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Conclusion: The Politics of Numbers – Censuses in the Post-Yugoslav States

Soeren Keil

Reader, Canterbury Christ Church University
soeren.keil@canterbury.ac.uk

<http://www.suedosteuropa.uni-graz.at/cse/en/keil>
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Conclusion: The Politics of Numbers – Censuses in the Post-Yugoslav States

Soeren Keil*

This conclusion poses a number of questions related to policy issues and the censuses in the post-Yugoslav states. It is argued that censuses are always more than just a technical counting exercise. Census discussions in Western Europe tend to focus on regional funding, infrastructure support and long-term policy planning, and can be as contested and heated as questions over identity, religion and mother tongue in the post-Yugoslav states. However, identity-related questions in an area in which identity is still in flux and in which fundamental demographic changes have taken place recently, prevent any focus on more policy-oriented discussions. In their EU integration process, all of the post-Yugoslav countries will have to concentrate on issues such as economic development, sustainable infrastructure planning, budgeting within the strict rules of the most recent EU agreements and hence policy discussions should be at the forefront of the debates about the results of the censuses. Instead, discussions over who is counted and how remain of key importance in all countries (even those that have joined the EU), and demonstrate unconsolidated nation-building projects.

Keywords: Census taking, post-Yugoslav states, EU enlargement, Ethnicity, nation-building

Introduction

As the papers in this special issue have demonstrated, censuses have been highly contested in the post-Yugoslav states. From the question of the “erased” persons in Slovenia to problems related to the inclusion of minorities such as the Roma, and especially issues related to inter-ethnic relations in very diverse societies – censuses remain divisive, create conflict and contribute to new tensions.¹

Yet, there is little disagreement that censuses also matter in practical terms. Nobody, as Pieter Everaers points out, questions the usefulness of a census as a tool to inform policy-makers about future policy planning in relation to schooling, hospitals, regional development, budget allocation, etc. Indeed, the usefulness of information about how many people live in a state and which

* Soeren Keil is Reader in Politics and International Relations at Canterbury Christ Church University in the United Kingdom. His research interests include the political systems of the post-Yugoslav states, EU enlargement policy and conflict resolution in divided societies. He is the author of “Multinational Federalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina” (2013) and the Co-editor (with Valery Perry) of “State-Building and Democratization in Bosnia and Herzegovina” (forthcoming 2015).

¹ Visoka, Gëzim and Elvin Gjevori. 2013. Census Politics and Ethnicity in the Western Balkans. *East European Politics* 29(4), 479-98.

regions they live in (and also how the population has changed over time – for example through migration), are indeed vital for policy-making. Reliable data are of key importance in decisions on complex questions, including budget allocation and regional development issues. Having said this, what is often forgotten is that these policy decisions can have far-reaching consequences. Decisions over who gets what kind of resources, where hospitals and schools are being built and which regions deserve special financial support are deeply political – and contested, even in the established liberal democracies in Western Europe. Censuses, in other words, are *never* just a technical exercise; they have far-reaching implications for future policy- and decision-making.

In the post-Yugoslav states, there has been a stronger focus on identity-related questions, in particular in relation to ethnicity/nationality, religion, mother tongue and in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) also over the question of citizenship. These questions add an additional layer of complexity to census exercises, because their use is often unclear and in fact is mostly linked to ethnic engineering, confirming the dominance of one group in a territory over another, or ensuring certain rights associated to the numbers represented in the census. What the strong focus on these questions demonstrates is that identity is still a flexible category in the post-Yugoslav states, though there are strong incentives to pressure a more rigid personal affiliation that in turn would enlarge and strengthen certain groups. In the most extreme case, Montenegro, there have been fundamental changes in who declares as Montenegrin or as Serbian in the last 20 years.² At the same time population changes resulting from refugees and internally displaced people in the recent wars, as well as internal and external migration, also play a much more important role in the post-Yugoslav states than in many other Western European states.

This Conclusion is focussed on the policy implications of the most recent censuses in the post-Yugoslav states. It will proceed in three steps. In the first part, the contested nature of a census will be described in more detail, before the focus shifts again to the post-Yugoslav states and the sources of contestation in this region. The final part will look at policy implications and lessons learned.

