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Research Article

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Contemporary Southeastern Europe, 2015, 2(2), 142-158

A Tale of Two Serbias? Census-taking in 2002 and 2011

Mina Djurić Nikolić and Laura Trimajova *

The challenges implicit in census-taking are especially pronounced in the Western Balkans and, very specifically, in Serbia, considering this country's multi-ethnic and multi-religious makeup, as reflected in territorial delineations, as well as its political past. Minorities, in particular, have suffered from ongoing discrimination, which is brought to the fore by the politicization of census taking exercises by political elites, as seen in 2002 and 2011. These political elites have leveraged census taking in order to promote their own agendas, often to the detriment of citizens belonging to minority groups. The administrative and monetary influence of the EU in census taking exercises marked a slight shift toward better integrating minorities into these exercises in 2011. The prospect of EU accession will continue to influence Belgrade's decisions in making further strides towards minority integration.

Keywords: census-taking, Serbia, European Union, minority rights, demographics

Introduction

Due to the sensitive nature of the collection of data on the private life of citizens, a census-taking exercise is a complex undertaking. Even in those jurisdictions with a high level of ethnic or religious homogeneity, census-taking can easily become a politicized exercise with nationalistic undertones. The matter becomes further complicated in the Balkans, where one must take into account the ethnic, religious, and political diversity within a post-war context. Serbia, despite a strong central government in Belgrade, has a substantial number of minority groups of various sizes, located throughout the country. Census-taking in Serbia is particularly important as the results dictate budgetary fund allocations for each respective ministry; as such, the need for accuracy cannot be overstated. The seriousness of certain minority issues in parts of Serbia were brought to the fore as a result of the 2011 census, the importance of which is politically and socially critical. Within this framework, this article will analyze how the Serbian censuses of 2002 and 2011 proved to

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be sources of contention and were, indeed, “marginally contested” due to a boycott by the Albanian and Bosniak minorities.¹

The aim of this paper is to analyze the complexity of the two censuses in post-Milosevic Serbia through a comparison of the different political reactions of leading figures in different ethnic communities. As the case study of Serbia will demonstrate, a rather simple technical exercise can entail various political challenges where minority issues overshadow the technicality of the process. The article begins with a brief overview of these technical exercises as they took place in Serbia in 2002 and 2011. This article will then consider the extent to which Serbia’s political elites strategically utilized the census. Specifically, we will analyze whether the census was approached as a depoliticized exercise, or leveraged to promote respective strategic nationalist agendas. We will look at the role of the European Union (EU) in this process, discussing whether it was sufficiently constructive considering its perceived role as a crucial player in both censuses. Lastly, we will sum up by offering a recommendation on how census results can be used instrumentally in the future.

Two different tales?

Census-taking is an important and complex statistical exercise. It becomes a more demanding exercise when a country is decentralized and heterogeneous. In heterogeneous societies, the census also becomes a barometer for the country’s policy towards minorities and vulnerable groups, who might fear the impact of the outcomes of this technical exercise. The political structure of Serbia and its numerous nationalities and ethnic groups ensures that the census continues to be debated, especially in respect to sensitive questions on ethnicity, religion, and language. The disintegration of Yugoslavia and the ethnic politics of the Milosevic regime have given Serbia an international reputation which revolves around nationalism with right-wing extremism and the oft-quoted underlying discourse of Greater Serbia.² Serbia is a diverse country, home to many ethnic and linguistic minorities, both bigger (like the Hungarians) and smaller (like the Czechs or Egyptians). Additionally, and perhaps most importantly for the purpose of this study, *external* influence in a country’s highly *internal* undertaking (which the census undisputedly is) can play an instrumental role in both the preparation and the conducting of the census.

European countries were preparing for the 2001 round of census-taking since the end of the 1990s. Serbia at the time was undergoing a radical political transformation; with the crumbling of the Yugoslav state, the aftermath of the Kosovo conflict, and the October 2000 ousting of Slobodan Milosevic. At this period the census-taking exercise was a major challenge that had to be undertaken by legislators, state agencies, and people in the field. At each of these stages, even the simplest ones, problems were expected. But the census-taking was critically necessary, as the Yugoslav wars led to significant

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

² See, e.g., Judah, Tim. 2000. *The Serbs: History, Myth, and the Destruction of Yugoslavia*. Yale: University Press: New Haven.

demographic and border changes. It was also a test for Belgrade, which had to take into account the discontent expected from minorities throughout Serbia.

A decade later, in line with the 2011 censuses that took place throughout the EU and reflecting its EU aspirations, Serbia held a census as well.³ The EU legislation on population and housing foresees census-taking in ten-year cycles. The preparations for the 2011 census had been underway since 2008, when, for the first time, the census was covered by EU regulation and guidance.⁴ As all countries in the Western Balkans are viewed as future EU member states, the EU's involvement in their domestic politics is much more pronounced than in other parts of the world. This translates into the EU's support in technical exercises, such as census-taking, while expecting convergence in the *acquis communautaire* related to the census. Flexing its soft power in its immediate neighborhood, it is in the EU's interest to help countries prepare for membership and assist in technical matters, to ensure consistency of methodology and collected data. Serbia, after years of political turmoil following the ousting of Milosevic, is an EU candidate country. Preconditions for successful accession negotiations necessitate reliable information reflecting the actual demographic composition of each country.

