Nationalities Papers (2024), 1–10
doi:10.1017/nps.2024.62

STATE OF THE FIELD

Dynamics of Intermarriage in Europe

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Abstract
This article analyses the scholarly results concerning the social phenomenon of intermarriage. It specifically focuses on the similarities and differences in the latter in Europe, between migrants and host society members, and between national minorities and majorities. The study shows that while intermarriage between migrants and host society members is often seen as a vehicle for bridging social gaps and promoting social cohesion, intermarriages between national minorities and majorities is more likely to lead to erosion of minority identities and cultural traits. Common challenges faced by intermarried couples include resistance from family members and bureaucratic obstacles, with gender dynamics playing a crucial role, particularly in traditional societies where women often bear the brunt of cultural assimilation. Intermarriage also promotes the perspective of the integrative nature of nation-states without requiring intervention by the states themselves. The article underscores the importance of deepening the discourse on intermarriage and focusing on the impact of the latter on both migrant and national minority communities through both quantitative analyses and qualitative approaches. This may improve the understanding of the transformative potential and challenges of these unions.

Keywords: intermarriage; national minorities; majorities; migrants; host society; cultural differences; Europe

Introduction

Intermarriage refers to the union between partners from different ethnic/national, racial, religious, or cultural backgrounds. The multifaceted nature of interracial and interethnic marriage, which encompasses the concept of "mixedness," requires delving into the complexities of the integration of various national, racial, cultural, and religious identities within society (Gordon 1964; Rodríguez-García 2015; Osanami Törngren et al. 2021). These unions extend beyond personal relationships, reflecting broader socio-cultural dynamics, and serving as critical indicators of societal integration, assimilation, and acceptance among different groups (Song 2009). The transformative potential of interethnic marriage is wider than its effects on the couple, significantly impacting community and societal structures. By fostering communication, mutual respect, and understanding, these unions may promote social cohesion and challenge longstanding divisions (Gorden 1964; Osanami Törngren 2016; Cerchiaro 2023). Mixed marriages also serve as a gauge of the relationship between different societal groups, highlighting the flexibility or rigidity of social boundaries (Gordon 1964). A prevalence of mixed marriages indicates a majority group's openness towards minority communities, potentially leading to the blending or dilution of the latter's distinct cultural characteristics (Schoen, Wooldridge, and Thomas 1989). Thus, these marriages not only enhance social cohesion but also reflect the assimilation patterns of minority groups, signifying the societal

endorsement of diversity and a rejection of entrenched prejudices (Smits 2010; Kiss 2018; Song 2009). To better understand and define who is involved in the unity of intermarriage, we apply Kymlicka's (2001) classification of minority groups into (1) immigrants who have left their original homelands and emigrated to another society (Kymlicka 2001, 31) and (2) national minorities which formed functioning societies in their historic homeland prior to being incorporated into a larger state (Kymlicka 2001, 23). We focus on unions between immigrants and host society members and national minorities and majorities in Europe.

In examining the phenomenon of intermarriage, we note that there is a significant disparity between the research focus concerning couples' backgrounds. The situation in countries with a high immigration flow has been extensively examined by researchers interested in intermarriage (Gordon 1964; Schwartz 1970; Song 2009; Rodríguez García 2015; Osanami Törngren 2016; Cerchiaro 2022), while intermarriage between national minorities and majorities (that is, people who share the same citizenship, but a different cultural and/ethnic background) has attracted less attention (Lendák-Kabók, 2024b). Thus, a comprehensive literature review of intermarriage in Europe (an immigrant-receiving continent with national minorities) can help present the main stands and differences between the abovementioned unions, illustrating how they are perceived and researched. We specifically focus on scholarly research about intermarriage involving immigrants and unions between members of majorities and national minorities, shedding light on the differences and commonalities in the perception and research of these unions. In relation to these two overarching strands, we will show that publications devoted to these two domains tend to address the topics of (a) integration and assimilation, (b) the conflicts and challenges faced by families involving intermarriage, and (c) gender dynamics in intermarriage.

