

# Counting for EU enlargement?

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## Valorisation addendum

## Introduction

It is commonly believed that censuses are a purely technical exercise. However, in reality the collection of population data is highly political, and many laypeople do not understand the implications and possible complications inherent in the collection of population data. As censuses in the Netherlands are conducted via registers, many Dutch citizens are unaware of the process of data collection. In Germany, where in 2011 the first census was taken since the 80's, the topic of census-taking was long neglected.<sup>36</sup> As census-taking is already a complicated process in established democracies such as Germany, one might expect that in post-conflict countries with less stable institutions, there are even more obstacles when it comes to the population count. For example, the countries in the Western Balkans, which are except for Albania all countries that were part of former Yugoslavia, there is a wide variation in recent census outcomes. These countries are however also prospective members of the European Union (EU) and since the census is part of the *acquis communautaire*, the full body of EU rules and norms, there is considerable pressure on enlargement countries to comply with the EU census regulations.

This thesis assesses the census processes in three of the Western Balkan countries Croatia, Bosnia and Macedonia, which are all (or in the case of Croatia were) part of EU enlargement and as such have to comply with the EU regulations, but show different outcomes when it comes to census-taking. Croatia's 2011 census was successful, whereas Bosnia's 2013 census was the first census after the wars (1992-1995) and long delayed. Macedonia's 2011 census was aborted after the enumeration started.

## The politics of numbers

Censuses were already conducted in ancient Babylon 6000 years ago (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2006, p. 9). Whereas in the beginning the data was purely used to count people, it currently also includes the collection of data on social and economic life (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2006, p. 9). As the first tool to collect data on complete populations, the census can be seen as the mother of big data. Big data nowadays is a term 'to mark a departure from conventional

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<sup>36</sup> Due to protests based on the fear of invasion of personal privacy, Germany stopped collecting census data after 1987 (in West Germany population numbers have been based on municipality registers, and in the former East Germany the last population data is from 1990). Population data was thus based on estimates until the 2011 census, which revealed that the total population was 1.5 million less than expected, which in the end led to a decrease in subsidies for municipalities and cities where the number of inhabitants was lower than anticipated (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2013).

forms of data and statistical knowledge' (Ruppert, Isin, & Bigo, 2017, p. 2), but has different meanings and applications. It remains nonetheless crucial to study where such data derives from and how this data is collected, as this can have serious implications for its validity and reliability.

Even more important is that the data may have a severe impact on the life of the people behind the numbers: the citizens. As census data is used to allocate resources, for example the distribution of funds and subsidies, ultimately some profit more than others, which makes census processes highly political and even more so, when rights of minority and ethnic groups are connected to the census outcomes, as in the case countries. In Croatia minority rights are linked to the census results (Petričušić, 2002). In Bosnia the population data of 1991 is linked to the Dayton Peace Agreement, which divides the political system among the three constituent ethnic groups (Bosniak, Croat and Serb) (Armakolas & Maksimovic, 2014; Bieber, 2004). In Macedonia, the census is linked to the Ohrid Framework Agreement which stopped the armed conflict between ethnic Albanians and Macedonians in 2001, and according to which minorities making up more than 20% of the population receive language rights and proportional representation in the police and bureaucracy (Brunnbauer, 2002; Vasilev, 2013). In general these outcomes show that there should be more awareness of the fact that censuses are always political processes and can feed existing tensions. Since census data is used for policy-making, ultimately some will gain and others will lose on the basis of the census data. There should also be more awareness of the political implications that are inherent to census-taking, especially if the census results are linked to peace agreements and minority rights. These situations call for more additional measures, such as supervision through international monitoring missions and/or a clear agreement on the census regulations by all actors involved.

