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Research Article

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Census, Identity, and the Politics of Numbers: The Case of Macedonia

Roska Vrgova*

A census is a statistical procedure which can provide detailed information on demographic characteristics including the fluidity (or stability) of identities with which a population identifies in a given period of time. A census also represents a political process which can play an essential role in ethnic politics, especially when power is distributed on the basis of numbers. As such, censuses often have results that are contested, and the case of Macedonia is no exception. This article provides an overview of the census taking processes in the years following Macedonia's independence in 1991, the dynamics and the challenges of the process itself and implementation of the results, and potential implications for the creation of identities. The author shows how census politics in Macedonia has been used as a political tool both in inter- and intra-ethnic relations, presenting ethnic political elites as true defenders of the interests of their respective communities. Moreover, it shows how the census taking process has generated tensions, fear, lack of trust, and reification of ethnic demographics. The author demonstrates that there is a lack of political will on the part of policymakers to move forward in conducting a new census and creating relevant policies that will enhance the lives of individuals.

Keywords: Macedonia, census, identity, politics of numbers, ethnic relations

Introduction

A population census is just one example of a statistical tool a country may use in order to count its population and identify and map trends in its economic, political and social reality during a defined period of time. However, many view censuses as significant. As Arel argues, censuses do not simply reflect social reality; rather, they play a key role in its construction. This proves to be especially true in cases where censuses divide the population along ethnic, racial, linguistic and religious lines.¹ Censuses play a significant role in ethnic politics, as their results can directly affect the distribution of power and the allocation of public goods, making it fundamentally a political process and an “exercise of social power, with potential to change policy outputs.”²

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¹ Arel, Dominique, and David I Kertzer. 2001. *Census and Identity the Politics of Race, Ethnicity, and Language in National Census*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 5.

² Simmons, Beth A. and, Kelley G. Judith. 2014. Politics by Number: Indicators as Social Pressure in International Relations. *American Journal of Political Science* 59(1), 1-56, 5.

Macedonia has a substantial Albanian minority, so “the game of the ethnic numbers has been running wild”³ in the past as well as today; census taking has never failed to be a source of contestation both among inter-ethnic groups and, more recently, among factions of the same ethnic group (although for different reasons, as explained below). As Friedman notes in his observations, the experts observing the Macedonian census in 1994 “thought they were going to be overseeing the technical aspects of a statistical exercise,” but were instead “shocked by the level of political passion their very exercise reignited.”⁴ As Ademi⁵ from the Democratic Union for Integration (*Bashkimi demokratik për integrim* - DUI) states, “the inability to agree⁶ on who is to be counted, in particular how to approach the counting of the classical Diaspora⁷, and the Diaspora⁸ who remain attached in one or more ways to Macedonia, persists in being an obstacle in conducting a census”. The signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), which ended a short armed conflict between the Macedonian army and Albanian paramilitary forces (National Liberation Army-NLA), granted to any minority constituting over 20% of the country’s population the right to guaranteed representation in Parliament, as well as other privileges with regard to employment in the public administration, military, education system, and other sectors. Since its independence in 1991, Macedonia has held four census operations, of which only two (1994 and 2002) have been relatively successful. The 1991 census was boycotted by the Albanian minority, and the 2011 census was stopped due to methodological inconsistency and controversy. Bearing in mind that different methodologies would have yielded different results, some representatives⁹ of political parties still doubt whether a mutual agreement between the ruling coalition of Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization - Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација - Демократска партија за македонско национално единство - VMRO-DPMNE) and DUI was ever reached prior to the start of the 2011 census.

The biggest challenge in overcoming the negative census dynamics has been and still is the low level of trust among the communities.¹⁰ Moreover, since the census is used for political purposes by the different political parties, and in light of the lack of trust in the State Statistical Office, due to the complaints on lack of representation of different ethnic groups at the institutions,¹¹ these dynamics have strengthened divisions among ethnic groups, without achieving much progress in minimizing tensions or negotiating a solution acceptable to

³ Cohen, Roger. 1994. Macedonia Census Just Inflames the Disputes: Counting ethnic groups in a land of countless enmities. *New York Times*, 17 July 1994 (accessed: 26 October 2015).

⁴ Friedman, 1996, 94, as cited in Dominique and Kertzer, *Census and Identity*, 19.

⁵ Personal interview with Abdylaqim Ademi, Minister of Education, Secretary General of DUI, Skopje, 13 October 2014.

⁶ Implying the inability of the ruling Macedonian-Albanian coalition partners, in this case VMRO-DPMNE and DUI.

⁷ When complete families have permanently moved out of the country.

⁸ Diaspora populations in which members of families frequently live abroad to earn a living, but regularly return to visit their close or extended families, have attachment to the country, and have not given up their Macedonian citizenship.

⁹ Personal interview with Remenski, Frosina, Vice President of SDSM, Skopje, 14 October 2014.

¹⁰ Personal interview with Abdylaqim Ademi, Minister of Education, Secretary General of DUI, Skopje, 13 October 2014.

¹¹ Ademi, *Interview*.

all groups. This article discusses how the politicization of census taking influences intra- and inter-ethnic relations, and the effects and consequences such processes have, both on the construction of identities and on the consolidation of democracy in Macedonia. First, an overview of the national context is provided. The debate is situated and analyzed in section two through the prism of census and identity politics, including an account of how political elites interact and negotiate, and what kind of approaches they employ to balance the institutional frameworks of post-OFA Macedonia. Sections three and four give an overview of census processes since Macedonia's 1991 independence, including recent initiatives. The article concludes with several observations with regards to how census taking has affected the creation of identities, the approach and discourse that different stakeholders have employed at different times and the potential entry points for compromise in holding a new census in the near future.

