



**Contemporary Southeastern Europe**

An Interdisciplinary Journal on Southeastern Europe

# **The 2011 Round of Population and Housing Censuses in the Western Balkans: A Comparative Analysis with a Focus on Ethnicity and Citizenship**

Event Analysis

Pieter Everaers

Director “Cooperation in the European Statistical System; International Cooperation; Resources”,  
DG Eurostat

[pieter.everaers@ec.europa.eu](mailto:pieter.everaers@ec.europa.eu)

<http://www.suedosteuropa.uni-graz.at/cse/en/everaers>

*Contemporary Southeastern Europe*, 2015, 2(2), 184-194

# The 2011 Round of Population and Housing Censuses in the Western Balkans: A Comparative Analysis with a Focus on Ethnicity and Citizenship

Pieter Everaers\*

**Keywords:** population census, Western Balkans, facts, quality, costs and benefits

## Introduction

The censuses in the Western Balkan countries deserve special attention as they are grouped in a region with a conflictual and difficult past. The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia fell apart in the early 1990s, resulting in the current configuration of independent countries (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo<sup>1</sup> and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia). This dissolution process has troubled the region for years with wars that have cost many lives, and which still remain an important event in the minds of many people in the region as well as in the minds of the hundreds of thousands that have fled the region and built a life in other European countries. Many of these people in the diaspora still feel affiliated with the area; they might still have family or own property, or they simply decided not to settle for life outside the region of their childhood. Even 20 years after the wars there are many traumas and the relations between population groups are difficult.

All the former Yugoslav countries as well as Albania are considered potential members of an enlarged European Union (EU), and for that reason the EU has a special relationship (via Stabilization and Association Agreements) with these so-called “enlargement” countries. The status as an enlargement country brings very strong support to all elements of society, from funding of road infrastructure and agricultural development projects, to poverty eradication and implementation of the rule of law. This relationship also brings obligations in the context of the “European *acquis*”. For statistics, this *acquis* is reflected in the set of regulations for European statistics.<sup>2</sup> The countries are supported over a period of approximately 10 to 15 years to develop a set of statistics that

---

\* Pieter Everaers is Director of Directorate A- Cooperation in the European Statistical System; International Cooperation; Resources at DG Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Commission. From 2008, he has been leading the International Monitoring Operations for the Population and Housing Censuses in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Montenegro.

<sup>1</sup> This designation is without prejudice on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence. This footnote is relevant for all references in this document to “Kosovo”.

<sup>2</sup> Eurostat. 2014. Statistical Requirements Compendium. *European Commission*.

reflects the content and quality of the statistics in the European Statistical System (ESS). In the work plan for the European Union Member States - as is the case for the potential members - the censuses are an important reference point for population data; data essential as basic building blocks for many other statistics (e.g. Gross National Income). In the European Union, statistics are an important part of the societal infrastructure. The contribution to the common budget of the EU is based on high quality statistics, and subsidies and funds for redistributing the budget are based on sound figures. "Evidence Based Decision Making" is an important cornerstone of European society; new countries joining the Union are expected to have achieved the same statistical standards.

Compared to difficult census operations in countries all over the world, the recent political history of the Western Balkans adds an extra level of complexity. The European Commission, via the Directorate General Eurostat (DG ESTAT) and the Directorate General Enlargement (DG NEAR), is involved in this process, and as a consequence it supported the development of appropriate statistical infrastructures; for the census more specifically this has been done via a series of "Technical Cooperation Meetings."<sup>3</sup> In these meetings, the Directors General of the National Statistical Institutes (NSIs) of the countries and the various state census experts met with experts from the European Commission to exchange best practices on the population and housing census, create a good understanding of one another's specific situation, and cultivate cooperation with the aim of achieving a certain level of comparability among the results of the individual countries. This support, which was given as part of multiple beneficiary projects to the countries via horizontal projects, forms a part of the efforts to enhance cooperation among the countries themselves, as well as the cooperation with the European Statistical System. An important result of these intensive discussions is a detailed overview of all the choices and decisions, as well as a rich data base of factual information. The European Commission, via the national support programmes installed via the EU delegations in the concerned countries, has also funded many preparatory projects, and in some countries parts of the enumeration itself as well as parts of the processing were funded by the EC. Finally, but of critical importance, several countries (Montenegro, Kosovo, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), Bosnia and Herzegovina and to a minor extent Albania, have requested the establishment of an International Monitoring Operation (IMO) to guarantee a fair and transparent census-taking.

