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Introduction: The Politics of Numbers in the Post-Yugoslav States

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Introduction: The Politics of Numbers in the Post-Yugoslav States

Valery Perry and Soeren Keil*

Introduction: The Merits and Pitfalls of Counting Populations

Since 1991, every country in the former Yugoslavia has either held, or has attempted to hold, a census. The most recent efforts occurred in or around 2011, reflecting both the interest of harmonizing with the European Union's (EU) own 2011 census round, as well as the need for accurate data in a region that has experienced significant population flux in the past generation. Macedonia's 2011 census was cancelled during the enumeration period due to objections related to the counting procedure, but grounded in politics related to the Macedonian and Albanian populations, and representation provisions in the Ohrid Framework Agreement that ended the violent conflict in the country in 2001. Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) collected data for the first time since the war in 2013, but as of this writing (October 2015) the results have not been finalised.¹ Kosovo's census results have been contested by Belgrade, with a number of Serb majority municipalities in Kosovo boycotting the census while other minorities have also questioned the results.

In the former Yugoslavia, censuses are clearly not about the simple number of persons in a household or their education; the number of people in a municipality; the numbers of people employed; the percentage of people who drive or take public transportation to work; or other such information common to census taking in other parts of the world (including most EU Member States). In this region, the census very often becomes focused squarely on sensitive identity questions related to one's ethnicity, one's nationality, one's religious affiliation, and one's mother tongue. Interest in these sensitive questions is not purely academic, but based on either existing required quotas and representation requirements and local level budgeting decisions, or on the aspirational politics of groups seeking to ensure greater formal mandated participation in power structures, at either the local or state level. As Simon and Piché argue, "[t]he statistical representation of diversity is a complex process which reveals the foundations of societies and their political choices. Thus there is a gap between the apparent ethnic and racial diversity in most countries in the world and the way these societies perceive themselves [...]."² The link between a defined group and a defined piece of territory is not unique to the former Yugoslavia;

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¹ Some basic preliminary data has been released such as the overall number of people residing in the country, but no actual breakdown of all the information has yet been released. It is expected that these data will be available later in 2015.

² Simon, Patrick and Victor Piché. 2011. Accounting for Ethnic and Racial Diversity: The Challenge of Enumeration. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 35 (8), 1357-65, 1357.

Benedict Anderson notes in his study of identity construction and consolidation in Southeast Asia that, “[i]t would be unwise to overlook the critical intersection between map and census.”³ These questions of who lives where and who rules where, and who is a majority or a minority, and who is constituent or not constituent, were at the core of the power struggles and led to violent conflict in the region in the 1990s. While the violence ended, the concerns about such issues, by people but especially by political parties both shaping and shaped by these dynamics, continues.

Public Policy, Identity and Contestation

This special issue aims to explore these issues by looking at the census experiences of each country that has emerged from the former Yugoslavia. While each case study presented has its own focus and structure, a number of themes emerge that demonstrate a certain cohesion among the cases.

One theme is the link between demographics and public policy, including political participation. Some of the cases ensure certain minimal representation of minorities based on the count of a minority in a certain area; reaching a threshold guarantees a certain level of representation or number of seats. In some cases this provides primarily for representation and certain rights (often language rights) at the local level, while in others state-level rights and representation is confirmed as well. As the discussions in Croatia demonstrate, local issues do not only reflect questions of minority rights protection, but can also link into previously unresolved issues related to the violent conflict that erupted in the country in the early 1990s. Similarly, discussions in Bosnia have demonstrated how important censuses can be in a system that is dominated by power-sharing quotas and positive discrimination for minorities. This link between representation and numbers creates a context in which everybody – and *every body* – counts, leading to incentives to ensure the highest possible number of one’s own group, to in turn ensure the highest possible representation.