The Contested Nature of Censuses

In their study of censuses and their political impact, Kertzner and Arel have highlighted some of the issues related to population counts.³ They demonstrate that censuses are particularly contested in diverse societies, in post-colonial countries and in post-war states. Yet, their work clearly highlights that in the game of numbers as to who is included and what categories are being used, there are *always* contested issues, even in relatively homogenous societies. In Germany, the announcement of a new census in 2011 resulted in numerous interesting and contested results. For once, big cities such as Berlin and Hamburg had a lower overall population than previously assumed. This does not only affect their own budget planning and tax income in the near future, but

² See for example: Džankić, Jelena. 2014. Reconstructing the Meaning of Being “Montenegrin.” *Slavic Review* 73(2). 347-71.

³ Kertzner, David I. and Dominique Arel (eds.). 2002. *Census and Identity: The Politics of Race, Ethnicity, and Language in National Censuses*. Cambridge University Press.

will also have consequences for their financial subsidiaries, which result from fiscal equalisation payments. Furthermore, the German census demonstrated that Germany is relying on immigration for its population growth, and that a greater proportion of the population have immigrated into Germany or have an immigration background.⁴ While some right-wing groups have used these results to demonstrate the threat immigration poses and warn of the loss of German identity, cities such as Bremerhaven have filed legal complaints challenging the results of the census complaining about under-counting, consequently fearing less financial support.⁵ Discussions about intra-German migration, particularly from the East to the richer Western parts of the country, have also surrounded the census, as have further discussions about the financial consequences and its impact on the distribution of seats in the Bundesrat, Germany's second chamber of Parliament.⁶ Hence, even in a more homogenous and well-established liberal democracy such as Germany, the census has had a big impact and has been contested by different actors.

The situation in countries like Belgium and Spain is even more complicated, as they have a higher degree of ethnic and linguistic diversity. While it is forbidden by law to ask certain questions related to identity in Brussels for example, in Spain groups such as the Catalans and the Basques use the census as a tool to confirm their absolute majority in their "homelands" and confirm demands for autonomy and even secession. Pieter Everaers is right in his article, when he claims that similar discussions about the contested nature of censuses that were observed in the post-Yugoslav states can also be found in other European and non-European countries. Censuses, in short, are always more than a simple population count. While often labelled as a simple technical exercise, they contribute to putting the population of a country in certain pre-prepared patterns (this is most visible in terms of ethnicity and identity, but also includes social categories and patterns related to employment).⁷ This is why it is important to not only look at the use of census data, but at the way in which census questions are designed. The design of a question, – whether it is an open question or uses prepared (some would say limited) categories – the choice of categories offered, the languages in which people can fill in the census, and the methods used for holding the census (administrative data collection, interviews, sending out questionnaires, etc.) all have an impact on the usefulness and the role of a census in nation-building. Ultimately, this is what it is all about: censuses are forms of nation-building⁸ used to confirm who is in a majority in a given territory, who is a minority and which rights and resources should be allocated to different groups. Of course data are important for policy planning, but this policy planning in itself is a form of nation-building. A key criteria for a

⁴ Bielicki, Jan. 2013. *Einwanderungsrepublik Deutschland*. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 1. June 2013 (accessed : 03 November 2015).

⁵ Available [here](#).

⁶ N.N. 2013. *Bevölkerungsrückgang löst Streit ums Geld aus*. *Die Zeit*, 31. May 2013 (accessed: 03 November 2015).

⁷ The author remembers the 2011 census round in the United Kingdom. When asked about his employment status he was puzzled by the lack of flexibility in the existing categories, as he was working part-time as a teaching assistant, while also being a self-employed researcher at the same time. There were a lot of discussions which boxes to tick and how to describe this employment status.

⁸ Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

nation is not only a shared history, but also a common vision for the future. In addition to demonstrating a certain degree of homogeneity, census data provide a great framework for planning and implementing a common vision for the future.⁹ This form of nation-building, in connection with state-building/consolidation and Europeanisation is particularly visible in the post-Yugoslav states, to which this conclusion now turns.