National minorities and ethnic groups in Serbia

In order to study the approach to the census in both 2002 and 2011, one must understand the heterogeneous ethnic mosaic of the country⁵. While Central Serbia remains predominantly Serbian, Vojvodina is home to a diverse population, and some other geographical parts of Serbia, such as Sandzak, are affiliated with particular national minorities, mostly linked to similar populations in neighboring countries. After the demise of the Milosevic regime, Serbia fast-tracked its obligations toward minorities and adopted comprehensive laws on their freedoms and rights, regional and minority languages, and launched bilateral agreements with neighboring countries on minority protection. The Serbian Constitution affirms the protection of national minorities in its Constitutional principles under Article 14, pledging to “[...]”

³ “Initially all the countries in the Western Balkans planned to carry out their population censuses in April 2011. However, for different reasons censuses were only carried out in Croatia, Montenegro and Kosovo at that time. The censuses in Serbia, Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia were postponed till October 2011. The censuses in Serbia and Albania commenced as planned whereas the census in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia was cancelled after a few days of field operations. For Bosnia and Herzegovina the population enumeration phase took place in October 2013 and the following census phases are yet to follow.” Everaers, Pieter. Annex to: The 2011 round of Population and Housing censuses in the Western Balkan countries in the context of the political situation and technical preparedness: a comparative analysis with a main focus on ethnicity and citizenship. Paper presented at *ASN World Convention 2014*, 2.

⁴ Commission Regulation. 20 October Regulation (EC) No 763/2008 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 July 2008 on population and housing censuses. *Official Journal of the European Union*, 9 December 2010 (accessed: 24 October 2015).

⁵ Identity formation is an ongoing process in Serbia, due to the aftermath of the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Despite the fact that it is an inevitable part of the ethnic picture of present-day Serbia and closely linked to the study of censuses, this paper will not be concentrating on the trends of identity-formation for reasons of length and scope.

guarantee special protection to national minorities for the purpose of exercising full equality and preserving their identity.”⁶

Apart from national minorities in Serbia, one also needs to distinguish among Croats, Bosniaks/Muslims, Macedonians, and Slovenes, and after the 2006 independence vote, Montenegrins, “[...] who were considered “constituent nations” and did not enjoy minority rights which were secured for so called “nationalities.”⁷ There are other distinctions as well. While the Hungarian minority living in Vojvodina is considered to be economically and socially well-off, with their minority rights exercised consistently, the situation for other minorities remains difficult. Those residing in Eastern Serbia, as well as Bulgarians, Romanians/Vlachs, and Albanians concentrated around the poor regions of South Serbia, have experienced high unemployment rates and the overall economic decline of the regions they inhabit.⁸ The situation remains complex and indeed, multifaceted: the economic disadvantages of the population in poor regions feed political, social and cultural discrimination in a vicious cycle.

Increasing regional autonomy is still a contentious issue in Serbia. Serbia’s mainstream elite “still believes that unification of all Serbs would be possible sometime in the future [...] for them, autonomists, particularly those in Vojvodina, are ‘tearing apart the unique Serb national being.’”⁹ The large Hungarian minority has been successful in presenting a united front when dealing with issues of concern to them, though not without controversy. The adoption of the Law on Rehabilitation drew a sharp reaction from Hungarians due to its link to the restitution of property dating to the Second World War. In respect to the EU, the opening of the Vojvodina European Office in Brussels in early 2011 triggered controversy in Serbia, with many insisting that this action was yet another step on Vojvodina’s path toward secession. While then-Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic had pledged his support for this initiative, it took over three months for the government to formally give its consent; likewise, the opening of the Office was continuously postponed. The divisiveness in public opinion as far as Vojvodina is concerned highlights the importance of the autonomy debate in Serbia, and its resolution is essential for progress on the EU accession agenda. Lingering issues such as these show that sub-groups of the Balkans often have a long memory, and that injustices against minorities cannot just be swept under the carpet.

Census-taking as an exercise is instrumental in re-exposing these various injustices and grudges; however, it is left to each state’s respective government to deal with these issues in a proactive manner. Failing to do so has very definite implications for Serbia’s EU accession; Hungary, for example, has warned Serbia that denying Hungarians the right to property restitution seized after World War II, might compromise Serbia’s accession effort. Other issues encountered by the Hungarian population include the inability to receive

⁶ Government of the Republic of Serbia. 2004. *Constitution of the Republic of Serbia* (accessed: 24 October 2015).

⁷ OSCE. 2008. *Ethnic Minorities in Serbia: An Overview* (accessed: 24 October 2015).

⁸ European Centre for Minority Issues. 2006. *Minority Issues Mainstreaming: A Practical Guide for European Agency for Reconstruction Programmes*. Thessaloniki/Flensburg, 68.

⁹ European Center for Minority Issues, *Minority Issues*, 18.

instruction in their mother tongue, along with difficulties in media representation.

Federal Republic of Yugoslavia 2002

The three most recent pre-war censuses were carried out in 1971, 1981, and 1991. Serbia's first post-war census was anticipated in 2001, the year that all other European countries held censuses. However, the Serbian census was launched a year later than originally planned due to "[t]he political situation in the country and the lack of financial resources"¹⁰. The legal basis for the census was the 1999 Law on Census¹¹. The political situation in Serbia in 2002 could be described as a time of maximal euphoria following the ousting of Slobodan Milosevic in October 2000, and the agony of not reforming quickly enough in the wake of this change. The Milosevic administration was out of office, but its structures remained. Though the EU was open to communication with Serbia, the Stabilisation and Association Agreement was not yet signed, nor had the country been invited to join the Council of Europe. The opposition figures that had rallied around the one common point in their agenda – ousting President Milosevic – were now increasingly populist and radical.¹² The complex disillusionment in Serbia was reflected in the 2002 Presidential elections;¹³ with all three rounds void, the Speaker of the Parliament assumed the role of the Serbian President on 29 December 2002.