---

<sup>3</sup> In October 2009, Eurostat established a Technical Coordination Group (TGC) consisting of all census managers in the region aiming at exchanging experience on the census, sharing best practices and harmonising methodologies and definitions on a regional level. The group has had five meetings. For the TCG, a 'matrix of key census issues' was created where the countries reported their level of preparedness on a number of areas, ranging from planning and management to census methodology and logistics.

### **Background on the Western Balkan countries<sup>4</sup>**

To better understand the impact and role of the census, the recent history and the current ethnic situation of the region needs to be described in more detail. After the death of President Tito in 1980, ideological and ethnic tensions led to violent confrontations. Starting from 1986, the different republics, reflecting rising Serbian and Croatian nationalism, became increasingly divided. The historical tensions between Serbs, Albanians, Croats and Bosnians over the question of who would hold the power led to the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Over a period of approximately 10 years, the Yugoslav wars played out to the current situation, with different levels of violence and different outcomes. In 1991, Slovenia succeeded in splitting very quickly and without much bloodshed from the rest, and Croatia also became independent in 1992, though there was significant violence in parts of the country. From 1992 the Bosnian War was fought, until a peace agreement confirmed the creation of the country of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995. In 1999, Kosovo violently split from Serbia, while in FYROM there was a brief armed conflict which ended in 2001. A couple of years later, in 2006, Montenegro became independent following a peaceful referendum.

The wars of the 1990s resulted in significant population flux. Several agreements ended the conflicts in the region and contributed to improved inter-ethnic relations, for example the Ohrid Framework Agreement in FYROM (2 million inhabitants), the Dayton Agreement for Bosnia and Herzegovina (3.8 million), and rather recently (2013) the specific agreement between Kosovo (1.7 million) and Serbia (7.2 million, excluding the area of Kosovo), which led Serbia towards a breakthrough in its potential membership of the EU. Croatia (4.2 million) followed Slovenia as the second country of the Western Balkans to become a Member of the European Union, acceding in 2013. While FYROM has been a candidate country already since 2005, negotiations have not yet started, while with Montenegro (0.6 m) and Serbia, accession negotiations started recently.

Albania (2.9 million inhabitants) needs a special mention. Established in 1944 as a Socialist Republic based on the Chinese communist model, it transformed into the Republic of Albania with a parliamentary democracy in 1991. An economic and societal crisis in the nineties drove many people to flee from the country, though many have returned in recent years. Albania achieved EU candidate status in 2014; however negotiations have not yet started.

Another specificity of this region is the distribution of ethnic and religious groups. The complicated history of the Balkans, with population shifts which occurred over centuries mixing people from east and west, north and south, resulted in a striking diversity that at time reveals some deeply rooted ethnic and religious cleavages. Croats, Albanians, Serbians, Roma, Turks, Muslims, Christians, Greek Orthodox, Jews, Russian Orthodox, etc, are spread throughout and integrated into various parts of the region. These groups were living over a period of some 50 years in relative peace as neighbours within the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

---

<sup>4</sup> Detailed statistical information on the Western Balkan enlargement countries is available in Eurostat. 2014. Pocketbook on the enlargement countries. *European Commission*.

War and extreme social disruption caused a large outflow of the population, degradation of the transport system and dilution of the societal infrastructure. It resulted in a very low interest in foreign investment in these countries; consequently resulting in a relatively high level of unemployment, and the continued high scope of a rural economy. The large population groups that left for countries like Austria, Germany and Switzerland live in a wealthier situation with relatively high incomes. As a consequence, the economy of many of the Western Balkan countries is dependent on remittances, and influenced by groups from the diaspora. Countries that were dependent on Belgrade for certain aspects of infrastructure, political direction and economic development, had to re-start their development from a relatively backward situation as a result of years of violence and warfare, as well as semi-authoritarian governance.