The European Union's policies on movement and integration (Albertini et al. 2019) have created a distinct social and cultural milieu in which intermarriage occurs. These marriages in Europe are not just examples of personal choice but are embedded within broader narratives of regional integration, cultural exchange, and socio-political evolution. Eurostat data indicates that the number of intermarriages (that is, those where partners have different citizenship) is constantly growing due to migration flows and globalization. In some countries, such as Belgium, the Netherlands, and Sweden, the intermarriage rate has reached approximately 25%.[1] This means that intermarriage between partners of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds but the same citizenship (that is, intermarriage between national minorities and majorities) has remained mostly invisible from the perspective of Eurostat. However, the former has been researched and presented in various European contexts. Thus, this article aims to raise awareness of the different categories of intermarriage in Europe and to showcase the commonalities and differences between them. In the following section, we first present the literature on intermarriage from the perspective of migrants and members of the host society, continuing with the literature on intermarriage between national minorities and majorities. In both sections, the common strands in literature (integration/assimilation, conflict, and gender) are analyzed, starting with a presentation of statistical data on the rates of intermarriage in different countries in Europe. In the concluding part, we argue that intermarriage, while promoting social cohesion and mutual respect, poses significant challenges for cultural preservation, especially for minority communities.

Intermarriage and migration

Historically, Europe has experienced multiple migration waves that impacted the prevalence of intermarriage. Notably, following World War II (WWII), the encouragement of labor migration from Southern Europe and North Africa to Western Europe (WE) led to the formation of families between these migrants and the local population (Lucassen and Laarman 2009). Due to the attraction of wealth and perceived stability, migration is ongoing, as is measurable from the Eurostat 2021 data on mixed marriages.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.62 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Higher rates of intermarriage between migrants and host society members have been observed in France and the UK, contrasting with lower rates in Hungary and Bulgaria (González-Ferrer 2014). The factors that influence these disparities are migration policies, historical connections, the size of the immigrant communities, and sociocultural attitudes toward diversity (Kalmijn 1998). Nevertheless, migration opens up the possibility for intermarriage, which occurs at a different rate depending on the receptiveness of the society migrants arrive in and the social gap between the two groups (migrants and host society members). For example, Germany has witnessed an increase in "mixed" marriages between immigrants and natives (especially between Turks and Germans), which indicates that the gap between the two social groups has narrowed (Schroedter 2006). According to a study from 2011 conducted by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), around 16% of individuals in Germany with a Turkish background were married to non-migrant partners.[2] In France in the early 2010s, around 27% of individuals born in France to immigrant parents were married to non-migrant partners (Tribalat 2013). Similarly, in 2016, a report highlighted that individuals with a Moroccan or Turkish background in the Netherlands were in relationships with partners of Dutch descent in proportions of around 10–15%.[3] Further, data from the 2011 UK census indicated that intermarriage rates were highest, at around 12%, among the "White British" and "Black Caribbean" populations.[4]

These figures suggest that the rate of intermarriage is increasing, along with the focus on them, because mixed couples are acknowledged as microcosms for analyzing societal norms, prejudices, and social change (Song 2009; Rodríguez-García 2015). Mixed couples deviate to various degrees from societal norms and expectations of homogeneity, having multiple implications for societies (Cerchiaro 2022). In the literature on intermarriage between migrants and members of the host society, scholars highlight the prevalence of an integrationist perspective—that is, migrants are often considered aliens who want to integrate into the host society (Song 2009; Rodríguez-García 2015).

Various influences and impacts on the couple's identities occur in their endeavor to integrate. For example, Kovács (2015) argues that Chinese-Hungarian intermarriage in Hungary simultaneously creates social ties to different geographical localities, making the relationships and spouses in those relationships transnational. However, there is an "inverse" or "bidirectional" integration outcome for intermarried couples, whereby the majority partner becomes oriented toward the socio-cultural world of the immigrant spouse, or where the native member of the couple benefits from the cultural and structural integration of their immigrant partner (for example, in the areas of language acquisition, social networks, or labor incorporation) (Rodríguez-García et al. 2016, 242). It is worth noting that intermarriage also impacts offspring, as they often display broader cultural understanding and bilingualism but may face identity challenges as they are part of two separate cultures and heritages (Rodríguez-García 2015).