Background: Macedonian Contemporary History, Cleavages, and Political Systems

Modern Macedonia emerged in 1945 as one of the six constitutive republics of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the country declared independence on 8. September 1991, and experienced a relatively peaceful transition, although its transformation to a multi-party democracy was (and remains) incomplete. A small-scale violent conflict in 2001 clearly demonstrated contested political views and agendas, but was much shorter and less intense when compared to other regional wars. The ethnic differentiation of the country is present in the country's 1991 Constitution, which, in its Preamble defines Macedonia as the independent state of the "Macedonian people, in which full equality as citizens and permanent co-existence with the Macedonian people is provided for Albanians, Turks, Vlachs, Roma and other nationalities living in the Republic of Macedonia."¹² From the moment of adoption of the Constitution, the language in the Preamble prompted many political disputes; while ethnic Macedonians found these provisions satisfactory, the Albanian ethnic group found them problematic. In the first decade after independence, Albanians openly expressed dissatisfaction with their political and social status, and the inequality of the distribution of economic, cultural and political resources. Their main political and social demands included wider official use of the Albanian language, decentralization of political power, proportional representation in public administration, and preservation of the Albanian cultural identity.

During the first decade of independence, Macedonia witnessed increasing mobilization and mounting grievances of the Albanian community related to their political status, and differences between the Albanians and the Macedonians about the nature of the state and the role of the Albanians in it.¹³ The discontent led to the eruption of a small-scale violent conflict between the

¹² *Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia*, Preamble, 1991. (accessed: 26. October 2015).

¹³ Brunnbauer, Ulf. 2004. Fertility, families and ethnic conflict: Macedonians and Albanians in the Republic of Macedonia, 1944–2002. *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* 32(3), 565-98, 565-66.

Macedonian army and the NLA in 2001, which lasted for six months, from February until August, when the OFA was signed. The main goal of the OFA reforms has been to accommodate the grievances of the Albanian ethnic group and to address the ethnic Albanian demands for equal representation, while at the same time preserving the unitary character of the state in order to alleviate the concerns of the Macedonian majority, who feared a “federalisation” of the country and its eventual disintegration.¹⁴ The census, as some authors claim, was at the core of the conflict, as ethnic Albanian politicians have long upheld the view that ethnic Albanians constituted a significantly higher percentage of the population than the 22,8% recorded in the census of 1994¹⁵; thus they felt that they deserved privileges which were not acknowledged by the state.

The constitutional amendments prescribed in the OFA, adopted in November 2001, institutionalized non-discrimination and equal treatment of all under the law. The non-discrimination principle was to be applied in particular with respect to employment in public administration and public enterprises, including access to public financing for business development.¹⁶ It confirmed what the Law on Local Self-Government of 1995 already guaranteed – the official status of languages spoken by at least 20 percent of the population of a given municipality.¹⁷ (However, language appeals appeared again following the 1994 census. Albanians claimed that they constitute more than one third of the population, therefore the Albanian language should become a second official language state-wide.¹⁸) The OFA introduced a system of double majorities—a majority of all deputies, as well as of the ethnic Macedonian population and majority support from all minority communities jointly—for key areas of legislation. The Agreement introduced a programme of decentralization and local self-governance, cleared the way for a multi-ethnic representative police force,¹⁹ and ensured representation of ethnic minorities at the Constitutional Court, the Ombudsman, and the Judicial Council. Additionally, authorities were required to take measures to correct imbalances in the composition of the public administration through recruitment of members from under-represented communities, with special emphasis put on the police services.

The Macedonian–Albanian relationship has been a significant feature of Macedonian politics.²⁰ Following the OFA, Macedonia introduced a political system based on power-sharing determined through an informal rule that the government would be composed of a multi-ethnic coalition. Although there has

¹⁴ O’Flynn, Ian, and David Russell. (eds.) 2005. *Power Sharing: New Challenges for Divided Societies*. London: Pluto Press, 108.

¹⁵ Jovanovski, Vlado. 2001. *Features: On the Brink of Peace*. *Transitions Online*, 11. July 2001. (accessed: 26. October 2015).

¹⁶ *Ohrid Framework Agreement*. 2001. *Art. 4*. (accessed: 26. October 2015).

¹⁷ *Law on Local Self-Government* of 1995 (Official gazette of R. Macedonia, No. 52/1995, Arts. 88-89. The recognition of languages of smaller ethnic communities are subject to the municipal council’s decision.

¹⁸ Daftary, Farimah and Eben Friedman. 2008. *Power-Sharing in Macedonia?*, in *Settling Self-Determination Disputes: Complex Power-Sharing in Theory and Practice*, edited by Weller, Marc and Barbara Metzger. Leiden: Brill, 265-305, 270-71.

¹⁹ Bieber, Florian. 2005. *Partial Implementation, Partial Success: The Case of Macedonia*, in *Power Sharing: New Challenges for Divided Societies*, edited by O’Flynn, Ian, and David Russell. London: Pluto, 107-22.