These countries have shown impressive developments resulting in their recognition as potential member states of the European Union. However many visible and invisible remainders of the difficult period of the wars persist. Demolished and empty homes, clearly divided areas and often a feeling of distrust, overall daily lives still are very much dominated by polarisation.

### **The reasons for a Population and Housing census**

Population and Housing censuses are a common tool for collecting basic information on the size and structure of the population once every five or ten years for a wide range of planning and often also serve political purposes. Under the leadership of the UN, every 10 years, the vast majority of countries hold a census. In many countries, the enumeration is still done via a traditional paper and pencil interview. Since 2000, world Population and Housing census round many countries all over the world began to use modern interview tools for data collection such as handheld computers or the Internet. New technological and societal developments have made it possible - especially in the more developed countries - to integrate results of vital statistics and administrative registers to completely eliminate the role of the census interview. A third group of countries used a combination of data collected via interviews with data aggregated from registers and administrative sources. A handful of countries all over the world do not use a full population count at all, but base their 'census results' on sampling techniques and consequently collect thorough information for only a part of the total population. The fact that census results are considered very important by many stakeholders also ensures that the census is an important cause for discussions and even tensions concerning the results. Even in highly developed countries the results and even the basic format of a census lead to difficult discussions, as well as political interventions in the management of national statistical offices. Such challenges can even lead to heavy political crisis, as was the case for FYROM in the Western Balkans, but there are several similar and even more serious examples from the 2001 and 2010 population census rounds in other parts of the world.

However, even when the procedures and outcomes might be contested, the usefulness of a census is in general *not* contested. The population census is

considered as a crucial basis for many other statistics. In the modern evidence-based society, good quality statistics are a part of the basic infrastructure. In the Western Balkan countries which are also candidate countries for the EU, the need for and use of census data can be seen from several perspectives.

Firstly, in order to join the EU and especially to comply with the governance procedures in the EU statistics are essential. They are important for the calculation of the contribution to the EU and the subsidies from the EU budget, related to a large variety of policies.

Second, from the perspective of internal planning purposes and local funding and support mechanisms, good information on population groups is needed to internally plan health, education systems, and others, in a democratic manner.

Support from international organisations also depends on trusted statistical information.

A fourth perspective includes the obligations set in some agreements that rights and obligations of populations and governments on a local or sub-regional level depend on the number of citizens or distribution of characteristics of the population in certain districts or regions. To implement these obligations, regular data collection in the form of a census is considered essential. This is particularly important when the rights of certain groups (i.e. minorities) are connected to a certain percentage share of the population.

Finally, for some countries in this region - even when not spelled out clearly but nevertheless still important - the Population and Housing censuses serves as a tool for the creation of a national feeling. Part of building or consolidating a nation is to know how many “we” are and what “our” characteristics are. In addition, censuses are sometimes used politically to consolidate the results of wars. The popular saying ‘when you are not counted, you do not exist’ is relevant for some population groups.

It is evident from both a global and EU perspective, as well as for internal and “nationality” reasons, that the Western Balkan countries were under a certain pressure to conduct censuses in the 2011 census round. In fact, almost all countries in the world held a population census in one way or another, so why would the Western Balkans be an exception? Eurostat, on the request of DG Enlargement and also from some of the countries themselves, supported almost all the countries in this census exercise. This support ranged from purely financial to technical assistance, capacity building, political, as well as moral and professional support to the statistical authorities. For this wide network of political and technical contacts in the countries concerned were set up and maintained.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> For the author of this paper this meant that regular (sometimes weekly) contacts with the responsible ministers and other high level stakeholders were needed to discuss main decisions and progress in the preparations.