As intermarriage disrupts societal norms in different ways (Rodríguez-García 2015), societal responses to intermarriage vary, with increasing acceptance but pockets of resistance; thus, these unions face multiple and significant challenges. On a societal level, couples may encounter bureaucratic obstacles and discrimination (Song 2009; Bail 2015), which makes their integration more challenging. Moreover, in-depth investigations have revealed how partners may encounter social discrimination that indicates how their relationship is perceived as a source of risk to national identity and social cohesion (Fresnoza-Flot 2017; Rodriguez-García et al. 2016; Lendák-Kabók 2024a; Song 2019). At the same time, intermarriage changes the structure of society in the direction of unification without any intervention by the state. This means that intermarriage is important in the maintenance and creation of nation-states throughout Europe.

In the Netherlands, data show how the marriages of mixed couples are more likely to end in divorce than endogamous unions; this increased risk is attributed to various factors such as socioeconomic disparities (Goldstein and Harknett 2006), cultural differences (Kalmijn et al. 2005), and familial disagreements, including the non-acceptance of a partner by the spouse's family (Milewski and Kulu 2014). In the Netherlands, divorce is more common if one of the partners is

https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.62 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Dutch and the other is a non-Western immigrant (Kalmijn and Van Tubergen 2010). This is also true for Sweden, where unions between a Swedish-born and a foreign-born partner or between partners from different foreign countries are associated with a higher risk of divorce (Dribe and Lundh 2012). Data on France and the UK are less comprehensive. However, indications of higher divorce rates in binational or mixed-ethnicity couples have been observed there as well, influenced by socioeconomic conditions and age differences (Régnard 2014; Zhand and Van Hook 2009).

Beyond the risk of divorce, these mixed marriages often do not lead to societal harmony or cohesion. Alternating Song's (2009) observation of their integrative potential, such unions can become sources of social tension at both the societal and family levels. Members of mixed couples frequently face social discrimination, particularly from their families, who may perceive their group identity as being under threat (Rodríguez-García et al. 2016). Family rejection often stems from negative stereotypes and prejudices about the origin, phenotype, religion, gender, or social class of partners, with certain social groups exhibiting stronger disapproval than others (ibid.). A study that examined intermarriage in three European countries with differing religious backgrounds (immigrant Muslim and European Christian) highlighted persistent social barriers, such as a fear of declining social prestige within the host society's family upon the integration of a Muslim spouse, demonstrating the complex interplay of class and ethnic background (Cerchiaro 2022). Additionally, societal attitudes also differ, with some demonstrating more conservative attitudes toward intermarriage. For instance, citizens of countries such as Poland and Hungary have shown resistance to intermarriage, particularly with non-European groups (Lanzieri 2012).

Intermarriage is also associated with a prominent gender perspective, leading to different marital patterns between men and women. Generally, women are much more likely to enter exogamous marriages than men (Klein 2001; Song 2009). For women, intermarriage can be a means of social integration (Jääskeläinen 2003, 48); for men, personal attraction—having an attractive or even "exotic" partner with a different racial or ethnic background—may be a decisive factor (Klein 2001). Focusing on masculinity and migration, Cerchiaro (2022) demonstrated how migrant Muslim men who marry non-Muslim women in Europe are more likely to be opposed by their families-in-law, especially if they have a lower socio-economic status, revealing the relevance of social class together with gender and religion in explaining the stronger social disapproval of these unions. This fact is also connected to growing Islamophobia in Europe (Kallis 2015).

Intermarriage between national minorities and majorities

In contrast to migrants who voluntarily leave their homeland and become members of different societies, national minorities and majorities have a different background and power relations in their unions. The creation and break up of empires and unions across Europe have created national minorities and majorities, leading to historical tensions between communities and partners of different ethnicities in mixed marriages (Dumănescu 2017). These historical tensions significantly shape the patterns and perceptions of interethnic marriage in the region (Pichler 2011), and instead of a process of integration (as marriage between a migrant and a host society member is perceived), intermarriage between national minorities and majorities may lead to different patterns of acculturation and assimilation (see Sokolovska 2008; Kiss 2016; Kovály and Ferenc 2020; Lendák-Kabók 2024a).