While a census is typically aimed at being a “snapshot” of the people residing in a country at the time of the enumeration process, these political incentives create motivation to ensure that this snapshot is enlarged, to include diaspora who have been out of country for short- or long-periods of time. Discussions on including the diaspora have not only contributed to problems during the census process in Macedonia, but have also been present in Bosnia and Kosovo. This competition for numbers is further expressed through often organized efforts to ensure that individuals declare “cleanly” as members of just one identifiable group, or speak one primary mother tongue; persons of complex or mixed heritage, or those who seek not to declare are often expected to “take sides” to ensure greater numbers of one group or the other. The fact that sensitive, identity-focused questions are not in fact required by the EU has not removed the political allure of categorizing citizens in this manner. Censuses remain key instruments of ethnic engineering,⁴ of creating a certain type of polity, in which

³ Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso (Excerpt from Chapter 10), 249.

⁴ On ethnic engineering, see Stiks, Igor. 2006. Nationality and Citizenship in the Former Yugoslavia: From Disintegration to European Integration. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 6(4), 483-500.

different groups live, have rights and enjoy political and societal participation, while others (those not counted, or not fitting the previous pattern) remain marginalized. This is nowhere truer than in the post-Yugoslav states. In turn, this means that those organizing a census become political actors, engineering questionnaires and methodologies according to which the population is categorized, and deciding who is and is not counted.⁵

Another theme that runs through several of the contributions reflects the fact that these challenges related to identity are not unique, and have been evident in census efforts in the region for over a century. This is particularly visible in the discussion of identities such as “Muslim”, which have changed in numerous countries, including Bosnia and Montenegro, where the dominant category has become “Bosniak.” Identities have changed at various times in each country’s history, as new census responses have been available; while a person could remain the same as an individual between two separate census periods, their available identity options could in fact change, meaning that in one census they could be offered a different range of ethnicity or nationality options than in another, being left to consider which “box” is more appropriate for them to tick (if any). Another example of this form of identity change would be the rise and fall of the category “Yugoslavs” which played a key role in the 1950s in Yugoslavia, when Tito was trying to promote a common identity for all Yugoslav peoples. Nowadays, this identity does not feature anymore in censuses – and like the state, Yugoslavs seem to have disappeared. Florian Bieber has recently analyzed how different processes have affected the construction of national identities in the post-Yugoslav states. He highlights processes of state-dissolution, nation-state-building, the reification of national identities and the emergence of new categories as key elements that influenced the development of census categories in these states.⁶

A third theme in these articles is contestation, as certain aspects of nearly all of these censuses have been contested by various groups claiming pressure, over- or under-counting, or flawed data collection methods.⁷ Once group rights have been identified and enshrined in public policy, the importance of the count makes it obvious that results will often be challenged, as tangible budgetary or political participation rights are based on these numbers. This environment also increases the ethnic stakes of what is – to people outside of the region – often believed to be a purely technical exercise. All country studies in this special issue mention different forms of contestation. Some of these contests are based on questions such as whether to include the diaspora, while others evolve around socio-economic factors. For example, Roma in most countries are permanently undercounted because of lack of permanent residence, low literacy rates and social exclusion, which makes their participation in census exercises

⁵ Nobles, Melissa. 2000. *Shades of Citizenship: Race and the Census in Modern Politics*. Stanford: Stanford University Press; See also Kertzer, David and Dominique Arel (eds.). 2002. *Census and Identity: The Politics of Race, Ethnicity and Language in National Censuses*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

⁶ Bieber, Florian. 2015. The Construction of National Identity and its Challenges in Post-Yugoslav Censuses. *Social Science Quarterly* 96(3), 873-902, 880.

⁷ On the issues of census contestation in the post-Yugoslav states see Visoka, Gëzim and Elvin Gjevori. 2013. Census Politics and Ethnicity in the Western Balkans. *East European Politics* 29(4), 479-98.

particularly difficult. Other contests arise out of the question of refugees and displaced persons. Should these individuals be included in the censuses of the countries where they are refugees, or should they be included in the censuses in the countries where they originally come from (and supposedly will return to)? How would data reliability be affected if they were included in both? What if this group of people is not included in any of the censuses because of their “in-between” status? These are but some of the questions which have resulted in contestation of censuses in the post-Yugoslav states.