### **Factual information on the censuses in the Western Balkans**

The systematic technical support from Eurostat via the Technical Coordination Group as well as the involvement in census projects in the individual countries resulted in a rich overview of characteristics of the censuses in the Western Balkan countries. This information is available through a series of 'Factsheets on population censuses in the Enlargement countries'.<sup>6</sup> The information varies from basic factual information on the number of enumerators, to overall costs and specific costs of parts of the project (for example, communication and outreach policies).<sup>7</sup> The sheets describe "factual" information, so they do not include details on what happened during the preparation, enumeration and the processing stage of the census, nor do they relate to discussions between the main stakeholders, the political parties, government, the census institute (the National Statistical Institute), with the main sponsors of the census and a great variety of other parties interested or involved (e.g., NGOs, the media, universities, religious and ethnic groups and even neighbouring countries). From the first phase of census preparation - the discussions on the census law - until the very last moments on how to disseminate and interpret the results, opinions can differ greatly between stakeholders on how to go ahead. It is common that during all phases there are stakeholders that try (and often succeed) in stepping over the outer line of their responsibility, and in doing so try to impose their influence in areas that should be the sole responsibility of the Head of the National Statistical Institute. Professional independence (particularly on methodological decisions) as requested from the UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics is often not that easy to defend in countries with such complex governance systems, weak democratic traditions and complicated ethnic and religious structures as the Western Balkan countries.

The following sections will review various key thematic issues of importance, both to explain certain policies and then to consider how the various countries in the region can be assessed. As the census results in Bosnia and Herzegovina have not been released, this case cannot be considered yet in the regional assessments with the same detail as the other countries.

### **Population in the diaspora and the treatment of the sensitive questions on ethnicity, religion and nationality**

The noted factsheets describe all the stages of preparing the census, from the enumeration itself until the moment of dissemination. Interesting conclusions can be drawn, like the relatively high costs of the communication and outreach in Kosovo, the high number of enumerators in FYROM or the lengthy process of establishing the census law in Bosnia and Herzegovina. They also describe the complexity for hiring census staff, and information on how to measure the population in the Diaspora (this is typically not seen as part of a census exercise) as well as reaching agreement on the inclusion and formulation of the

---

<sup>6</sup> Eurostat. 2013. 2011 Population Census Framework. Factsheets on Population Census in the Enlargement Countries. *European Commission*.

<sup>7</sup> These factsheets are made available in agreement with National Statistical Institutes of the countries concerned.

sensitive questions on ethnicity, religion and nationality (and state/entity citizenship in Bosnia and Herzegovina) in the questionnaire. These two issues: how to measure/include information on the population living abroad and the inclusion and formulation of these sensitive questions, have created huge discussions and disputes. In all countries concerned these issues had to be tackled, which had an impact on the formulation of the census law, the required communication and outreach and the training of the enumerators, among others. Of course, in each of the countries (and as discussed in the other articles in this volume) there were specific problems and issues which complicated the process.

The measurement of the population in the diaspora was mainly done via a special form at the end of the questionnaire, allowing the households to inform the enumerator on family members living abroad, permanently or at the time of the enumeration. This was done for Kosovo, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In a context where the percentage of a population group in the total population is important for existing agreements, for house and land ownership or simply having sufficiently high numbers to justify certain policies (e.g., the Ohrid Agreement for the Albanian population in FYROM, or the Dayton Agreement for Bosnia and Herzegovina), the issue of the diaspora population caused long disputes. More specifically, there were discussions on how this population group could be approached, how the questions were formulated and how the answers could be checked against other information. However, the final results of these efforts are considered to be relatively minimal. Based on results of a variety of polls a large part of the former residents now living abroad has either no intention to return to the original country (many of them children of the former residents), has no link to the newly established countries (as they left the country before 1991) or they are simply not interested and could/did not want to be reached.

The controversies over the formulation of the sensitive questions raised many more concerns, and might also have affected the final results. These questions are noted in the UNECE/Eurostat recommendations for the Population and Housing Census for round 2011, and are described as non-core questions.<sup>8</sup> This implies that countries are free to decide to include them in the questionnaire, or not. But if they decide to do so, they are strongly encouraged to follow the recommendations on how they are formulated. An essential element of these recommendations is that these questions are asked based on a self-declaration, either via a fully open question (no answer categories) or a combination of a set of predefined answers with also the possibility to give an answer different from the predefined. Furthermore, there should be the possibility, as the response to these questions is considered voluntary, to use the option to actively declare *no* ethnicity, religion or national affiliation. Considering the context of the ethnic complexity of the Western Balkan countries, the tense discussions between the population groups (via political organisations or NGOs), and the apparent need to have specific information over these population groups for specific agreed policies (as the Ohrid Agreement), the collection of information on these