Censuses in the Post-Yugoslav states: Nation-building, state-consolidation and Europeanisation

In the Introduction to this special issue, three common themes amongst the papers are identified: the link of census results and public policy planning, changing and shifting identities and contested issues within censuses. These themes demonstrate that despite the diversity of approaches and topics discussed in each of the post-Yugoslav states' census, there are still a number of similarities they share. This can be explained by the complex transition that all of these countries have been going through in recent years – the shift to becoming independent, building efficient and democratic structures and of course the process of European integration.¹⁰ This rather complicated mix of different transitions has been labelled as EU Member State Building – an involvement of the EU in the consolidation and EU integration of the post-Yugoslav states.¹¹ Censuses are of key importance in this EU Member State Building process. As all authors in this special issue have pointed out, the EU played a vital role in the preparation and initiation of the censuses, in some cases it provided financial assistance for the census exercise, expertise on data collection and data processing, and, in some cases (Bosnia and Kosovo) more direct engagement through an International Monitoring Mission.

The EU's involvement can therefore be classified in three main areas: (a) active state-building by supporting the establishment and training of the government statistical offices; (b) Europeanisation by focusing on norm adoption and providing a European framework and European standards for the census exercise; and (c) democratization by highlighting the importance of the legitimacy of the census and the proper use of census data in the decision-making process. From the perspective of the post-Yugoslav states, a number of observations can be made. As Anna-Lena Hoh and Damir Josipović highlight in the cases of Croatia and Slovenia respectively, the census exercise was not only about providing good data for policy planning, but also for proving that both countries are “good” EU Member States that can fulfil their obligations as members. In particular, Hoh points out that Croatia's census in this respect was also seen as an example for the other Western Balkan countries. In the cases of Montenegro and Serbia, Vuković and Nikolić/Trimajova explain how census taking formed part of the EU integration and accession process of these countries. The ability to hold a census, despite regional and identity conflicts in

⁹ For a further discussion on nation-building and nationalism see: Hobsbawm, Eric. 1992. *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁰ On the link between these, see: Keil, Soeren. 2013. Europeanization, state-building and democratization in the Western Balkans. *Nationalities Papers* 41(3), 343-53.

¹¹ For more on EU Member State Building, see Keil, Soeren and Zeynep Arkan. (eds.). 2015. *The EU and Member State Building – European Foreign Policy in the Western Balkans*. Basingstoke: Routledge.

both countries, was seen as an important milestone in their ability to adopt EU law and implement complex European regulations. For Kosovo, Bosnia and Macedonia, the census exercise demonstrated their long road towards state-consolidation, and persistent questions related to ethnicity, citizenship and belonging. It is not surprising that in these three countries the census was most contested, especially in relation to issues of nationality/ethnicity, religion and mother tongue. All three countries remain inherently weak, characterised by political systems which have been influenced by external intervention, and by identity groups that remain contested and fluid.¹² In short, they are unconsolidated states that are still internally and externally contested.

This is clearly reflected in the census exercise, most drastically in Macedonia where questions over methodology and data use resulted in the failure of the latest attempt to hold a census. In Bosnia and Kosovo, too, there are continued pressures on state institutions and territorial integrity. Kosovo's census remains contested, as a large portion of the Serb population (especially, but not only, in the North) has boycotted the census, because they do not, as Musaj argues, recognise the legitimacy of the institutions of Kosovo to organise such a population count. In Bosnia, it took nearly 20 years after the end of the conflict to hold a census, and even when it was organised in 2013, it was neither a smooth, nor a technical issue. Not only have different political and religious groups contested the results before they are even published; but as Valery Perry demonstrates, it remains to be seen how the results of the census will be used for public policy-making.

The nexus of state-and nation-building, Europeanisation and democratization in the post-Yugoslav states has had a particular impact on the censuses in these countries. While all countries tried to prove their ability to hold a technical counting exercise according to European standards, in many cases this was overshadowed by questions over who is counted, how is the population count done and most importantly, how will the data be used for policy-making. All papers highlight that there have been issues of contestation, and severe effects on inter-ethnic relations, which in some cases have worsened as a result of the census exercise. While the EU, as Pieter Everaers demonstrates, can generally be satisfied with the ability of the states to hold a census, there is nevertheless a growing recognition that these population counts have contributed to contested decisions, and will certainly contribute to contested and problematic policies. It is therefore worth looking at some of the lessons learnt from these censuses.

Policy implications and lessons learnt

The discussion above has demonstrated that the censuses in the post-Yugoslav states raise a number of interesting issues, both from an academic point of view and for future policy planning.

