare leave Albania, and now operates via skype.

Reviving childless villages

This story was told to Armanda by the first Albanian bride who found her husband in Serbia, Mira. Mira’s arrival in 2006 revived the village of Budevo, near Sjenica. After her, seven more brides (including her cousin) followed, giving birth to over ten children in a village which had not witnessed a single wedding for over three decades. In the words of one of Armanda’s respondents: “The one who first thought of the girls from Albania should be knighted by this country. If a mafia woman made all this happen – may she be blessed!”
Mixed marriages go way back

Marrying foreign men is not a new phenomenon for women from Albania. Weddings with Greek and Italian men have been common for decades, as sisters of Albanian emigrés got to know their brothers' friends. Macedonian men often marry Albanian Catholic girls from Northern Albania; though interestingly, mixed marriages between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians living in Macedonia itself are seen as a no-go: love affairs flourish, but legalising the relationship is regarded as inconceivable by both communities. Given this context, why should this new trend of Serbian-Albanian mixed marriages be so strident? Surely, romantic engagement between the two ethnicities is a special case due to the recent history of non-communication, war, and hatred. The phantom of hostility has affected even the everyday communication among various strata of the population. But are these matches substantially different from any other marital union?

An “ethno-chaudistic nation-state”

In recent research, the nation-state has been described along ethno-chaudistic lines and portrayed as a male dominated entity, whose social and moral coherence rests “on the readiness of its men to defend its borders and protect the purity of its women”, according to the anthropologist Vassiliki Neofotistos. She argues:

Ethno-nationalist ideology elevates women to powerful symbols of the nation, and predicates the honour of the group on the honour of its women, who need to remain chaste and reproduce an ethnically pure nation, and the masculinity of its men, who stand up for their women and aim to make men from a different ethno-national background appear inadequate.

Thus, up to a certain level, the ethno-national nation-state is viewed symbolically as a family, where male patriarchs take decisions and own the sexuality and fertility of their women. This theoretical framework, which can be referred to as symbolic patriarchy, was sadly all too evident in gender relations during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, manifesting itself in many ways including the rape of women belonging to “the other” tribe.

No overarching master plan

The phenomenon of Albanians marrying Serbs to ensure the reproduction of the Serbian population clearly does not add up to the above-described framework of symbolic patriarchy. There have thus been (conscious or less conscious) efforts to try and make it fit: Serbian hard-liners argue that the Catholic (and thus Christian, not Muslim) Albanians from the north of the country are not in fact Albanians, but “albanised Serbian women”, therefore maintaining that the purity of these unions is in fact preserved. On the other hand, Albanian media suggest that Serbian authorities had a secret design of ensuring continuity of survival for the Serbian nation by exploiting Albanian “wombs”.

This could not be farther from the truth. In fact, most of the Albanian women interviewed were experiencing great difficulties in getting Serbian citizenship – an absolutely crucial detail for these families, as both parents are required to hold Serbian citizenship if they are to qualify for much needed childcare assistance from the state. The decision to get married to the “enemy” – if it can still be seen as such – appears thus as a very personal choice, not guided nor steered by any overarching master plan.

Deeply personal decisions
Digging into the motives of those who decided to tie the knot reinforces this initial assessment. Most of the men looking for an Albanian wife were above the age of 37 and up to 50 years old. But what about the women? Out of the 13 cases examined, age played a factor only in four cases. If an Albanian girl living in a village has not been married up to the age of 24, her chances to find an Albanian single man are indeed very low. But there were other motives too. Two of the women had experienced terrible domestic violence, while other girls were still young, but lived in extreme circumstances. One had turned down two marriage proposals in Albania because she deemed Albanian men to be too jealous and longed for a more independent life – only to find out that the Serbian man she chose was the most possessive one in the village ("What can you do – destiny is destiny!", she said). Stereotypes are crushed as well, as the men realise that Albanian women are not that docile after all. “Who said Albanian girls are obedient? This one is not, I can tell you! We fight all day long. Of course, during the night it is another story…” In synthesis – age certainly plays a factor, troubled domestic conditions too, but most of the reasons are deeply personal and there is in most instances genuine affection and understanding between the partners.

Everyday life’s triumph

There is thus no way of reducing the phenomenon to a pattern of reasons or, even more laughably, to a pre-conceived political plan of state repopulation. Real life circumstances end up imposing themselves over the abstract rhetoric of politics. That is when symbolic patriarchy, forcefully trying to link up social behaviour to a conceptual notion of nation-state, needs to give way to the real patriarchy, which is nothing else than the traditional family structure. And when the existence of real patriarchy faces the danger of extinction, the rigid borders of nationalist ideology are easily overcome. It is everyday life’s triumph over the seemingly untouchable barriers of political ideology. Once this fact becomes widely accepted, such marriage trends might well become the norm – and Vera will then need to find another business opportunity to pursue.

The anthropologist Dr Marija Mandić Ilić, of the Balkanological Institute, SANU, participated in the fieldwork conducted on 2-10 May 2013 in Serbia. This fieldwork trip was partially supported by the Balkanological Institute.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of LSEE Research on SEE, nor of the London School of Economics. The name of certain respondents have been changed to preserve anonymity.

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