Assessing the census in Serbia in April 2002, one must understand the particularity not only of the political climate at that time, but the actual state structures and relationships between various levels of government that resulted from the demise of Tito's Yugoslavia. The situation in Serbia was complex at the FRY, state, and regional levels, and could best be described as a "provisorium" coupled with "a crisis of identity."¹⁴ Despite the 5 October events, Serbia was still officially part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), which it formed with Montenegro in April 1992.¹⁵ Additionally, the status of the two autonomous provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo remained contentious, with tensions rising between Novi Sad and Pristina versus Belgrade. Indeed, Kosovo was under international administration since 1999 until unilaterally declaring independence in 2008 —the legality of which is still contested in Belgrade.

Additionally, the census in FRY was not performed in all parts of the country at the same time; while in Serbia it was carried out at the beginning of April 2002, in Montenegro¹⁶ it only took place a year and a half later, in October

¹⁰ UN Economic Commissioner for Europe. 2003. *Experiences in preparation for the population, households and dwelling census in year 2002*. Eurostat, Conference of European Statisticians, Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, *Working Paper no. 9* (accessed: 25 October 2015).

¹¹ Full text of the law [in Serbian] available [here](#).

¹² Biserko, Sonja. 2003. Human Rights in the Shadow of Nationalism Serbia 2002. *Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia*. Belgrade: Zagorac, 8.

¹³ OSCE, *Ethnic Minorities in Serbia*.

¹⁴ Biserko, *Human Rights*, 14.

¹⁵ The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) was reconstituted as the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro in 2003, following an orchestrated effort of the European Union. This Union ceased to exist in 2006 when Montenegro formally declared independence, following a referendum.

¹⁶ Please also see the paper on Montenegro in this special issue on this topic.

2003. Additionally, the census in Kosovo¹⁷ was not carried out at all, continuing the difficult census tradition there since 1981: “[A] census of population, households and dwellings has been carried out in the area of Central Serbia and Vojvodina, while the Census in Kosovo and Metohija is predicted when conditions are more favourable or, in another words, after the end of the United Nations Mission for temporary administration (UNMIK).”¹⁸ The census in Serbia was finally carried out from 1-15 April 2002. The results of the census showed a total of 7, 498, 001 inhabitants in Serbia (including Vojvodina), out of which almost 83 percent accounted for Serbs, with the rest being national or ethnic minorities.¹⁹ The questions on national affiliation, mother tongue and religion were open questions in the 2001 form, while the "citizenship" question was a closed one.²⁰ Unfortunately, data comparison to the 1991 census proved to be difficult due to substantial demographic changes caused by both the Yugoslav wars and the disastrous post-war economic situation and subsequent economic migration.²¹

The first census after the Yugoslav wars was expected to be difficult, and many challenges appeared: defining respondents' usual place of residence; colossal migration movements of population with groups of people of different statuses;²² ambiguity in economic activity due to the collapse of the state-run economy and the grey economy that thrived during the international isolation of Yugoslavia; blurred lines between household members and households; and the general mistrust of the population toward the census takers due to the possibility of data misuse.²³ Indeed, it was noted that “[m]assive forced migrations of population, [...] as well as the departure of a large number of young and educated persons from the country, due to the unstable economic situation, have contributed to a very unclear picture of demographic reality in Serbia and emphasize the need for data from the Census.”²⁴

¹⁷ Please also see the paper on Kosovo in this special issue on this topic.

¹⁸ UN Economic Commissioner for Europe, *Experiences in Preparation*.

¹⁹ Statistical Office of Republic of Serbia. 2002. *Final Results of the Census 2002*. 24 December 2002, issue LII (accessed: 24.October 2015).

²⁰ The possible answers were: FRY and Republic of Serbia; FRY and Republic of Montenegro; FRY, Republic of Serbia and foreign country; FRY, Republic of Montenegro and foreign country; Foreign; Without citizenship. Questions on national affiliation and religion were not obligatory in the 2001 census forms, as per the Constitution of the FRY. In the 2001 "Accessory questionnaire for Yugoslav citizens working abroad with foreign employer or working independently and for the members of the family living with them", the citizenship question was a closed question (citizen of FRY, citizen of FRY and other, without citizenship), while the national affiliation (not obligatory) and the native language were open questions. It appears there was no question on religious affiliation. This questionnaire also involved a question on whether the person was displaced from Kosovo, or a refugee from another part of former Yugoslavia.

²¹ As the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia has explained: “Permanent population by the definition from 1991 census includes the population in the country and the population temporarily employed abroad, as well as members of their families who accompanied them there. In line with international recommendations, the 2002 census includes the population in the country, Yugoslav citizens who had been employed abroad for less than a year, as well as foreign citizens who had worked in Yugoslavia for more than a year and their family members.” Ibid.

²² Either IDPs or refugees.

²³ UN Economic Commission for Europe. 2004. *Some Difficulties in Application of Recommendations 2000 in Serbian Census 2002*. Eurostat, Conference of European Statisticians, Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 11 November 2004, *Working Paper 17* (accessed: 25 October 2015).