As for the academic issues, the link between state-building, Europeanisation and unconsolidated nation-building projects has been highlighted in numerous

¹² Keil, Soeren. 2015. Power-sharing Success and Failures in the Western Balkans, in *State-Building and Democratization in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, edited by Keil, Soeren and Valery Perry. Farnham: Ashgate, 193-212.

papers, and especially the relationship of censuses to nation-building and consolidation deserves further examination in academic literature.¹³ Furthermore, the use of censuses as tools of state-building has been demonstrated. Highlighting ethnic homogeneity, changing population patterns and deciding who is part of a polity and who is not, who has what status and what rights are connected to this – these are just some of the questions which remain of key importance in the post-Yugoslav states. The results of the most recent violent conflicts in the 1990s are still being felt in many countries, most visibly in Bosnia and Kosovo. Unresolved issues over ethnic relations have influenced population counts in Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro. Further research on this topic promises to tell us more about censuses and state-building, but also about ongoing nation-building projects and the consolidation of multi-ethnic states, especially after violent conflict.¹⁴ Finally, the European dimension cannot be underestimated. While EU policies do not require questions on identity, the EU did not effectively dissuade or prevent countries from asking these questions, or even ask political elites to justify the inclusion of these questions. Further, as the EU provided much financial support for the censuses, the fact that EU money supported censuses in which non-essential questions came to dominate the public discourse could be a cause for concern.

The EU enlargement process is in many aspects also a large technical exercise, strengthening state capacity and administrative capabilities. Censuses are the key, not only because they themselves are seen as a technical exercise, but also because of their influence on future decision-making. In the post-Yugoslav states, there has been a strong focus on identity-related issues. It remains to be seen if there will be more focused policy debates once the results of the most recent census round will be fully implemented in policy formulation and decision-making.

In terms of policy implications, one major lesson learnt (or perhaps, confirmed) is that censuses are never just technical exercises. Their design, the methods used and their consequences are *political*. This is not only the case in the countries discussed in this special issue; but it is of special importance for these countries. It certainly was a mistake to ever regard these censuses as simple counting exercises to provide data for policy planning. The implications and consequences of these censuses are far-reaching, from worsened inter-ethnic relations in Croatia, to new political and religious mobilisation in Bosnia; from questions over minority community funding in Kosovo to the failure of census taking in Macedonia, political issues will continue to dominate the agenda in the post-Yugoslav states, and these are strongly linked to the census round in 2011.

Could anything have been done differently? Certainly Slovenia's move towards an electronic census based on aggregating different existing registers is an alternative to the standard census interview and can prevent the dominance of

¹³ For a more recent discussion on this topic, see Bieber, Florian. 2015. The Construction of National Identity and its Challenges in Post-Yugoslav Censuses. *Social Science Quarterly* 96(3), 873-902.

¹⁴ For a discussion on some of these issues, see Džankić, Jelena. 2015. *Citizenship in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Montenegro – Effects of Statehood and Identity Challenges*. Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate.

identity-related issues in a traditional census exercise. However, it remains questionable if countries like Bosnia and Kosovo (and even Macedonia) have the administrative capacity and trustworthy data systems needed to be able to implement a population count based on different registers. One way to prevent the focus on identity-related questions and new tensions amongst different groups would be an insistence from the EU and other financial supporters to avoid these questions altogether. This, however, would be problematic, because as the papers on Croatia and Macedonia have demonstrated, minority rights are often connected to a certain share in the population, which is assessed based on census data. Having said this, it is a completely flawed assumption that censuses ever truly reflect the ethnic composition of a country. Not only are some groups continuously undercounted (such as the Roma), but boycotts (Kosovo), questions over diaspora involvement (Croatia and Macedonia) and shifting self-identification (Montenegro) have all resulted in census results which provide a picture, but *not the real picture*, of ethnic composition in these countries. Identity remains a fluctuating category in these new states that were born out of violent conflict and remain involved in complex state-building and nation-building projects. This is something that the census cannot take into account. But this is also the reason why the results should be analysed with care, and a critical eye for the circumstances surrounding census-taking, counting criteria and ongoing political discussions, should be adopted. A census is a snapshot – and as the discussion in this special issue has demonstrated, a very contested one.

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