For example, Kiss (2016) argues that in Transylvania, members of ethnically mixed couples are constantly forced to choose between two ethnically marked identities. "This occurs when choices must be made between institutionally defined and ethnically marked alternatives" (Brubaker et al. 2018, 311). Due to the social power asymmetry between majorities and minorities, the choice often gravitates towards the majority identity, which results in ethnic minority group erosion and endangers ethnocultural reproduction (ibid.). Since there is no overarching statistical data about intermarriage between national minorities and majorities in Europe (in contrast to the data on migrant-host society members' intermarriage), some regional examples may exemplify the data on

https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.62 Published online by Cambridge University Press

migration and intermarriage. For example, the proportion of Hungarians in mixed marriages in Transylvania has experienced notable changes over time. In 1966, 15.5% of Hungarians married outside their ethnic group, slightly increasing to 17.9% on average between 1992 and 2015. A significant rise occurred during the last three decades of the 20th century, with the proportion of mixed marriages increasing from 9.8% in 1977 to 12.9% in 1992, peaking at 13.6% in 2002, and then slightly decreasing to 13.0% in 2011. Between 1992 and 2015, 22.5% of Hungarians in urban areas who married chose partners from a different ethnic background. The data also reveal a higher divorce rate among ethnically mixed marriages, with 17.6% ending in divorce, compared to 8% for ethnically homogenous marriages. This suggests that mixed marriages have become more common but face greater challenges (Kiss 2018).

Statistical data is provided in an article by Sokolovska (2008), which extensively analyses ethnically mixed marriages in Vojvodina (Serbia), covering the period between 1956 and 2004. The data reveals that the proportion of ethnically mixed marriages varied widely over this period. For instance, in 1962, 23.7% of marriages were ethnically mixed, which declined to 17.2% in 1971, which increased to 22.5% by 1981. However, the trend fluctuated, reaching 21.9% in 1991 and eventually stabilized at around 23.1% in 2002. In terms of the divorce rate, mixed marriages exhibited greater instability than ethnically homogenous ones. Specifically, 17.6% of ethnically mixed marriages ended in divorce, in contrast to 8% of ethnically homogenous marriages. This trend highlights couples' social and cultural challenges in mixed marriages in Vojvodina, reflecting broader societal dynamics and integration issues within the region (Sokolovska 2008).

The situation is similar in Slovakia and results in high rates of assimilation, especially in families in which grandparents lived in ethnically mixed marriages (Csepeli et al. 2002). In Transcarpathia, regarding intermarriage between Ukrainians and Hungarians, the characteristics of dispersion (such as the incomplete system of minority institutions and the dominance of the majority language) result in strategic decisions that favor the majority (Kovály and Ferenc 2020). This promotes the gradual decline of minority groups (Barth 1969). Minority communities also have their own exclusion patterns, resulting in the shrinkage of the community. As Öllős (2012) suggests, mixed-nationality individuals born into intermarriage who do not identify openly and exclusively as members of a minority community may be denied recognition of their minority affiliation. Hărăguş (2017), in her study of mixed marriages in Transylvania, points out that tensions inevitably occur between the families of potential spouses who do not want to accept a young family member's spouse with a different ethnic background. Tensions may arise between couples when discussing political issues concerning the spouses' respective nations (Brubaker et al. 2018). For this reason, many couples of diverse ethnic origins avoid discussing political or ethnic topics (Brubaker et al. 2018).

During specific political periods of some post-WWII countries in Europe, like socialist Yugoslavia, intermarriage increased, influenced by compulsory civil marriage, urbanization, and education (Petrović 1968), as well as by the similarity of the cultural traditions of the peoples and states from which the spouses originated (Botev 1994). The socialist state initially encouraged intermarriage to help build a unified Yugoslav nation (Petrović 1985). In Yugoslavia, mixed marriages were seen as a potential pathway to diminishing ethnic differences and fostering unity. By 1968, one in nine marriages in Yugoslavia was mixed, serving as proof of socialist laws and encouragement to promote such unions. In rural areas, only 4.9% of marriages were mixed compared to 28.2% in urban areas, indicating the role of urbanization in facilitating interethnic unions. Between 1960 and 1962, mixed marriages constituted 12.9% of all marriages, with a significant proportion occurring among highly educated individuals, one-quarter of whose unions were mixed. However, despite these figures, ethnically homogeneous marriages remained predominant, comprising 88.5% of all marriages in the early 1960s. The persistence of ethnic divisions was evident, as mixed marriages were more frequent in urban centers and among educated populations but less stable overall, with one-third of divorces associated with mixed marriage attributed to ethnic differences (Burić 2020).