²⁴ UN Economic Commissioner for Europe, *Experiences in Preparation*.

Difficulties in obtaining clear answers with respect to determining the “place of usual residence” were linked to the specific case of refugees: “The refugees were enumerated as permanent residents of Yugoslavia, and also as a population who migrated, under threat and pressure, from the (presently) foreign countries that were formed on the territory of former Yugoslavia.”²⁵ Matters were further complicated when it came to the status of refugees from *within* the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), as the census would seek to count all refugees from former SFRY republics and internally displaced persons from Kosovo and Metohija, “regardless of whether they have acquired the FRY citizenship or not.”²⁶ An extraordinary challenge presented itself in the Kosovo/Metohija case, despite the fact that the 2002 Census was not carried out on that territory, which resulted in the FRY authorities reasoning that, “this region is a constituent part of Serbia and Yugoslavia, and the population that fled to other parts of Serbia and Montenegro under pressure and threat, could not be considered as refugees in their own country. However, in order to secure all relevant data on these persons, they were conditionally treated as migrants, and they were obliged to furnish data on place of permanent residence in Kosovo and Metohija, and the time of arrival to present residence place.”²⁷

Challenges were also present in the monitoring of economic activity, mostly due to the abrupt change in the economic system of the country (with the entire Yugoslav-run economy still tied to the FRY). The status of (formally) employed, (formally) unemployed and all those in between “[...] necessitated monitoring of the economic situation and employment in a shorter sequence of time. The period of one year, which is typical for the approach of usual activity, cannot express the wide variety of work curricula of many employees in Yugoslavia.”²⁸ In addition, people were mostly “[...] reserved about data of agricultural holdings,” while pointing out the distrust of the population to authorities and the possibility of the misuse of data.²⁹ Despite the fact that the wars in Yugoslavia did not specifically take place on the territory of Serbia proper, “[...] Muslims, Croats, Hungarians and Albanians were subject to intimidation, harassment, discrimination and forced displacement, mainly by paramilitary groups.”³⁰ Thus, it is imperative to understand the differentiations among the main minorities in Serbia, whose economic and social status “vary greatly”.³¹

Roma, as stated above, are considered to be the most numerous ethnic minority group in Serbia (excluding Kosovo), despite the fact that according to the 2002 census data, they numbered only 108,193 (1.4% of the population), which would make them the third largest minority after Hungarians and Bosniaks/Muslims. Unofficial estimates vary anywhere from 300,000 to 800,000. Counting this population is consistently difficult. The Roma are arguably the most discriminated and impoverished ethnic group in Serbia, with the highest

²⁵ UN Economic Commission for Europe, *Difficulties in Application of Recommendations 2000*.

²⁶ UNECE, *Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in 2002*.

²⁷ UN Economic Commission for Europe, *Difficulties in Application of Recommendations 2000*.

²⁸ UN Economic Commission for Europe, *Difficulties in Application of Recommendations 2000*.

²⁹ UN Economic Commission for Europe, *Difficulties in Application of Recommendations 2000*.

³⁰ UN-HABITAT. 2005. *Housing and Property Rights – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia and Montenegro*, (accessed: 25 October 2015), 101.

³¹ European Centre for Minority Issues, *European Centre for Minority Issues*.

unemployment and illiteracy rates in the country, at approximately 80 percent of the overall population.³² Due to these factors, the challenges that the Roma community faced regarding participation in the census, and response to identity questions, were of a different nature than those of other minorities, who were much more effectively politically organized in particular regions of Serbia. Additionally, the political organization of the Roma is somewhat fragmented as the Roma population is spread across the country, unlike other minorities who are geographically more concentrated.³³

According to demographers, Vojvodina is becoming a less multicultural region, with 90 percent of the population identifying as ethnically Serbian by the end of the century and the remainder being split between Hungarians and Roma.³⁴ Counted at 293,299 in the 2002 census, or 3.91% of the population, the numbers of Hungarians living in Serbia who are concentrated in Vojvodina, have slowly yet consistently been dropping over the decades. Individual Hungarians' participation in the census exercise varied largely by municipality, with more than half of these municipalities showing a less than 10 percent participation of their respective citizens in the census. Traditionally the biggest and most organized ethnic minority in Vojvodina, and by official numbers the most populous minority in all of Serbia, the Hungarians participated in the census-taking exercise on both occasions. The reasons for the decrease are not necessarily political in nature, but are rather more straightforward: the population is aging, and many have left (or are leaving) for either Belgrade or other EU member states.

Vojvodina saw a change in its status in 2002 after shifting levels of autonomy in the preceding decades. Though it had been endowed with more extensive rights of self-rule in the 1974 Yugoslav constitution, its parliamentary influence decreased during Milosevic's time, when many of its autonomous powers were transferred to Belgrade. The fall of Milosevic in 2000 created a more open atmosphere of reform, resulting in the passing of the omnibus law which gave Vojvodina increased freedom to establish and administer its own institutions, allowing local policymakers to better address the needs of the citizens of this province within the oversight of central governmental bodies.³⁵

The Albanians in Serbia's south have boycotted the census since 1981, and the refusal to participate in political life in Belgrade spiraled out of control in 2000 when an armed conflict erupted after Serbian troops retreating from Kosovo clashed with local paramilitaries. The initial objective of the Liberation Army of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja (UCPBM), was to join the three municipalities with Kosovo.³⁶ With tensions high in the economically poor Presevo valley, the participation of the Albanians in the 2002 census exercise

³² OSCE, *Ethnic Minorities in Serbia*, 20.