²⁰ Reka, Armend. 2008. *The Ohrid Agreement: The Travails of Inter-ethnic Relations in Macedonia*. *Human Rights Review*, 55-69, 55.

been a broad coalition including Macedonian and Albanian parties since the first free elections in 1991, one can argue that this undefined quota provides for greater flexibility, but also carries a risk of inadequate protection if some of the parties decide to break up this informal agreement, which is observed by tradition rather than law.²¹ However, “the numerical strength of ethnic Albanians in the Macedonian polity and the structure of its party and electoral systems guarantee significant representation of ethnic Albanian parties in the national parliament and makes their participation in a coalition government at least highly likely.”²²

The OFA further stipulates that the consent of a majority of deputies representing all non-dominant groups is needed in several areas of legislation: culture, education, personal documents, use of language, use of symbols, as well as local governance.²³ The OFA has been criticized for its favourable treatment of one minority group (the Albanians) over others, since they are the only group whose share of the population is so substantial, although the smaller ethnic groups have also benefited from these terms, especially in regards to their “post-Ohrid constitutional status and their empowerment on the municipal level.”²⁴ The numerical 20 percent threshold has become the basis on which groups can lay political and administrative claims, which has led to further contestation of census issues, becoming “a source of permanent tension between Macedonian and Albanian parties.”²⁵

Census, Ethnicity, Identity, and the Politics of Numbers

In countries²⁶ where calculations of ethnic populations are used for the distribution of power or obtaining certain privileges, the census process is highly politicized. This is also the case in other Western Balkan states, such as Croatia and Serbia.²⁷ Ethnic population numbers matter in the distribution of power, resources, local governance, local finance policies, education, and cultural policies in Macedonia as well. The OFA, as stated above, defined the 20 percent threshold as critical for the entitlement of certain privileges. In such a political environment it is impossible for the census to transcend politics. Rather “since census politics is expressed in numbers, the pursuit of entitlement translates into a contest for achieving the ‘right’ numbers.”²⁸ Identity politics is a game of numbers,²⁹ and groups fear a change of proportions that will put them into a disadvantageous position, becoming a minority in the territory³⁰ in which they have already secured certain rights.

²¹ Ian and Russell, *Power Sharing*, 115.

²² Weller, Marc and Barbara Metzger. (eds.). 2008. *Settling Self-Determination Disputes: Complex Power-Sharing in Theory and Practice*. Leiden: Brill, 434.

²³ Decisions related to the structure of the municipality, and policies affecting particular communities require a double majority of the majority councillors, and those representing the smaller communities together.

²⁴ Armend, 2008. *The Ohrid Agreement*, 56.

²⁵ Brunnbauer, *Fertility, families and ethnic conflict*, 567.

²⁶ Turkey, Austria in the 19th century, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, are a few cited in Dominique and Kertzer, *Census and Identity*, 114, 119.

²⁷ See the contributions on Serbia and Croatia in this volume for more detail.

²⁸ See the contributions on Serbia and Croatia in this volume.

²⁹ Dominique and Kertzer, *Census and Identity*, 30.

³⁰ Dominique and Kertzer, *Census and Identity*, 30.

The perception of a volatile environment contributes to making census taking a process of political negotiation, rather than objective assessment.³¹ The analysis below aims to analyse how the politics of numbers influences the “ways in which and conditions under which the practice of reification, and powerful crystallization of group feeling, works,”³² accompanied by an examination of the discourse and “processes through which they become institutionalized and entrenched in administrative routines.”³³

Census Processes in Macedonia (1991-Present)

The first census taking processes in Macedonia took place in the 15th century, when the Ottoman authorities registered only tax payers and the male population. The first modern census was conducted in 1921, however there is also census data from the 19th century. Following World War II, the country conducted eight more censuses, with the last successfully completed census in 2002.³⁴ This makes Macedonia the only country in Europe that still has not conducted a census in more than 10 years. (Bosnia and Herzegovina held its first post-war census in 2013, but as of this writing the results have not been released.) The former director of the State Statistical Office (SSO) Doncho Gerasimovski stated that the SSO of Macedonia has the capacity to conduct a census immediately, but the political will is lacking.³⁵

It has been said that one of the basic mathematics rules in census taking is that two and two rarely add up to four.³⁶ Just as Petar Goshev, leader of the Democratic Party in 1994 stated, if we take into consideration the claims of size of all the ethnic groups living in Macedonia, “claims of modest Macedonians that 1.350.000 Macedonians live here, claims of Albanians as Naser Ziberi for 1 million to 1.2 million of Albanians, 400.000 Serbs according to claims made by a great number of Serb political demographers, 300.000 Vlachs of Greek descent, according to some Greek political demographers, 150.000-200.000 Turks according to the claims by representatives of the Turkish nationality, 220.000 Roma according to statistical data given by Faik Abdi, and around two million Bulgarians according to Bulgarian political demographic estimates,”³⁷ then the total sum of the population would likely be 5,4 to 5,6 million inhabitants - two or three times the actual number. This is to be expected, as the question of numbers has disproportionate importance, as different ‘ethnic or religious groups are competing for the political, material and symbolic resources linked to control of the state.’³⁸ Numbers do matter, as they imply potentially great political consequences, accompanied with great fear. An

³¹ Dominique and Kertzer, *Census and Identity*, 20.

³² Brubaker, Rogers. 1996. *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 11.

³³ Tilly, 1998 as cited in Brubaker, Rogers. 2004. *Ethnicity without Groups*. Harvard University Press, 60.

³⁴ [State Statistical Office of the Republic of Macedonia](#) (accessed: 26 October 2015).

³⁵ P.R. 2014. [Gerasimovski: Ako ima politichka volja, kje ima I popis](#) [Gerasimovski: If there is Political Will, there will be a Census], *Utrinski Vesnik*, 20. July 2014 (accessed: 26. October 2015).

³⁶ Editor’s Note. 1994. [Macedonia More Than Mathematics: A Census In Six Languages](#). *Transitions Online*, 09. May 1994 (accessed: 26. October 2015).

³⁷ Editor’s Note, *Macedonia More Than Mathematics*.

³⁸ Courbage, Youssef and Ronald Wilkens. 2003. Censuses, elections and population: The case of Macedonia. *Population*, 58(4-5), 429-450, 429.

example of one of the Macedonian collective fears is that “Macedonians will eventually become a minority by ‘demographic swamping’, due to the high reproduction rate of the ethnic Albanian population.”³⁹ Albanian fears are related to being undercounted. Although the general opinion among Albanians is that they comprise at least 25% of the population,⁴⁰ there is an additional fear, as claimed by some experts, that this might not in fact be the case. The implication of this would be the loss of certain legal privileges if it were confirmed that their number is indeed less than the minimum 20%, especially in particular geographic areas.