Contributions

The contributions in this special issue confirm that in the countries of the former Yugoslavia, censuses are never simply technical. Since censuses in the post-Yugoslav states have not only been used as tools of ethnic engineering, but also as mechanisms to assess countries’ preparedness and convergence with EU standards and regulations, the articles in this special issue are organized according to the countries’ EU integration process, starting with Slovenia, which joined in 2004, followed by Croatia which became an EU Member State in July 2013. This is followed by the article on Montenegro, which became a candidate country in 2010 and shortly afterwards opened membership negotiations with the EU. It is perceived by many as the most advanced country of the non-EU Western Balkans, in terms of its progress towards eventual membership. The following article discusses Serbia, which became a candidate country in 2012 and opened negotiations on membership in 2014. Macedonia, which is discussed in the following paper, has been an EU candidate country since 2005, but has so far been unable to open membership negotiations due to the ongoing name dispute with Greece. Finally, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are discussed, neither of which have official candidate status, though Bosnia signed a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU in 2008, and is also part of the visa liberalization process, which allows its citizens visa free entry into the Schengen area of the EU. Kosovo has so far not formally signed any Agreements (SAA) with the EU on its path towards membership, although it is currently engaged in negotiations on a SAA. The last contribution provides a broad overview of census in the region.

Damir Josipovič’s article on Slovenia provides a historical overview of the census on the territory of Slovenia, post-Yugoslavia’s first “success story”. He shows how even during the Yugoslav period, there were differences in territorial enumeration units and methodology that can make longitudinal comparisons difficult. He reviews the way in which certain new census methods were tested in Slovenia in this time; a trend that continued after the fall of Yugoslavia as Slovenia has now in fact moved away from “classic” census techniques and towards a register-based system of data collection. Josipovič also touches on the country’s own controversy concerning the “erased” persons, namely the approximately 30,000 people who were living in Slovenia and were essentially erased from the population register for failing to apply for Slovenian citizenship in time. What Josipovič demonstrates persuasively is the fact that even in a small state that is considered relatively ethnically homogenous, and which escaped the Yugoslav break-up with little violence on its own territory, controversies surrounding population censuses and questions about who is being counted and who is not, and which categories are used, remain.

Anna-Lena Hoh's article examines Croatia's census in 2011 to determine whether or not this country provides a good example in terms of the application of EU norms to a candidate country seeking to meet accession requirements. While the technical aspects of the census were broadly viewed as meeting the needed requirements, the inclusion of sensitive ethnicity/nationality questions in a semi-closed manner can be viewed as a weakness. Further, she explains how the linkage between certain political participation rights for minorities and census results have increased inter-group tensions, particularly with the Serb minority.

Ivan Vuković's contribution on Montenegro provides a broad historical overview of the country's 20th century experience of independence, its incorporation in various south Slav polities, and then its renewed independence in 2006. The options available to citizens in censuses in this time reflect the various political interests of the ruling regime, and as such while the actual population structure had not changed in noticeable ways, the manner in which people declared themselves in the numerous censuses held in these various constructs did fluctuate significantly. His detailed review of ongoing political dynamics and the census results of 2003 and 2011 demonstrate the interplay among the responses of citizens, meanings of identification, political party development and evolution, and broader political strategies. He also highlights very clearly how censuses can be used as tools of nation-building and reflect ongoing political issues in a country that is still trying to find the meaning of Montenegrin nationhood, now that it has found Montenegrin statehood.

Mina Djurić-Nikolić and Laura Trimajova look at the two most recent censuses in Serbia (2002 and 2011), analyzing the results and related politics in this heterogeneous state. They discuss the impact of census boycotts in Kosovo, but also responses among Hungarians (primarily in Vojvodina), Albanians in southern Serbia, among Bosniaks and the Roma. They survey the political dynamics evident during these two enumeration periods, and the policies of guaranteed representation thresholds among various minority groups. They conclude that many minorities still contest Serbian censuses and feel insufficiently integrated into the census project and the state more generally.

Roska Vrgova provides an overview of the consistently contentious census experience in Macedonia – the only country in the region in which the latest census failed. She outlines the historical context for debates on demography and population, and the impact of built-in quotas in the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which has reinforced the belief that every person counted matters. Vrgova also reviews the role of the census in identity consolidation through public policy – a theme repeated in several of the contributions. She concludes that although the most recent attempt to hold a census in 2011 failed due to technical issues over who is counted and how the results will be used, this failure in fact reflects deeper political issues between the Macedonian and the Albanian population. Because political representation and certain group rights are linked to representative figures from the census, each census exercise becomes a form of political mobilization and a 'game of numbers.'

