

## Political meaning of numbers – the population census of 2011 in the Republic of Macedonia

According to the National Geographic Magazine by the end of this month the world population will reach 7 billion. The world faces new challenge – overpopulation. New policy strategies for development are created regarding the approximations of fertility rate in the next decades. The population censuses in China, India, Bangladesh and Rwanda show that even if the governments implement the most draconic provisions (like the “one child policy” in China or the sterilization of the population in some states in India) the increase in world population is inevitable. While the international community and the countries mostly affected with overpopulation, are making efforts in predicting different scenarios and strategies for facing the problems that might come out in the future, the countries in the Western Balkans (WB) seem to be preoccupied with other problems that arise from the specific historical and political context of the region regarding the population censuses.

The population census is a statistical operation that provides government and other stakeholders with factual information on the most valuable resources – the human resources in order to prepare and conduct short and long term policies for community development. But in the WB this operation usually turns into an opportunity for ethnic hostilities and first class political arguments.

Republic of Macedonia has its population census held this month and proved itself as a tailor- made example of the so called “Balkan trauma” with population censuses. Serbia and Albania also scheduled population

censuses for the beginning of October. Minority groups in Serbia (Ethnic Albanians and Bosniaks) declared boycott to the country’s census due to disagreements over the ethnicity of data collectors and the language the census forms have been written in. In Macedonia there was resistance towards the final result of the census even before the start of the operation.

The President of the Commission for census resigned on the basis of her conviction that the census will be forged. Albanian party leaders along with some CSOs at first, including the Government after the beginning of the census also supported the claims that we were about to have non-transparent problematic population census. In this line the misunderstandings were regarding the methodology of the census. Most of the Albanian census takers shared the understanding that citizens can be counted even if they show photocopied IDs. Also there was a misunderstanding of the European standard that those citizens that live more than one year abroad cannot be counted and leaders of different ethnic groups interpret this differently, as number of people holding Macedonian passport live abroad and only visit their families in Macedonia during the holidays.

The general impression is that there was not a serious institutional approach toward organizing this operation regardless of the official statements given in the beginning from institutions engaged in the census and the claims of Eurostat monitoring mission that even though Macedonia is a complex case, the overall preparations for the census were well considered. Media reported cases of technically unprepared municipalities and deficiency of census takers in some regions. Census takers trainings were held late and not in the languages of the ethnic communities. Towards this, came the government’s final decision to suspend the census completely. Before the decision, the whole Commission for census along with the newly appointed President resigned as a result of the apparent

irregularities of the whole procedure and assumptions that falsification of the actual result would happen due to political obstructions.

The major origin of the political problematization of the operation derives from the question: Will the numbers legitimize the power sharing model established with the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) as it was with the last census in 2002? The problems do not originate from the classical model of the census and one should dive in the core of it in order to understand the possible consequences coming from it.

In fact, the consociational elements of the Macedonian political system are based on population numbers. It is compatible with Donald Horowitz economic theory of ethnic conflicts or the one stating that potential source of ethnical conflicts is ethnic rivalry for economical resources and values that are socially respected. In a country with overall weak economy performances and high unemployment rates, the state is the biggest employer, which makes working in the public administration highly desirable position. The proportional representation means the bigger the percentage of the ethnic segment in the overall number of the population, that higher the chances to take part of the economical resources in the country.

It seems that the only way to transcend the ethnical approach towards every question posed in our society is to implement more integration – like mechanisms in the functioning of the Macedonian political system. The model of integration without assimilation according which different ethnic groups share common values and are oriented towards mutual collaboration is the only way considerable for the future of Macedonian society. Only then we can hope for transparent and technically well organized census and maybe even an e – census conducted via the Internet.

In the future political actors should show stronger political will and responsibility toward respecting the European standards prescribed, since

the main and final goal of the census is to supply accurate, diligent and comparable data on the population and households.

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