Some experts warn about the danger of making policies without up-to-date data.⁴¹ There are estimates from the World Bank that over 447.000 citizens have left the country. Eurostat published that from 1998 to 2011, some 230.000 Macedonians have registered in various EU countries.⁴² Additionally the Australian Bureau for Statistics in 2012 published data that the total number of Macedonians has increased from 83.978 in 2006 to 93.570 in 2011.⁴³ For a country with a population of 2 million, these numbers are significant. The following sections review the country’s post-Yugoslav census history.

Census taking in 1991

Following the dissolution of Yugoslavia the country created a Constitution which defines it as primarily the state of the Macedonian people, in which full equality as citizens and permanent co-existence with the Macedonian people is provided for Albanians, Turks, Vlachs, Roma and other nationalities living in the country. According to Daskalovski, this put the “ethnic Macedonians in a superior position vis-à-vis the rest of the population”,⁴⁴ and as result the Albanian minority found this formulation discriminatory.⁴⁵ During this period the Albanians were attempting to address the Albanian interest in autonomy; accompanied with independence for Kosovo, the federalisation of Macedonia into an Albanian and a Macedonian entity, within a bilingual state.⁴⁶ While the interest in increased autonomy has been a key interest of many Albanian parties for some time, the strategy of framing this demand in terms of federalism has been increasingly evident in the post-Ohrid period, whereas prior to the conflict the main focus of the Albanian parties was recognition of the Albanians as a second constituent nation, as well as language and

³⁹ Institute for War and Peace Reporting. *Balkan Crisis Report*, No.21, 17. April 1999, and *Balkan Crisis Report* No. 509, 30. July 2004.

⁴⁰ Editor’s Note, *Macedonia More Than Mathematics*.

⁴¹ Chomovski, Gorazd. 2014. Intervju, Abdulmenaf Bedzeti: [Dodeka so brojките si igrame politika, popis ne moze da se sprovede](#). *Faktor*, 28. June 2014 (accessed: 26. October 2015).

⁴² [Eurostat Demographics](#) (accessed: 26. October 2015).

⁴³ N.D. 2012. [Skoro 100.000 Makedonci ziveat vo Avstralija](#) [Almost 100.000 Macedonians Live in Australia], *Utrinski Vesnik*. 21. June 2012 (accessed: 26. October 2015).

⁴⁴ Daskalovski, Zhidas. 2002. Language and Identity: The Ohrid Framework Agreement and Liberal Notions of Citizenship and Nationality in Macedonia. *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, Issue 1, 1-32, 25.

⁴⁵ Brunnbauer, *Fertility, families and ethnic conflict*, 567.

⁴⁶ Neofotistos. O. Vasiliki. 2010. Postsocialism, Social Value, and Identity Politics among Albanians in Macedonia. *Slavic Review* 69(4), 882-902, 882.

education rights in the country.⁴⁷ The Macedonian leadership was strongly promoting the idea of a unitary – not federal - state.

The Albanians boycotted both the referendum for independence from Yugoslavia, and the census in 1991. Friedman writes that the census ‘was carried out in an atmosphere of distrust and animosity’.⁴⁸ The boycott was observed in municipalities with a large Albanian population: Debar, Gostivar, Kichevo, Kumanovo, Ohrid, Skopje, Struga, Tetovo, and Titov Veles.⁴⁹ Albanian political leaders claimed that they would be deliberately undercounted, and complained about the lack of census forms in Albanian. On the one hand they were calling for a boycott, but on the other they appealed to Roma and Macedonian Muslims participating in the census to declare themselves as Albanians.⁵⁰ They did not recognize the census results, and the SSO instead estimated the numbers in the boycotting areas using statistical projections based on data from the 1981 census, the natural growth of the population during the inter-census period, migration, and other statistical data.⁵¹ According to the census results of 1991, Macedonia had a population of 2.033.964. Macedonians comprised 65,3%, Albanians 21,7%, Turks 3,8%, Roma 2,6%, Serbs 2,1%, and Others 4,6%.

During the 1991 census, people living abroad for over a year *were* included in the results whereas in 1994 they *were not* included. At that time, the Albanian leadership was claiming that they make up 40% of the total population, accompanied with similar unfounded claims by other ethnic groups, namely the Serbs, the Turks, Roma, Greeks, and Egyptians.⁵² Dr. Ahrens, a German diplomat with the rank of Ambassador and head of the Working Group for Human Rights and Minorities within the International Conference on Former Yugoslavia (ICFY), called for an extraordinary census in Macedonia to be supervised by the international community.

Census taking in 1994

The 1994 census was also highly contested. The usual inflated estimates of the different ethnic groups continued, and again the most disputed question was the percentage of the Macedonian and the Albanian populations. The main grievances of the Albanians during this period were again the lack of status as a constituent people.⁵³ Among the political demands during this period were guaranteed representation of ethnic Albanians in all state institutions; improved secondary and higher education in the Albanian language; state-subsidized Albanian language media; strong government decentralization that

⁴⁷ Bieber, Florian and Keil Soeren. 2009. Power-Sharing Revisited: Lessons Learned in the Balkans?. *Review of Central and East European Law* 34, 337-60, 345, 357.

⁴⁸ Friedman, Victor. 2002. Observing the Observers: Language, Ethnicity, and Power in the 1994 Macedonian Census and Beyond. *New Balkan Politics* 3/4, 5.

⁴⁹ Antonovska et al. 1991, as cited in Daskalovski, Zhidas. 2013. Census taking and Inter-ethnic Relations in Macedonia. *Southeast European and Black Sea* 13(3), 365-79, 8.