Valery Perry looks at the 2013 census in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) – the first since the war that displaced half of the pre-war population. Twenty years after the end of the war, Bosnia continues to face significant political challenges and obstacles, most of which are driven by the nature of ethno-national parties operating in the ethno-national system devised and confirmed at Dayton. As the results of the census are not expected to be available until late 2015 (and some doubt this timeframe), she focuses on unanswered policy questions related to Bosnia’s census, and questions the nature of the notion of “constituent peoples” if the census reveals that there are more “Others” than there are of a constituent group (the Croats). As is the case in Macedonia, Perry also highlights how the link of group rights is connected to absolute (and relative) numbers revealed by the census, making the count a powerful tool around which political and religious elites mobilize, often manipulating and undermining what, in essence, should be a technical counting exercise.

Mehmet Musaj explores Kosovo’s contentious experience with censuses, including the boycott of the 1991 census by Albanians following Kosovo’s rescinded autonomy by the Milošević regime as Yugoslavia began to disintegrate, and the 2011 census boycott by Serb municipalities in the north, as well as by some Serbs in parts of the south. He also examines the sensitive nature of the census and the consequences of relying on other data sources as he explains current controversies concerning the much smaller numbers of minorities as enumerated in 2011, and the impact that this could have on local budgeting and minority representation. Population censuses, Musaj argues, cannot only be a way towards ensuring a minority is properly represented and enjoys sufficient rights, but it can also be a way of scaling back minority rights and funding for minority communities if in fact certain minorities are demonstrated to be smaller in numbers than previously assumed.

Pieter Everaers gives a practitioner’s view of the censuses in the region, grounded in his years of experience with EUROSTAT, including, most recently, as the EUROSTAT Director. He looks at the countries that participated in the 2011 census round, looking at the EU’s role in supporting the development of appropriate census infrastructure and processes, and broad methodological consistency to ensure a solid basis for comparison among EU states. Reflecting on the pervasive interest in the sensitive (and, from the EU’s point of view, optional) identity questions, he acknowledges the political dynamics of identity-based census campaigns, but notes that the nature of such optional questions can at best be used as an independent variable, and that absolute interpretation of responses to these sensitive questions should be avoided, since they were either non-compulsory questions or people had the option to ‘not declare’.

In the conclusion, Soeren Keil poses a number of questions related to policy issues and the censuses. He argues that censuses are *always* more than just a technical counting exercise. Discussions in Western Europe focused on regional funding, infrastructure support and long-term policy planning, and were often as contested and heated as questions over identity, religion and mother tongue in the post-Yugoslav states. However, Keil demonstrates that identity-related questions in an area in which identity is still in flux, and in which fundamental demographic changes have recently taken place, prevent any focus on more policy-oriented discussions. In their EU integration process, all of the countries

will have to concentrate on issues such as economic development, sustainable infrastructure planning, and 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 and state-consolidation projects.

While the 2011 census round is over, it is clear that the ramifications of the results will continue for some time. Croatia, an EU member state, will continue to grapple with ensuring it meets its human rights obligations concerning its Serb minority (mostly located in the east of the country), and political dynamics that can at times favor nationalist rhetoric and illiberal policy. It is difficult to imagine a scenario in Bosnia in which the results of the sensitive questions are released without contestation, and the policy implications of the count remain woefully unclear. That the success of Macedonia's Ohrid Agreement continues to be threatened by the manner and methodology of a count, and the fears of how resulting numbers will be used, suggests that the foundations of the peace in that country are still rather fragile. Kosovo's count remains incomplete due to the ongoing conflict with Serbia, both in broad terms regarding its declared independence, and in targeted terms related to Belgrade's continued role in and among the Serb majority municipalities. Even if countries begin to follow Slovenia's model, moving away from a decennial special enumeration process and towards the concerted collection of data from various registries, the controversies and conflicts surrounding the politics of demography, territory and representation will likely continue as long as the countries of the region remain heterogeneous and seek to identify appropriate means of political participation that are grounded in various definitions of group identity.

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