---

<sup>8</sup> Eurostat. 2009. UNECE/Eurostat Recommendations for the 2011 round of Population and Housing Census. *European Commission*.

variables was considered a crucial element of the census-taking by the decision-making authorities in many of these countries. A remarkable example in this context is the use of the 1991 population census in BiH to ensure positive discrimination for returning minority populations based on pre-war data. The countries have found varying solutions for these questions, ranging from sticking very closely to the UNECE/Eurostat recommendations (Albania, Croatia, Montenegro and Kosovo), to strongly criticized versions (only partly open) like in BiH and FYROM. In most of the countries the ethnic, religious or political institutions and movements have tried to influence the citizens' behaviour on how to answer these questions.

### **Success factors for the Population and Housing census**

Indicators of success of the censuses is also summarized in the fact sheets, though for this purpose additional quality information has to be used to ensure a good level of understanding on the usefulness and effectiveness of the projects. Useful indicators include the acceptance of the numbers of the total population and the numbers for subgroups (as was the case in Albania and Montenegro), as well as the speed in delivering preliminary, first and final results (again Montenegro). Factual information also comes from the Post Enumeration Survey in the form of estimates on the absolute and relative *under or over count* (representation in the census) of populations groups. This quality information results often from Post Enumeration surveys. The training of the enumerators, as well as the infrastructure and logistics created for the enumeration and the processing of the collected information, also supports the chances of a successful census (likewise the motivation of the census staff can be reflected in, for example, the feeling of being respected and well paid.). In addition, the International Monitoring Operations can provide competent advice and support; a factor that like technical assistance, can contribute to the overall success of a census.

One could assume that the success of a census also depends on factors such as the existence of a well organised state government, the oversight of this government over regions, the trust in state organisations and the experience and skills in the administration, particularly in the National Statistical Institutes. On these issues the countries are all very different (knowing their history). Of equal importance is the societal infrastructure in the country, and how well the society is organised. The internal coherence of the population groups or the awareness of the heterogeneity of the population can be a factor of influence. Likewise, group feeling and the political engagement of the population will play a role; this, of course in combination with more basic issues such as literacy, education and overall interest in a country's issues, and more generally the trust in society, common goals, norms and values and understanding of the common values of a developed democratic society. Media plays a very important role in this context, not only for the official awareness campaigns but also for any opposition groups and movements. A clear example of this impact was seen in the first week of the enumeration in 2012 in FYROM. Based on statements in television interviews, enumerators as well as citizens engaged in declarations on how to interpret certain questions and how to count people, with the result that the government had to stop the census

enumeration midway through the enumeration stage.<sup>9</sup> Another factor is the overall political situation. Not only is the trust of the citizens in their government and in society in general important, but trust and belief in statistics is important as well, as is the understanding that the government can use the data in the process of development. Specific awareness among a population of how a census can play a role in a country's EU candidacy can also be critical in explaining the success. In Montenegro and Albania as well as in Kosovo this awareness was very high.

In addition to all this, specific and time bound developments can play an important role in the success of a census project. The role of key leaders, incidents not related but having a big impact (e.g., election campaigns) or even the very personal behavioural issues of stakeholders have to be taken into account in trying to explain the success and outcomes.

### **The usefulness and effectiveness of the censuses**

Discussing the usefulness of the census for each of the countries concerned is difficult from the perspective of the long-term benefits. In most, if not all the countries, the project significantly increased the functioning of the National Statistical Institutes and resulted in an increase in experience and skills. The infrastructure needed to ensure good statistics clearly improved the amount and quality of actual information available on populations, groups, as well as on all kinds of developments in the society (from literacy, urbanisation to health and housing). The basic information collected will support international and state policies. Without a doubt the financial investment will be paid back via international programs that support economic development, as well as through more focussed development and investment projects. The availability of useful and "fit for purpose" statistical information will lead to better spent domestic budgets. The fact that International Monitoring Operations were present in Kosovo, Montenegro, BiH as well as in Albania could send a strong message about the credibility of the census results; this is particularly important for Kosovo.