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Some states, like Bosnia and Herzegovina, were more diverse than others, like Slovenia, the latter had their national minority communities (such as the Italians and Hungarians), which were not part of the constitutive nations of Yugoslavia, but who entered into intermarriage with the Slovenes as the majority nation (Sedmak 2002). Generally, religious differences played the most significant role in intermarriage decisions within Yugoslavia; the division between Orthodox Christianity, Islam, and Catholicism significantly impacted marital choices (Petrović 1985; Burić 2020). Following the fall of the socialist system in Yugoslavia and during the 1990s Yugoslav Wars, intermarriages were subject to instability and political scrutiny (Burić 2020; Lendák-Kabók 2024b). A recurring point in research related to the Yugoslav wars, which highlights the significance of uncovering lived experiences, is the nuance that should be associated with the "ethnic hatred" approach, which is typically an oversimplification of the phenomenon and, in some cases, outright incorrect (Szabó 2019, 54); this claim is exactly contested by the prevalence of mixed marriages.

In the former USSR, as internal migration was encouraged, many ethnic Russians emigrated to non-Russian-speaking states like Estonia, which led to an increase in the number of mixed marriages. However, Estonian-Russian intermarriages did not happen without controversy or resistance. Estonian mothers-in-law were often against marriage with Russians during the period the USSR existed, fearing the loss of Estonian ethnic markers and opening doors to Sovietization (Lember 2014). By contrast, Russian families looked more favorably at Estonian spouses and perceived the benefits of intermarriage into an Estonian family, which they considered a more prestigious nation than Russia (ibid.). Spouses in such unions usually avoided raising controversial political topics.

Brubaker et al. (2018) identified a similar phenomenon from research conducted in Cluj (Transylvania) long after the formal disappearance of socialism. The author claims this was due to the cultural othering that may occur during marital strife, aggravating interpersonal arguments based on partners' different ethnically based political views (ibid.).

Intermarriage between the Roma minority and the majority population in Europe is an important topic from the perspective of intermarriage between national minorities and majorities. As the biggest minority in Europe, the Roma's status in Europe is very unfavorable, especially when it comes to intermarriage. Roma people are stigmatized and discriminated against; the attitude in Europe towards Roma people is fundamentally racist, characterized by systemic exclusion, discrimination, and violence that is perpetuated by both state and societal actors across the continent (Fekete 2014), thus the frequency of intermarriage between Roma and the majority society is very low in almost every European country. For instance, in Hungary, despite having a significant Roma minority, intermarriage rates between the Roma and non-Roma populations are relatively minimal, indicating social division (Szabó 2021). Szabó (2021) also notes that the probability of forming a mixed Roma/non-Roma relationship is greater if the male partner is older, if the partners have higher educational attainment, and if they live in a cohabiting relationship (not a marital one), which indicates a looser union, making it easier for the male partner to leave. Like Hungary, Romania has a significant Roma population, and intermarriage rates between Roma and non-Roma are also relatively low (Sandu 2005). This is also true for the Czech Republic; intermarriage rates between the Roma and non-Roma Czechs are minimal, reflecting ongoing social and economic differences (Drbohlav and Dzúrová 2007). Besides religion, socioeconomic disparities, especially between the Roma and non-Roma populations, significantly influence intermarriage dynamics. Interactions between these groups are infrequent due to stark socioeconomic and cultural differences (Szabó 2021), which demonstrate that besides ethnic background, the class issue is also prominent.

As for the gender dimension of intermarriage between national minorities and majorities, a gender-focused survey in the former Yugoslavia (1950–1981) showed varying interethnic marriage rates among different ethnic groups. Vojvodina (an autonomous province in Serbia), in particular, witnessed an increase in interethnic marriage involving Serb women (Sokolovska 2008). A survey of interethnic marriages revealed higher levels of exogamy among men than women within

https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.62 Published online by Cambridge University Press

conservative, traditional ethnic communities, such as Serb, Turkish, Macedonian, Montenegrin, Romanian, and Albanian.