⁵⁰ Friedman, Eben. 2002. Political Integration of the Romani Minority in Postcommunist Macedonia. *Southeast European Politics* 3(2-3), 107-126, 113.

⁵¹ Antonovska et al. 1991, as cited in Daskalovski, *Census Taking*, 8.

⁵² N.D., *Macedonia More Than Mathematics*.

⁵³ N.D., *Macedonia More Than Mathematics*.

would allow municipalities to manage their own affairs,⁵⁴ and representation in administration, the army, and the judiciary.⁵⁵

The 1994 census started on June 21, funded with \$2.5 million⁵⁶ from the European Commission (EC) and the Council of Europe, and it was observed by the International Census Observation Mission (ICOM), also called the Group of Experts. As Friedman notes, many members of the ICOM team, including some of the highest ranking, were “quite surprised when they discovered that they were embroiled in highly charged political issues, as opposed to a mechanical statistical exercise, and they expressed confusion and dismay over the complex ethnic situation they encountered.”⁵⁷

The primary complaint prior to the census taking in 1994 was the lack of census forms in languages other than Macedonian. The insistence of Macedonian radicals to have the census only in Macedonian, the complaints of the ethnic groups were by amending the Census Law, and finally the census form was available in Albanian, Turkish, Serbo-Croatian, Romany and Wallachian.⁵⁸ Another complaint was related to Article 30 of the Law which envisaged that an enumerator shall be appointed for each enumeration district.⁵⁹ The Albanians claimed that in practice this resulted in the appointment of enumerators of mostly Slavic origin.⁶⁰ Menduh Tachi, Vice President of the then main ethnic Albanian political force, the Party for Democratic Prosperity (*Partia për prosperitet demokratik – PDP*) stated that, “the census was politicized by the Macedonian Government and has only created confusion”. He complained that the Albanian representation in census commissions was 12.8%, while the Albanian community was much larger.⁶¹

During the pre-census period “there were serious behind-the-scenes negotiations with the Albanian members of parliament, who threatened to call for a boycott despite the presence of the ICOM and the expenses already incurred.”⁶² According to the 1994 census results, Macedonia had a population of 1.945.932, out of which Macedonians comprised 66,6%, Albanians 22,7%, Turks 4%, Roma 2,2%, Serbs 2,1%, and others 0,5%.⁶³ All Albanian parties declared the result to be illegitimate,⁶⁴ saying there were not enough Albanian experts employed by the SSO and involved in processing the data. Hence, “representatives of the ethnic Albanian community in Macedonia continued to challenge this number, claiming deliberate undercounting.”⁶⁵ Although PDP leaders promised to do their own count, they did not, and the completion of the

⁵⁴ Mickey W., Robert. 1995. *Macedonia: Unstable in a Stable Way*. Transitions Online, 30 January 1995 (accessed: 26 October 2015).

⁵⁵ Roger, *Macedonia Census*, 8.

⁵⁶ Roger, *Macedonia Census*, 8.

⁵⁷ Friedman, *Observing the Observers*.

⁵⁸ N.D., *Macedonia More Than Mathematics*.

⁵⁹ Roger, *Macedonia Census*, 8.

⁶⁰ Roger, *Macedonia Census*, 8.

⁶¹ Roger, *Macedonia Census*, 8.

⁶² Friedman, *Observing the Observers*.

⁶³ State Statistical Office. (accessed: 26 October 2015).

⁶⁴ Robert, *Macedonia*.

⁶⁵ Brunnbauer, Ulf. 2004. *(Re)writing History: Historiography in Southeast Europe after Socialism*. Münster: Lit, 567.

census seemed to put to rest many speculations about the ethnic composition of the country.⁶⁶ However, in the period to follow, tensions increased; the grievances of the Albanian ethnic group ultimately escalated into armed insurgency in 2001.

The 2002 Census

The 2002 census took place in still volatile conditions, following the violence in 2001. The enumeration took place from 1-15 November, and it was again disputed by the Macedonians, the Albanians, and the smaller ethnic groups. The census was conducted by 11,000 people, with registration forms available in six languages, Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish, Vlach, Romani, and Serbian. Additionally, 50 experts from 26 European countries monitored the process.⁶⁷ The final census results were published a year later, and according to them Macedonia in 2002 had a population of 2,022,547, out of which Macedonians comprised 64,2%, Albanians 25,2%, Turks 3,9%, Roma 2,7%, Serbs 1,8%, and others 0,7%.

The results showed an increase of the Albanian ethnic group from 22,7% to 25,2%, and a decrease of the Macedonians from 66,6% to 64,2%. Although the international community assessed the census results as “a fair and accurate statistical analysis,”⁶⁸ the process and the outcome of the census provoked speculation and dissatisfaction among several parties. The Albanian parties believed that the official figure of 25% represented undercounting; while Macedonian nationalists believed it was too high⁶⁹, claiming the real number of Albanians was less than 15%.⁷⁰ The census results were also disputed by the Turks and the Serbs, who rejected the decrease in the number of Turks and Serbs; the Turks claimed that their real percentage is 5,15% rather than 3,85%, while the Serbs claimed that the announced numbers represented an attempt at their elimination.⁷¹

Among other speculations was that the percentage, primarily of the Albanian ethnic group, was agreed upon even prior to the start of the census, among the new winners of the 2002 elections. Such claims also came from officials of VMRO-DPMNE, as Nikola Gruevski, then President of the party, said he based his claims on the fact that the State Census Commission (SCC), was totally excluded from the process of analyzing the data. Other developments fed skepticism; the President of the SSO, Blagica Novkovska, was removed from the position in the middle of the post-census period; the President of the SCC, Zoran Krstevski resigned; and the results were delayed for seven months. Recalling the census in 2002, Krstevski announced that there were no political reasons for his resignation, but that he simply was not convinced that the

⁶⁶ Robert, *Macedonia*.