However, it remains important to consider the effect of a census on the issues of ethnicity, religion and nationality. For most of the countries under consideration, these issues are related to populations residing in the countries being enumerated and - differing from what is practice in most other countries - to the population in the diaspora. Two concrete and relevant factors arise: firstly, regarding the information collected via specific forms on family members residing *outside* the country; and second whether the information from the non-core sensitive questions where citizens (according to recommendations) were allowed to declare that they do not belong to an ethnic, religious group or nationality. Both questions lead to concerns on whether the census has indeed resulted in credible data. Have the censuses contributed to a process of settling disputes between population groups, and contributed to a more stable society? The extent to which censuses play a role in these dynamics is influenced both by the fact that answering these questions has been influenced by many NGOs, political leaders, religious figures and public

---

<sup>9</sup> See on this issue also Roska Vrgova's contribution in this volume.

discussions, as well as the fact that a significant number of the population might not have provided answers for these questions, meaning that their usefulness is questionable. Using these variables as explanatory (independent) variables is not very problematic; however to use them by themselves as absolute outcomes must be done only with great caution.

As mentioned in the introduction a census in any one of the Western Balkan countries does not only affect dynamics within its own borders, as the ethnic and religious groups do not follow the country borders. The Albanian population may have its main concentration in Albania, but Albanians also live in the neighbouring countries of Kosovo and FYROM; similarly, Croats live in Croatia but also in parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Roma population is spread in different concentrations all over the area of the Western Balkans, as well as old Turkish rooted groups in FYROM and Kosovo. The Serbian population lives in Serbia but also in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Croatia, and Kosovo.

Comparable results among countries, especially on ethnicity and religion, are very interesting from the perspective of regional policies and cultures as well as ambitions. In addition, they very much affect the behaviour of local and regional politicians. Compared to difficult census operations in individual countries this situation of countries with strong cross-border ties creates an extra level of complexity. The Directorate General Eurostat and the wider European Commission has tried to steer this process via the regular Technical Cooperation Meetings on the census at the level of the statisticians of these countries, developing a good understanding and cooperation as well as sharing of best practices. These meetings were also aimed at promoting the use of the same approaches to achieve maximum comparability of the results. This maximum comparability, by guaranteeing rather rigidly the principle of place of *usual residence* for counting the population (therefore not including diaspora) should lead to more credible and exhaustive results overall for the whole region.

However, these policies have not prevented the development of sometimes different approaches and conflicting results. Slightly varying data collection methods, resulting in different under- and over-counting, but also differences in attitudes among individuals enumerated and the impact of the population in the diaspora will not - when summing up the results on the sensitive variables of the individual countries - lead to reliable results for the region.

It is relevant to note that in supporting the census work (with technical support, funding and monitoring) the starting point for the European Commission and other international organisations involved as well as other individual donor countries, was the correct implementation of the international recommendations on Population and Housing censuses and at the same time respecting the details as agreed by the national governments in their respective Population and Housing Census Laws on the details of the topics to be collected (as for example the questions on citizenship, nationality, among other things).

### **Cost benefit analysis and potential impact**

The censuses already have and will continue to provide useful statistical information, but as said above for some variables this information has to be handled with great care. Can we conclude that the censuses in the Western Balkans were an example of value for money? Have the censuses resulted in information that can and will be used? Were they worthwhile or would it have been more useful to resist the international pressure for holding the census?

These questions are difficult to answer: the costs can be calculated easily, however, the benefits cannot. Census results might lead to financial support as well as increased credibility and recognition of the country. But the census can also lead to heated debates between ethnic and religious population groups. Are the societies mature enough to accept the results and how can they transform this information into useful policy information? This is a question that is useful to ask in looking at the efforts, the discussions and the results. The other contributions in this volume attempt to do so. To what extent does it also help the regional cooperation between the countries? Only over a period of years will the impact and real benefit be visible.

### **Bibliography**

- Eurostat. 2009. UNECE/Eurostat Recommendations for the 2011 round of Population and Housing Census. *European Commission*.
- . 2013. 2011 Population Census Framework. Factsheets on Population Census in the Enlargement Countries. *European Commission*.
- . 2014. Statistical Requirements Compendium. *European Commission*.
- . Pocketbook on the enlargement countries. *European Commission*.