Moreover, studies conducted in Vojvodina showed that women are more likely to marry outside their minority ethnic group, often sacrificing their ethnic identity for a higher social status with a Serb man from the majority community (Ilić [Mandić] 2010, 44; Ladancsik 2020). Such unions reinforce the claim that, in an interethnic marriage, women are more likely than men to give up their ethnic identity, reinforcing patriarchal relations (Ilić [Mandić] 2010, 44). The reason for the greater willingness of minority women to intermarry can be attributed to their striving to secure higher social status for their children, who will be less likely to be discriminated against if they have a Serbian name and if they are educated in the majority language (Ladancsik, 2020). This suggests the existence of patriarchal norms, which are notably more prominent in more traditional environments. Women entering intermarriage associated with the latter phenomenon are more likely than men to abandon their mother tongues and accommodate their husband's traditional values, especially concerning the raising of their children (Lendák-Kabók 2024a). Some exceptions exist, and certain ethnic group boundaries seem to be more rigid: an ethnological survey of interethnic marriages in Bulgaria demonstrated that women from minority groups hardly ever marry outside their ethnic group, but this is not the case with minority men (Ilić [Mandić] 2010).

Concluding remarks

This article has analyzed the latest scholarship on intermarriage, defined as a union between partners of different ethnic/racial, religious, and/or cultural backgrounds. Specifically, it focuses on findings about intermarriage from Europe, focusing on intermarriage between migrants and host society members and national minorities and majorities. The research identified several commonalities regarding intermarriage's effects on society: a prominent topic is social integration for migrants and acculturation and/or assimilation for national minorities. Intermarriage between migrants and host society members is often seen as integrative, bridging social gaps and promoting societal cohesion. The literature on these unions reflects the transformative potential of mixed marriages to enhance mutual respect and understanding between different cultural groups. On the other hand, intermarriage between national minorities and majorities involves a different dynamic. Scholarship on these unions often highlights assimilation patterns, whereby the minority partner may gradually lose their distinct cultural and linguistic traits. This can result in the erosion of minority identities and endanger ethnocultural reproduction, highlighting the critical challenges involved in preserving cultural diversity. Individuals involved in both strands of intermarriage face similar conflicts and challenges. Elderly family members often reject new family members from different racial, religious, and class backgrounds (such as migrants), especially if the new family member is a significantly different male. This is true for national minority-majority intermarriage, where the external family or the couple may be challenged due to complex historical facts and political views. Another important aspect is gender dynamics within intermarriage, which is a cross-cutting issue in both strands of intermarriage. Women, particularly in traditional societies, often bear the brunt of cultural and linguistic assimilation. Their experiences and choices—and their expectations—may lead to significant shifts within minority communities, affecting linguistic continuity, cultural preservation, and community cohesion. Intermarriage also promotes the perspective of the integrative nature of nation-states without requiring intervention by the states themselves. Given the challenges and dynamics identified here, it is important to continue the discourse on European intermarriage with a focus on the impact of the latter on both migrant and national minority communities from the perspective of the country they are living in and the respective communities. This employs quantitative analyses and novel qualitative approaches that delve into the personal narratives and experiences of intermarried couples, their families, and their friends. Understanding these dynamics can generate a deeper insight into the challenges, opportunities, and transformative potential of these unions within societies. By focusing on the effects of

https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.62 Published online by Cambridge University Press

intermarriage on minority communities, a richer, more nuanced understanding of integration, cultural diversity, and social cohesion in an increasingly interconnected world can be created.

Acknowledgements. We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their work and dedication, as their comments greatly improved the article.

Financial support. The research was supported by Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellowship, Grant Number: 101068320 – IMEI – HORIZON-MSCA-2021-PF-01.

Disclosure. None.

Notes

1 Eurostat (2021). Marriages by country of birth of bride and groom, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/product/view/demo_marcb, accessed June 23, 2024.
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Cite this article: Lendák-Kabók, Karolina, and Antal Örkény. 2024. "Dynamics of Intermarriage in Europe". *Nationalities Papers*: 1–10, doi:10.1017/nps.2024.62