³³ Orlovic, Slavisa. 2011. Politicko predstavljanje nacionalnih manjina – Srbija u komparativnoj perspektivi [Political presentation of national minorities – Serbia from a comparative perspective]. *Migracijske i etnicke teme* 27(3), 393-417.

³⁴ Orlovic, *Politicko predstavljanje nacionalnih manjina*.

³⁵ See, e.g., Petsinis, Vassilis. 2003. Vojvodina's National Minorities: Current Realities and Future Prospects. *Spacesofidentity* 3(3), 7-32.

³⁶ Adams, Jim. 2002. Serbia: Census Deal Resolves Presevo Crisis. *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, 17 April 2002 (accessed: 25 October 2015).

became an important issue to political leaders in Belgrade as well as in the Serbian South. Ultimately, the OSCE Mission to the FRY brokered a deal with local leaders and agreed to complement the municipal census commission with OSCE representatives through a “confidence-building” measure, in which a decision was made to send in “small teams of international staff members complemented by experienced local staff” as per the appeal of both Serbian authorities and representatives of the Albanian community in Southern Serbia “for the OSCE to facilitate and assist the census process.”³⁷ At the signing of the deal with central authorities in Belgrade, Riza Halimi, mayor of Presevo and leader of the Party of Democratic Action (PDA), declared that “[a]fter 21 years we have made moves towards having a proper census in this area and we hope displaced people can take part in the forthcoming extraordinary local elections as well.”³⁸ This also provoked a reaction from the Serbian community living in the Presevo valley, as fears escalated that the census would show their decline in numbers and lead to “[...] an Albanian take-over in local government.”³⁹ Thus, the census was a strongly politicized exercise, with people taking part in the discussions based solely on their ethnic affiliation.

The Albanian community numbered 61,647, with an absolute majority population in Presevo (89 percent) and Bujanovac (55 percent), and 26 percent in Medvedja.⁴⁰ Census forms were in both the Serbian and Albanian languages.⁴¹ The organization of the 2002 census should be seen as a sign of significant progress in Southern Serbia, as it was the first formal cooperation between the central authorities and the local authorities in that region since the Kosovo war. It formed a base for future political dialogue, despite that fact that the Albanian community did not formally establish the National Council of the Albanian National Minority (as other minorities have)⁴².

One of the most interesting communities in Serbia are the Bosniaks, who distinguish themselves on an ethnic, religious and linguistic platform. The Bosniak community, predominantly located in Sandzak in Serbia, found itself in a complicated situation during the census rounds with multiple factors to take into account. These include the stigma and flight of refugees from the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and *their* self-identification; a heated debate on the name of the language (Bosniak versus Serbo-Croatian, and later Serbian); and confusion on the distinction between Muslims and Bosniaks, and whether this

³⁷ OSCE (b). 2002. *OSCE starts to take up its role in census in southern Serbia*. OSCE, 5 April 2002 (accessed: 25 October 2015).

³⁸ Adams, *Serbia: Census Deal Resolves Presevo Crisis*.

³⁹ Adams, *Serbia: Census Deal Resolves Presevo Crisis*.

⁴⁰ OSCE, *Ethnic Minorities in Serbia*, 7.

⁴¹ Janjic, Dusan. n.d. *Challenges of the Peace Process in the South of Serbia*, 73.

⁴² The OSCE and the international community were then subsequently involved in organizing the extra-ordinary local elections in Presevo Valley, which “[...] resulted in Albanians leading local government in Bujanovac and Presevo and the participation of the Albanian ethnic party in the Medvedja municipality since 2002, in OSCE, *Ethnic Minorities in Serbia*, 7.

With regards to continued cooperation with Belgrade, the presidential elections held later that year were met with very low enthusiasm from the Albanian population. The Party of the Democratic Union of Albanians and the Movement for Democratic Progress called for a boycott. On the other hand, the PDA called on its supporters to participate. OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report. 2003. *Presidential elections and repeat presidential elections 2002*, 18 February 2003 (accessed: 25 October 2015), 12.

was even a distinction to be made.⁴³ Most Bosniak leaders advocated for self-identification as “Bosniak” and urged the population to declare Bosniak as their native language, thus replacing the traditional pattern of Bosniaks identifying themselves as “Muslims” since the 1971 census.⁴⁴ This was propagated as a key theme by Rasim Ljajic, leader of Sandzak’s Democratic Party, and Esad Dzudzevic of the Bosniak Democratic Party of Sandzak.⁴⁵ Contrary to the reaction of Bosniaks in the Sandzak region, the Muslims in Belgrade and Novi Sad were not so keen on following these calls, and chose instead to continue to self-identify as Muslims.

The 2002 census saw the identification of 136,087 citizens as Bosniaks, and 19,053 as Muslims, with a majority Bosniak population in Novi Pazar, Sjenica, and Tutin, while Serbs were the majority in Priboj, Prijepolje and Nova Varos.⁴⁶ The Sandzak region as a whole experienced the departure of many Serbians, but this was largely explained by economic reasons (structural unemployment), an argument put forward by Bosniak parties who have argued that Sandzak’s demographic changes were neither a result of political nor national pressure.⁴⁷

The 2002 census was conducted in a highly volatile political, social and economic time in Serbia, then still a constituent entity of the FRY. Due to significant population shifts following the end of the conflicts in the Balkans, coupled with the October ousting of Milosevic, tensions among minorities were exacerbated. Contestation was practically inevitable, particularly with respect to the south of the country and the Albanian minority. Initially unwilling to take part, the participation of the Albanian minority was largely brokered by the OSCE in what should be seen as a successful initiative. Thus, overall, the conducting of the 2002 census can be considered to be a successful technical exercise despite the initial contestation by the Albanians.