⁶⁷ Alagjovzovski, Robert and Biljana Stavrova. 2003. *Macedonia's Census Opens New Doors. Transitions Online*, 08 December 2003 (accessed: 26 October 2015).

⁶⁸ Alagjovzovski and Stavrova, *Macedonia's Census*.

⁶⁹ International Crisis Group. 2004. *Macedonia: Make or Break. ICG Europe Briefing*, 03 August 2004, 5.

⁷⁰ Gjorgjevski, Branko. 2006. *Albancite se pomalku od 15 otsto od naselenieto vo Makedonija* [The Albanians are less than 15% of the Macedonian population. *Dnevnik*, 18 March 2006 (accessed: 26 October 2015).

⁷¹ Alagjovzovski and Stavrova, *Macedonia's Census*.

census results were valid.⁷² Apostol Simevski, head of Census Data Processing, gave assurances that there was no room for abusing census materials or for falsifying data, because “the methods of control and the computer programs immediately reveal every mistake.”⁷³

Ultimately, the census results *were* recognized by all government coalition partners as the basis for negotiation. If we exclude the claims referring to the Albanians, for being undercounted (as perceived by the Albanians), or over counted (as perceived by the Macedonians); as well as the claims for undercounting of other smaller ethnic groups the 2002 census could be considered as relatively successful, because the results were ultimately endorsed and accepted by all groups.

The Cancelled Census in 2011

The census in 2011, initially scheduled for April, was postponed until October due to early elections in June. This census-cycle revealed that in addition to the issues of who is to be counted and how, the chosen time period for enumeration could also be controversial. A year prior to holding the census, the Albanian political parties claimed that in case the census was held in April, this “will create an artificially reduced number of Albanians, since many ethnic Albanians live abroad during this period.”⁷⁴ The preferred timing for the Albanian parties was July, when the emigrants come back to Macedonia for holidays; otherwise they threatened to boycott the census. Smaller ethnic groups also threatened to boycott the census when it was announced that the census-takers would be drawn from the two largest communities in each area.⁷⁵ The smaller groups such as the Macedonian Muslims, Serbs, Turks, and Vlachs, complained that the larger ethnic groups tried to assimilate them and offer money or false promises to make them declare themselves as, for example, Albanian or Roma.⁷⁶ There were also mutual accusations between Albanians and Macedonians, the former claiming that the Macedonian majority on the census commissions had arranged the criteria in order to underestimate the number of Albanians in the country, whereas the latter argued that the census was being falsified in Albanian-dominated areas in order to exaggerate the true number of Albanians.⁷⁷

According to official information from the SSO, the census was envisaged to include only the resident population, in accordance with Eurostat standards

⁷² Jordanovska, Meri. 2009. Popis od 2002: Kolku Albanci ziveat vo Makedonija [Census 2002: How many Albanians Live in Macedonia], *Nova Makedonija*, 14 August 2009 (accessed: 26 October 2015).

⁷³ Alagjovovski and Stavrova, *Macedonia's Census*.

⁷⁴ Lutovska, Klaudija. 2010. Prikazna za dva popisi [A Tale of Two Censuses], *Southeast European Times in Skopje*, 13 December 2010 (accessed: 26 October 2015).

⁷⁵ Andersen, Uffe. 2011. Year 1 for the Balkans?, *Transitions Online*, 03 May 2011 (accessed: 26 October 2015).

⁷⁶ Uffe, *Year 1*.

⁷⁷ Marusic Jakov, Sinisa. 2014. Macedonia PM Makes New Push For Census. 17 July 2014 (accessed: 26 October 2015).

aiming to avoid double registrations of emigrants.⁷⁸ The readiness of the SSO in 2011 was assessed as very good by Eurostat,⁷⁹ however the institutions faced misunderstandings among the local census commissions and enumerators in regards to the methodology. Namely, the issue in regards to methodology was the documents used for verification of the resident population, and whether only original IDs were acceptable. (There were also reports that people had registered via Skype.) This aroused suspicions of potential irregularities.⁸⁰ In an interview, Gjorchev of VMRO-DPMNE, stated that although the Government ensured equal multi-ethnic representation of enumerators (there was a total number of 16.000 enumerators, out of which 10.000 were Macedonian, 4.000 Albanian, and 2.000 others), in order to enhance trust in the census, the continued debate over different methodologies, as well as different approaches among the different regional census commissions and their presidents, led to the decision to stop the census.⁸¹ To the question of whether there was clear agreement *prior* to the start of the census on the methodology and the scope, Gjorchev neither confirmed nor denied the claims, stating that “there was an agreement to conduct a census.”⁸² An agreement to hold a census was possible, but the devil was clearly in the details.

The census lasted for 10 days, and it was halted upon the collective resignation of all members of the SCC. In a statement, the commission said “there are no basic preconditions for continuation of the census.”⁸³ A clear and detailed explanation and report in regards to the planned budget of 14 million euros (851.569.900 MKD) provided from the state budget, was never officially conveyed to the public.⁸⁴ However, in a recent interview the former President of the SSO, Novkovska, announced that Eurostat has published data⁸⁵ which states that the country spent a total amount of 2.86 million out of the budgeted 14 million Euros.⁸⁶

Ongoing Debates and Future Prospects for Censuses in Macedonia

The year 2014 brought yet more buoyant debate, and the apparent involvement of ruling parties, civil society, and academia. Whether this implies a higher chance for successful planning and implementation is difficult to predict. The urgency to conduct a census was stated by the Council of Europe in 2013.⁸⁷ Although EU officials seemed to be in favor of using an alternative approach of

⁷⁸ Chomovski, Gorazd. 2014. Intervju Novkovska Za sleden popis se potrebni podgotovki od najmalku edna godina. [The Preparation for a Census will last at least a year]. *Faktor*, 09 July 2014 (accessed: 26 October 2015).