When data is collected, people are quantified into categories with which they have to identify. Inclusion or exclusion based these categories is best described by the saying: 'If you are not counted, you do not exist'. To gain attention and rights, people have to be visible, and counting is one way to be seen, as has been highlighted in chapter 4 of this research by addressing the paradox of collecting ethnic and cultural data. This paradox entails that if a minority group is not counted, it is also not recognised. However, if counted, that group can be affected by discrimination, either in a positive or a negative way. Especially after the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia, issues of ethnicity and geographic belonging developed into tools for ethnic bargaining over borders, rights and political representation (Visoka & Gjevori, 2013, p. 6). Whereas until the dissolution of the country in 1991, identity questions in Yugoslavian censuses were common and based on self-identification (Bieber, 2015, p. 10), the census questionnaires in Croatia and Bosnia nowadays are a mix of closed and open answers favouring the most prominent

ethnic groups. When the census questionnaire includes questions on ethnic and cultural belonging, such as ethnicity, language and religion, it not only provides an overview of the demographic, social and economic characteristics of a country's population (Valente, 2010), but also creates an opportunity for individuals to identify as being part of this population (Ruppert, 2007). As such the census can be used as a tool for state building, but potentially also misused to (re)assure legitimacy and supremacy over others.

The implications that can follow from this is not only restricted to census data and can for example be extended to the collection of data on migration (Broeders & Dijstelbloem, 2016). We have to be careful while categorising people into groups and the potential consequences that might follow. A typical example is Germany, where due to the abuse of the Sinti lists by the Nazi police it is not allowed to register minorities (Salentin & Schmeets, 2017, p. 7). There is no easy answer to the paradox of whether or not ethno-cultural data should be collected; however, in the light of increasing numbers of refugees and minority groups, as well as more right wing and populist parties, awareness of this paradox and its potential implications is paramount.

## **Counting to be counted - EU enlargement**

Not only is census data important for the national statistics, but also within the context of the European Union. As evidence-based decision making is becoming more important, the need for reliable and harmonised data is increasing. Therefore the EU has made it mandatory for its members to have a decennial population count. The census is included in the *acquis communautaire* and thus also important for the enlargement countries. They do not officially need to comply with the EU regulations as they are not yet members, but it is highly recommended that they do so.

This thesis addresses the puzzle of why, despite the EU conditions being the same for all three countries, there are differences in compliance with the EU census regulations in Croatia, Bosnia and Macedonia. Whereas Croatia had a complete census with almost no complications, Bosnia's census has significant delays and Macedonia's census was aborted. The results of this research show that the influence of the EU, as well as domestic actors in the census processes is of high importance. In addition, this project also highlighted the political nature of the census processes, especially if the census includes questions on ethnic and cultural characteristics. The case analysis of chapter 5 and 6 showed that in Bosnia and Macedonia domestic actors hindered the census processes in order to favour the dominant population groups.

The analysis in chapter 5 has shown that Bosnia and Macedonia needed financial and/or technical assistance when conducting a census. One finding from the Macedonian case was that a shorter and smaller operation is not necessarily a viable solution. If there is assistance, it should be sufficient and tailored to the situation at hand. The tailoring to the situation at hand should also be relevant for the enlargement process in general. This thesis has shown that there is no one-size-fits-all process of enlargement into the EU. After Croatia became an EU member in 2013, enlargement currently seems to be on hold. Internal EU issues and Brexit seem to be more important than bringing the remaining Western Balkan countries into the Union. Enlargement, however, was conceived with the intention to spread peace and prosperity, and if taken serious by all actors involved, it is a powerful tool. In March 2017, the European Council reaffirmed its 'unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans' (European Commission, 2018). The prospect of the inclusion of the remaining Balkan countries and the, even though at times very slow, progress should be something that should not be nullified by taking away the prospect of ever becoming a member of the EU.