Serbia 2011

The organization of the census in 2011 was particularly significant for the state, both politically and otherwise, as it was the first census undertaken after Kosovo’s declaration of independence in 2008. The question of its exclusion from the 2011 census was contentious, as Belgrade’s refusal to recognize Kosovo as a separate country did not automatically exclude its citizens from being counted. Indeed, census-taking in Kosovo had been problematic for years; ethnic Albanians boycotted the census of 1991, and the conditions in place for the 2002 census precluded it from being counted. Belgrade cited this same reason for excluding Kosovo from the 2011 census, stating that there were “no conditions on the territory of [Kosovo] for the implementation of the census.”⁴⁸

⁴³ The evolution of the identity of Serbia’s Muslims and/or Bosniaks remains an important issue to be studied in more detail, and future publications will certainly contribute to the literature.

⁴⁴ Biserko, *Human Rights*, 339.

⁴⁵ Biserko, *Human Rights*, 340.

⁴⁶ Biserko, *Human Rights*, 338.

⁴⁷ Biserko, *Human Rights*, 338.

⁴⁸ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia. 2013. 2011 Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in the Republic of Serbia: Population: Religion, Mother Tongue and Ethnicity. Belgrade: 2013, 12, On census-taking in Kosovo, see the paper by Mehmet Musaj in this Special Issue.

The Serbian census was launched on 30 September 2011, and lasted from 1-15 October, with enumeration extended from 16-18 October and until 20 October in the bigger cities. (Initially, the census was to take place in the first two weeks of April, but was postponed due to funding.⁴⁹) The census was a traditional face-to-face census with interviewers, based on the Census Law adopted in December 2009 and amended in March 2011.⁵⁰ International funding was secured mostly through the support of the EU.⁵¹ The census forms were available in English and in eight languages, reflecting the largest national minorities (Hungarian, Albanian, Roma, Slovakian, Ruthenian, Romanian, Bulgarian, and Macedonian). The results confirmed a population of 7,186,862 (a decline of 4.2% from 2002), with 83 percent of the population declaring itself as Serbian.⁵² There was a slight decline in the overall population of Vojvodina, from 2,031,992 in 2002 to 1,931,809 in 2011.

The Hungarian population in the north, representing the largest official minority in Serbia by census figures, has taken issue with the Serbian government, slamming heads on topics such as post-Second World War reparations, among others.⁵³ The Hungarian minority has consistently been fighting for more minority rights, but on a politically more advanced platform than other minority parties. For instance, Prime Minister Vucic has invited the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (SVM) to join the coalition government in 2014⁵⁴, which resulted in a functioning partnership between the coalition and the Alliance. The Alliance holds seats in both the National Assembly and the Assembly of Vojvodina (where it is part of the coalition government), thus capitalizing on their political weight to push for their national interests. Active participation in the census is part of this. Such initiatives have helped the Hungarian minority become more integrated into political life, reflected in greater participation in the 2011 census.

As seen in the 2002 census, some minorities in Serbia are prone to greater difficulties and even to discrimination as a result of their preferred self-

⁴⁹ “Pursuant to the Law on the Census of Population, Households and Dwellings (“The Official Gazette of the RS,” no. 104/09), the 2011 Census was envisaged for the period from 1–15 April 2011. However, the sufficient funds for its preparation and field implementation were not provided in time in the budget of the Republic of Serbia. After an agreement had been reached between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the European Commission (the Delegation of the European Union in the Republic of Serbia) on the joint financing of the census activities, the Law on the Amendments to the Law on the Census of Population, Households and Dwellings 2011 was passed (“The Official Gazette of the RS,” no. 24/11) and thereby the enumeration was postponed by six months.” “Annex to: The 2011 round of Population and Housing censuses in the Western Balkan countries in the context of the political situation and technical preparedness: a comparative analysis with a main focus on ethnicity and citizenship”, 25.

⁵⁰ Approximately 41, 000 people were hired to conduct the census.

⁵¹ “The budget for the 2011 Census in Serbia was EUR 24.8 million. The Census was financially supported by the European Union with an IPA 2011 grant of about 14 million €, which covered approximately 60% of the total cost.

⁵² Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia. 2012. 2011 Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in the Republic of Serbia: Ethnicity (accessed: 25 October 2015).

⁵³ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, *Population: Religion, Mother Tongue and Ethnicity*, 21.