⁷⁹ Gorazd, *Intervju Novkovska*.

⁸⁰ Mitevaska M. Aleksandra. 2013. Ima li klima za nov popis [Is there a climate for a new census], *Utrinski Vesnik*, 12 June 2013 (accessed: 26 October 2015).

⁸¹ Gjorchev, Vlatko, Member of Parliament of VMRO-DPMNE, Skopje, 14 October 2014.

⁸² Gjorchev, *Interview*.

⁸³ Marusic, Jakov Sinisa. 2011. Macedonian Census Commission Resigns. *Balkan Insight*, 11 October 2011 (accessed: 26 October 2015).

⁸⁴ Delimitov, Kostadin. 2014. Popis nekogas kje ima no so poinakov “recept” [Some day there will be a census but according to a different “recipe”], 07 July 2014 (accessed: 26 October 2015).

⁸⁵ European Commission. 2011. Population Census Framework Factsheets on Population Censuses in the Enlargement countries (accessed: 25 October 2015).

⁸⁶ Gorazd, *Intervju Novkovska*.

⁸⁷ Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly. 2013. Post-monitoring dialogue with “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” (accessed: 25 October 2015).

counting the population by using administrative registries,⁸⁸ the ongoing wire-tapping scandal which revealed conversations related to electoral fraud,⁸⁹ put census taking high on the agenda again, as it is considered as one of the preconditions for creating a credible electoral list of voters.

In April 2014, Macedonia held both Presidential and Parliamentary elections. Five minutes after the closing of the ballot boxes, the opposition (Macedonian) SDSM declared that they did not recognize the elections. As officials from the party stated, they found the fact of 1,800,000 eligible voters as very problematic, and suspected manipulation of the numbers.⁹⁰ Since the country does not have up to date census data, it is hard to confirm whether the 'cleaning' of the election lists was in fact done properly for the latest Parliamentary elections held in April 2014.⁹¹ The President of SDSM also claimed, that "the phantom voters that the opposition warned about during the last elections have multiplied during these elections."⁹² They claim that no institution addressed their complaints, so the only option, which the party had, was rejecting the elections.⁹³ They conditioned their return to Parliament (they won 34 out of 123 seats) with several requests including formation of a technical government, creating conditions for separating the party from the state institutions, independent media regulation, cleaning the electoral lists, and conducting a census.⁹⁴ The party maintains that a new census would show how current voter lists are packed with people who are deceased or ineligible to vote, mostly because they have left the country.⁹⁵ They state that a potential census will question the turnout in many municipalities during the last elections.⁹⁶

Following the elections, and the demands of the opposition, the ruling coalition of VMRO-DPMNE and DUI came up with several proposals for conducting a census. Namely, VMRO-DPMNE is in favor of conducting an administrative census, where the results are received by aggregating and cross-referencing data from existing state institutions and registers.⁹⁷ Prime Minister Gruevski proposed installing devices on border crossings that would record entries and exits of citizens for the purposes of the census. Gjorchev of VMRO-DPMNE, states the party's position is clear and they want a European census conducted according to the criteria of Eurostat and the United Nations (UN).⁹⁸ Any other solution would be unacceptable to the party.

⁸⁸ European Commission. 2014. The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Progress Report (accessed: 25 October 2015).

⁸⁹ Center for Research and Policy Making. 2015. Saving Democracy in Macedonia: What to do After the Wire-tapping Scandal. *Policy Brief* 34, (accessed: 25 April 2015).

⁹⁰ Personal Interview. Remenski, Frosina, Vice President of SDSM, Skopje, 14 October 2014

⁹¹ Remenski, *Interview*.

⁹² Andersen, Uffe. 2014. What's in a Number? *Transitions Online*, 22 July 2014 (accessed: 25 October 2015).

⁹³ Remenski, *Interview*.

⁹⁴ Dimeska, Frosina. 2014. Propadna obidot za pocetok na krajot na politichkata kriza. [Attempt to start and end the political crisis failed]. *Makdenes*, 24 June 2014 (accessed: 25 October 2015).

⁹⁵ Uffe, *What's in a Number?*.

⁹⁶ Some municipalities, such as the municipality of Aerodrom, had a turnout of 97%. Remenski, *Interview*.

⁹⁷ Marusic, *Macedonia PM*.

⁹⁸ Gjorchev, *Interview*.

DUI, the coalition partner of VMRO, finds the proposal for an administrative census acceptable only if it includes citizens who live abroad.⁹⁹ The unofficial DUI proposal is to conduct a census that will include all the citizens of Macedonia who live in the country and abroad. They suggest processing the results in two tables: one that will register the citizens that are present in Macedonia during the time of census taking, and another that will register the citizens who have Macedonian citizenship and have entered the country in the period of 12 months prior to the census. They suggest the data from the first table to be used for planning and policy-making for the upcoming 10-year period in the field of demographic, economic, educational, and other policies, whereas the numbers of the second table to be used for determining the rights of the ethnic communities. The party claims this would not endanger any policy, and at the same time the country will be able to fulfill its obligations towards the EU.¹⁰⁰ Moreover such an approach would make a distinction between people who have families in the country and are absent during the year due to work, and the 'classic' diaspora. Although DUI is aware that this breaches the provisions of Eurostat, due to the specificities of the country they consider their proposal is of utter importance, since they are "emotionally attached to the ethnic rights"¹⁰¹, as many Albanians work outside of the country but keep their Macedonian passport and visit their families regularly. However, the party agrees with any proposed methodology of the coalition partner VMRO, as long as they agree on the scope of the census.