Next to the willingness of the EU to accept new members, are of course the countries in the Western Balkans who have to step up and show that they are worthy of becoming EU members. This research has shown in chapter 6 that the domestic context and actors should not be underestimated when it comes to census-taking, and this also holds for the enlargement process in general. Recently, Macedonia has made enormous progress and the name dispute with Greece seems to be almost resolved, which could finally start the membership negotiations. How this will affect the future plans for a census remains to be seen, but this research has highlighted the ethno-cultural sensitivities present in the country which need to be taken into account in any future census and enlargement plans. With regard to Bosnia, there is however less good news. Even though the census data has finally been published, the same issues as always seem to present themselves. Next to the publication of the census results, another step in the right direction would be to find a solution to the Sejdić-Finci case<sup>37</sup> and to increase political equality. Once there is development in the Balkans towards the EU principles there might be hope for future enlargement.

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<sup>37</sup> Under the Dayton Peace Accord only members of the three main constituent groups can be elected for the House of Peoples or for the Presidency in Bosnia. Dervo Sejdić and Jakob Finci are Bosnian citizens, but respectively Roma and Jewish. However, to stand for the elections, they would have to be a member of one of the main constituent groups (Bosniak, Croat or Serb). The European Court of Human Rights found that this was discriminatory and Bosnia's 'constitution remains in breach of the European Convention on Human Rights' (European Commission, 2018).

## **Dissemination of results**

The results of this research are important for the academic world, where research on census-taking especially within the framework of Europeanisation is a novelty. Next to this, the results are of importance for the National Statistical Institutes and the Directorate General European Statistics (DG ESTAT) of the European Commission (Eurostat) as they highlight the sensitivities, which need to be taken into account in census-taking processes. Furthermore, the results are interesting for international organisations, such as the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

To answer the research question of this thesis, two different methods were used to gather the data. In-depth interviews were complemented with survey data that was collected in two different rounds. This data is not only of crucial value for this research, but could potentially be used for follow-up research and be of interest for the international census community. The survey results in particular could be used for example to review the Conference of European Statisticians census recommendations and potentially also the EU census regulations. The results from this thesis are thus not only of value for the academic world, but contribute to a better understanding of census-taking in general and among European Statisticians and decision makers in particular.

The results of this research may have a direct impact on the next census round, which includes all censuses from 2015 until 2024. Croatia, the case country which now is a member of the EU, will have to comply with EU census regulations. The results of this research show that other enlargement countries, such as Bosnia and Macedonia, who had difficulties in their last censuses, will also require technical and financial assistance in the next census round. As minority and linguistic rights are connected to the census outcomes, the next censuses in these countries will also be highly political undertakings. This research has demonstrated that in addition to support by the EU, the domestic context is crucially important, and that past experience and better scores on state capacity do not guarantee a good census, as was visible in Macedonia. When planning a census, domestic developments, especially when there is domestic contestation, need to be taken into account. This should be taken on board in the EU census regulations and emphasised in the Conference of European Statisticians recommendations by the UNECE.

To disseminate the results, preliminary results were presented at several academic conferences, including the Association for the Study of Nationalities World Convention at Columbia University in April 2014. This study was also supported by an external advisory board, which included members working at Eurostat and Statistics Netherlands. In addition, visits have been made to

the Conference of European Statisticians Recommendations on the population census of the UNECE in Geneva in September 2013 and in September/October 2015. A short academic visit was made to the ARITHMUS project at Goldsmiths, University of London in November 2016. Next to this, some preliminary results were presented at the Fifth International Conference of Balkans Demography in in October 2015 in Ohrid, where not only people from Eurostat and the UNECE were present, but also all census experts from the National Statistical Offices of all the Western Balkan countries.

In addition, two of the three chapters of this thesis have already been published as academic articles, and the third empirical chapter is currently being revised for resubmission. Another academic article has been published during the time of this project, which however only analyses the 2011 census in Croatia (Hoh, 2015) and therefore is not part of this thesis. Apart from these academic contributions a policy note discussing the challenges and controversies of census-taking in the Western Balkans was published with the Democratization Policy Council in 2016.