⁵⁴ Caloianu, Ioana / Druker, Jeremy / Frye, Barbara and Ky Krauthamer. 2014. Vucic Invites Hungarians Into Serbian Government, Chechen Warlord 'Neutralized. *Transitions Online*, 9 April 2014 (accessed: 25 October 2015).

identification. These problems are persistent and equally true for the 2011 round, and have been documented extensively by the media, NGOs, and international organizations.⁵⁵ Roma, perhaps the most numerous of these minority groups (when taking into account other numbers estimated to be much larger than reflected in the census), continue to be discriminated against and subjected to human rights abuses and negligence. The census numbers for Serbia's Roma population are estimated to be two to three times larger than reflected, even when considering the relative success of the 2011 census in increasing the number of registered Roma participants by 40%.⁵⁶ Recorded numbers for Roma in the 2011 census total 147,604; the Council of Europe estimates actual numbers to be around 400,000, making the Roma the second largest minority group within Serbia (after the Hungarians).⁵⁷ The 40% increase in numbers since the 2002 census is of particular significance administratively, as these figures translate directly into assigned quotas for state administration and police employment. Thus, the higher number necessitates increased hiring of Roma in positions in public enterprises, institutions, and the media. However, the Roma as a group continue to have considerably weaker political lobbying power and are often shunted to the side as more "pressing" issues are discussed by elites. Indeed, they represent the majority of "legally invisible" persons in Serbia, encountering immense difficulty in obtaining personal documents. While some programs and initiatives have been instituted to aid the Roma population, mere gesturing on the part of political elites has more often been the norm, as will be discussed.

The plight of the Roma continues to be overlooked, as the problems that this "silent" minority faces are politically over-shadowed by the issues presented by another minority: the ethnic Albanians, largely concentrated in Southern Serbia. As noted above, they constitute the majority in Bujanovac and Presevo, and tensions again came to a head in late 2012 and early 2013. The illegal erection of a monument to fallen KLA fighters, spearheaded by ethnic Albanians in Presevo and located in the town center, led to an uproar in Belgrade. After weeks of vacillation on the part of the Serbian government and numerous requests to have ethnic Albanian authorities move the monument, which fell on deaf ears, authorities in Belgrade eventually removed it. Compounded with issues such as language instruction in schools, as well as tensions left over from the conflict in Kosovo, ethnic Albanians are often viewed with distrust, and Serbia's political elites have capitalized on this distrust in anti-minority rhetoric that they enshroud with pro-Serb, nationalist terms.

The 2011 census only underscored the growing tensions in these areas. Notably, it was not the official census results that worried politicians; it was the lack thereof, as ethnic Albanians largely boycotted the census. Additionally, it was reported that no one collected census materials from purely Albanian villages.⁵⁸ While the number of Albanians in Serbia is estimated to number

⁵⁵ See, e.g., Matic, Marko. 2012. *Manjine u Srbiji – meta drzavne represije* [Minorities in Serbia – target of state repression]. *Al Jazeera*, 7 June 2012 (accessed: 25 October 2015).

⁵⁶ Jovanovic, Zeljko and Mensur Haliti. 2012. *Roma Feel Less Fear and More Hope After Census*. *Open Society Foundation*, 12 December 2012 (accessed: 25 October 2015).

⁵⁷ Jovanovic and Haliti, *Roma Feel Less Fear*.

⁵⁸ *Danas*, 5 October 2011, cited in Biserko, *Human Rights*.

around 50,000, only 5,809 were counted in census results.⁵⁹ The monument incident in Presevo highlighted the potential for conflict that arises as a result of demographic and ethnic tensions. More significantly, the 2011 census showed how a task that is purely administrative in theory can quickly take on ethnic, religious, and political overtones in practice, leading to division and dissent within a state and within a society. The 2011 census was useful not only in providing data, but also in bringing to light tensions that had been simmering quietly – including, but not limited to, questions of language instruction, alphabet, religious freedom, and others. Belgrade’s resolution of the incident has only temporarily quelled a growingly problematic situation. The EU applauded Serbia’s attempt to be more inclusive of minorities during the census-taking exercise, noting that it “included provisions facilitating the participation of minorities.”⁶⁰ However, it likewise notes that implementation of relevant legislation needs to be undertaken before any true progress can be made in the long-term.

Further evidence of posturing by political elites in respect to the minority question heated up in the time before parliamentary elections were held in March 2014. Rasim Ljajic, Minister of Foreign and Domestic Trade and Telecommunications, visited the area around Pirot in Southern Serbia in February 2014. In a speech given there, he told attendees that his party, in coalition with the leading Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), would give more attention to the plight of minorities in Serbia, focusing in particular on Roma citizens and the elderly.⁶¹ Ljajic’s rhetoric is commendable and his position as not only a member of the political elite, but also as a Sandzak Muslim, gives him credibility and leverage in respect to minority rights. However, it remains to be seen what policies will be put in place to effectively address minority issues, particularly in light of the resounding success of SPS in the parliamentary elections held a month later.

Ljajic’s position in respect to the Albanian minority in South Serbia has been more clearly delineated, in keeping with the greater complexity of the situation and the events that had gone on in Presevo. The lack of participation by this minority in the 2011 census only underscored ongoing problems in the area, and the subsequent Presevo incident just brought these tensions to light. On the January 2013 morning of the removal of the controversial monument in Presevo, Minister Ljajic stated that it would be impossible for South Serbia to ever move its borders so that these Albanian-majority towns could become part of Kosovo. More importantly, he cautioned that it would be in ethnic Albanians’ best interests to align themselves with Belgrade instead of with Pristina or Tirana. He also stated that the removal of the illegally erected monument was the only option left to state authorities, as requests to have it moved from the center of town to a more appropriate location went unheeded.⁶² Ljajic’s words

⁵⁹ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, *Population: Religion, Mother Tongue and Ethnicity*, 21.

⁶⁰ European Commission. 2012. Commission Staff Working Document: Serbia 2012 Progress Report. *European Commission*. Brussels: 10 October 2012.

⁶¹ N.N. 2014. *Ljajic: Paznja manjinama, starima i penzionerima* [Ljajic: Attention to minorities, elderly, and pensioners]. *Mondo*, 13 February 2014 (accessed: 25 October 2015).