Besides the political parties, civil society has also been engaged in promoting the idea of the census. A group of organizations launched a campaign called *Popis Sega (Census Now)*.¹⁰² They claim that Macedonia must not be held hostage by political elites who cannot find a common ground for census-taking. Their aim is to inform and educate all citizens through round tables organized in several bigger cities in the country. They try to emphasize that the census is a statistical operation which is needed in order to create relevant policies, and they suggest, that the political side of it should be resolved through political negotiation.¹⁰³ From the side of academia¹⁰⁴ there have been ideas and efforts towards an electronic census that will use data from already existing registers. Although Prime Minister Gruevski announced the use of some census-taking software, to date, there have not been any steps towards implementation.

While there is continued debate there is still no defined timeframe for the next census. The budget for 2015 does not envisage costs for conducting a census.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁹ Trajkovska, Mariela. 2014. [DUI saka popis, ama po svoj terk](#). [DUI wants their tailor-made census], *Dnevnik*, 27 June 2014 (accessed: 25 October 2015).

¹⁰⁰ The unofficial proposal of DUI was presented to the author during a personal interview with Abdylaqim Ademi.

¹⁰¹ Ademi, *Interview*.

¹⁰² Official website of the coalition of organizations [Popis Sega](#) [Census Now]. (accessed: 25 October 2015).

¹⁰³ Personal Interview, Bejkova, Biljana. NGO Info Center, part of the Coalition *Census Now*, Skopje, 10 October 2014.

¹⁰⁴ Rashkovski, Dragi. n.d. *Sistem I uredi za sproveduvanje na popis na naselenie* [System and Devices for Conducting Census of Population], registered as G07C 13/00 in the field of physics, section for device for checking, device for voting. *PhD*. Patent.

¹⁰⁵ Ministry of Finance. 2015. [Budget of the Republic of Macedonia](#) (accessed: 25 October 2015).

Officially there is a will to conduct a census, but both sides maintain very hard positions, with little room for compromise. The proposals by DUI are entrenched in the requests of the Albanians dating from 1994, whereas VMRO insists on strictly following the EU and UN standards. The EU standards¹⁰⁶ are contradictory to the requests of the Albanians, so the prospects for a political compromise are questionable. The involvement of the opposition is also debatable, as they would accept a direct interaction only upon the fulfillment of their five requests.¹⁰⁷ In the meantime, their approach is giving key proposals, and communication with the ruling coalition through media.¹⁰⁸

Conclusion

The census issue is present in almost all fields of cohabitation and existence in Macedonia, as it is intimately related to both the practical and symbolic sides of ethnic politics. As evident in all census processes in Macedonia from 1991 until today, the main issues have been the methodology and the scope of the census, while the real problem remains the complete politicization of the census and lack of political will for compromise.

Based on the assessment of some international organizations¹⁰⁹ regarding emigration, it is reasonable to suspect that *both* of the main ethnic groups fear that they have decreased in number. Keeping in mind that political elites define their electorates on an ethnic basis, *any* decrease of what is thought to be the 'real number' of relevant groups would be considered a betrayal of the interests of their group. This dynamic additionally contributes to a hardening of collective identities generated by the political rhetoric of the elite, thus creating an 'us against them' discourse which exacerbates the fear of assimilation, and heightens instincts to fight for group preservation and power. Although this persists to be the general picture painted by media, and shared by the majority of the public, it is worth acknowledging the recent appearance of different civic initiatives which have managed to mobilize people of different ethnicities and generations, who have jointly gathered to express their dissatisfaction with the current system through different protests throughout 2015.

Still, finding an entry point for compromise acceptable for all sides is not an easy task. As Ademi stated, the biggest issue remains the trust among the ethnic groups; but based on experience, he concludes that this is surmountable.¹¹⁰ "It is important for the public to have census data, but in order to avoid speculations, distrust, and manipulation, we need full involvement, and participation of all sides."¹¹¹ This opens a door for the potential development of civic initiatives, to involve a broader public across ethnic lines, and to refocus the debate from one that is purely political to one

¹⁰⁶ Eurostat. (accessed: 25 October 2015).

¹⁰⁷ Remenski, *Interview*.

¹⁰⁸ Remenski, *Interview*.

¹⁰⁹ The World Bank, Eurostat, and the Australian Bureau for Statistics – for more details check the introduction, *Census Processes in Macedonia (1991-Present)* above.

¹¹⁰ In a personal interview, Abdylaqim Ademi pointed out that the inclusion of all parties, led to find acceptable solutions in regards to the Election Law.

¹¹¹ Ademi, *Interview*.

focusing on essential issues such as the development of policies and strategies on up-to-date data, in order to create bottom-up pressure for a political compromise. There is clearly a need for civic strategies that will unite the otherwise often antagonistic groups, in a vision for a better quality of life for all residents. At the same time, ethnic Albanian politicians have to do their share by “strengthening their loyalty to the state by promoting not only the interests of their ethnic kin but also policies and practices that will make their country stronger, more efficient and less prone to clientelism and patronage,”¹¹² while the Macedonians should prove their willingness to amplify the participation of all ethnic groups in all fields of public life. In the meantime, it remains uncertain when a new census will take place, whether it will show that there has been a change in the local demography of the country, and what this might mean for the country’s future.

The recent revelations about wire-tapping and large-scale electoral fraud have further raised questions not only about the willingness of the government and the opposition to work together, but also raise new issues in the relationship between Albanians and Macedonians. Since these revelations question the very nature of Macedonian democracy, it can be expected that the fall-out from these and the consequent investigations will take significant time, and further postpone outstanding discussions on a new attempt to hold a census.

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¹¹² Shasivari, Jeton and Ismail Zejneli. 2013. Macedonia between the Rule of Ethnos and Demos. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 4(10), 598-604, 601.

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