⁶² N.D. 2013. *Albanci sa juga da se okrenu BG* [Albanians in the South should turn to Belgrade]. *B92*, 20 January 2013 (accessed: 25 October 2015).

were heavy, yet used strategically as Belgrade sought to avoid repeating any potential conflict that could ensue.

The importance of such rhetoric in respect to EU aspirations is high, as Belgrade must tread a thin line between sounding authoritarian and condoning discrimination, versus potentially sacrificing its sovereign rights in deference to incendiary and/or illegal actions. The wariness of the government, especially in regards to its Albanian minority, cannot be overstated, especially given the events of the past ten years, and Belgrade seeks to minimize the potential for any future problems. Belgrade risks angering the EU by dealing with these issues with too firm a hand, and as such, increased prudence and more proactive attempts to deal with minority problems have been encouraged. Carried out nine years after the prior census, the 2011 census was undertaken in a different context, with the EU heavily investing both in this census and in those undertaken throughout the rest of Europe. Indeed, it funded 60 percent of the exercise in Serbia. The change in contestation among ethnic Albanians between the censuses of 2002 and 2011 underscored that the issues present in the 2002 census remain extant and continue to be of concern, especially insofar as they continue to be politicized and leveraged by political elites. Indeed, as it stands now, the contestation of the census in 2011 foreshadowed the continuing issues of contention, as seen not only in 2013, but even today, such as with the Albanian push to set up an association of municipalities in southern Serbia, similar to the association of Serbian municipalities in Kosovo.⁶³

Conclusion

Census-taking is considered to be a statistical and technical exercise of considerable importance to every country, as the data it provides is crucial to policy planning in key sectors. Census-taking also requires repetition, because it establishes a continuum of vital socio-economic data. In the context of multiethnic and multi-religious states, however, the census exercise becomes a more delicate and politically challenging question, bringing questions of identity to the forefront of debate in a society. This can be exacerbated in polarizing settings and in countries where conflicts have resulted in a large displacement of persons and where the consequences of the war are still visible, as with the unfinished returns of refugees. It has equally proven to be a contested exercise in countries with sizeable minorities where the “central” power has proven to be close to the country’s majority.

It is in the Western Balkans that many of these challenges are omnipresent. Additionally, the region is under the close auspices of the European Union, which, through the prospect of membership, offers clear incentives and funding to complete tasks deemed problematic. Though uninvolved in the 2002 round of census-taking, the EU heavily invested in the 2011 European-wide census, ensuring that they both comply with European standards. Not only has the European Union provided technical and substantial financial assistance, it also funded 60% percent of the census exercise in Serbia.

⁶³ Jovanovic, Igor. 2015. *Serbia’s Albanians Plot Their Own Municipal Union*. *Balkan Insight*, 11 September 2015 (accessed: 25 October 2015).

Both rounds of censuses have seen important contestation from minorities in Serbia. Resulting from border changes, dramatic movements of population, and fear of centralization of power in Belgrade, Serbia's minorities have been in doubt about their future in the country. This had not entirely changed in the nine years between the 2002 and 2011 censuses, and the results reflected the internal dynamic in ethnically mixed areas in Serbia. While on one hand, some national minorities remain well-integrated in Serbia, such as Hungarians or Slovaks in Vojvodina, others feel threatened and abandoned by the central government, such as Albanians and Bosniaks, while a third group, the Roma, are not genuinely reflected in their actual numbers, nor effectively organized on a national level.

The implications of these findings are thus two-fold: they both define the state-of-play of "majority versus minority" dynamics in Serbia and demonstrate that unresolved issues can begin to be addressed through approximation with the EU *acquis communautaire* and further advances in the EU integration process, increasing the likelihood that the objective of EU integration can help facilitate advances in minority rights. Firstly, both census rounds in Serbia illuminated the outstanding issues that persist in the country, particularly related to minority questions. The lessons from these censuses should oblige the Serbian authorities to create a more favorable and inclusive environment for its minorities. In fact there was a clear difference in the general tone and the atmosphere in which the 2002 and the 2011 censuses were conducted: the former took place in a soul-searching phase between the East and the West, while the 2011 census exercise took place during Serbia's increased orientation towards the European Union and Western values. However, there is still much room for improvement in both enumeration and the use of the results in policy-making.

EU regulation, guidance, and monetary support for the 2011 census helped ensure that the administrative component of census-taking was more in line with the interests of Serbia's minority citizens, making it easier for them to participate (though whether they chose to actually do so was a different matter). Providing census forms in multiple languages, for example, as per the stipulations of the *acquis communautaire*, helped facilitate a more inclusive census-taking exercise the second time around. This effort was recognized by the EU, as noted, and future efforts to ensure minority integration will likely continue by proxy through Serbia's continued interest in staying on the path to accession. Thus, the direct aid of the EU, as well as its indirect influence with the "carrot" of accession, have allowed for small steps in minority integration into censuses and will potentially facilitate greater inclusion in the future.

In conclusion, Serbia has proven to be an interesting case study for the analysis of a complex census-taking exercise: heterogeneous populations with varying degrees of polarization; contestation of census conduct; politicization of the exercise itself; and the ubiquitous presence of the European Union in the 2011 round. What will be the biggest challenge for the next round of census in Serbia, most probably taking place in 2021? To create an environment in which *all* ethnic minorities will participate in the exercise and feel included in the state.

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