







Weekly Briefing

Montenegro social briefing:
Population census - subject to manipulation and deepening divisions
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Summary

The upcoming Census, at first glance, may seem like a technical statistical operation, but in reality, it becomes a politicized social issue and a field for manipulation. Calls for postponement by certain political parties and the non-governmental sector additionally point to the complexity of the situation and the huge scope for abuse of the census. The legitimacy of the census will certainly be questioned. Nevertheless, the pro-Serbian parties see the census as an opportunity to define a long-term political agenda in Montenegro based on influence and current power, which would be based on nationalism.

Introduction

The population census in Montenegro was announced for the period November 1-15 this year.¹ Although the Law on the Census was passed in February, many doubted the exact date of the census, considering that it should have been held earlier. Also, although it is not a practice for the census to be held in an election year, the Prime Minister in his technical mandate categorically refused to postpone the census.² Three of the approximately eighty questions in the census focus on ethnicity, religion and language. This information has become crucial for political parties, especially those around the former Democratic Front, which are trying to change the ethnic and linguistic structure of the country in order to achieve their political goals.³

Why is the population census so problematic?

The population census, in theory, should be a statistical process intended to collect information about the number and characteristics of the population. However, in Montenegro,

¹ "Population census from 1 to 15 November of this year" (<https://www.cdm.me/politika/rtnk-popis-stanovnistva-od-1-do15-novembra-ove-godine/>)

² "Abazović: There is no postponement of the census" (<https://mina.news/vijesti-iz-crne-gore/abazovic-nema-odlaganja-popisa/>)

³ "Population census in Montenegro as a national counting" (<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-popis-vlada/31409310.html>)

as in many other societies, the census has become much more than that. It has become a politicized social issue and a breeding ground for manipulation, which seriously affects the integrity and purpose of the census itself. It is almost certain that it is not possible to prevent abuse of the census and enable a fair and accurate population census. The census announced in this way will become a means of additional polarization in Montenegrin society.

The upcoming census captures the attention of the entire public, due to the specific political and social situation in which Montenegro is located. In conditions of increased social tensions in which the perception of the population census exceeds its statistical character, the census itself becomes a key point around which the political agenda is shaped based on national affiliation. Serbia sees the census of the population in Montenegro as key to expanding its influence in a situation when pro-Serbian parties control a large number of state institutions and companies in Montenegro, and in which they employ a large number of citizens along political and national lines. Numerous pressures are expected on citizens regarding declarations regarding nationality, language and religious affiliation. The population census becomes an instrument of national engineering and territorial claims. Some analysts indicate that the population census is used to present the Serbian nation as dominant in Montenegro.⁴ This claim points to the possibility of national engineering, where an attempt is made to manipulate demographic data in order to achieve a certain political agenda. In addition, such national engineering could lead to territorial grouping according to the national model, which would threaten the integrity of Montenegro as a civil state. This assertion also has a strong presence in the current political tensions in the Balkan region. There is a fear that territorial changes could lead to new conflicts and destabilization of the region.

Therefore, instead of being a technical and objective action, the census became the subject of party interests and rivalry. Pro-Serbian parties hope that the census will show that a larger number of Serbs live in Montenegro than previous censuses show, and this would facilitate their additional efforts and activities in inserting Montenegro into the "Serbian world" through rhetoric about the Serbian identity of a significant part of the Montenegrin population. Political controversies and manipulations and the involvement of the Church of Serbia mean that the real purpose of the census - the collection of demographic data for planning and development - is almost ignored. The census should again become a technical process aimed at collecting

⁴ "The census is national engineering and an introduction to the national division of Montenegro, not a benign statistic" (<https://www.antenam.net/stav/300514-popis-je-nacionalni-inzinjering-i-uvod-u-saoizaciju-cg-a-ne-benigna-statistika>)

objective information about the population in order to help solve real challenges in society, such as functional illiteracy, lack of basic living conditions, population aging, etc.

The question of when the population census will be conducted has become a key point of political debate in Montenegro right after the parliamentary elections in 2020. International organizations recommended that the census not be conducted in election years, but this recommendation was not adopted. Namely, although presidential and parliamentary elections were held this year, the government's intention is to conduct a census. Politics and the population census in Montenegro are becoming inseparable, which further politicizes the process. The government and political parties use the census as a tool to promote their interests. Undoubtedly, the period of conducting the census, and possibly the process of processing the results, will be full of fraud, blackmail, malicious manipulations and attempts to get the desired projected results, especially when it comes to the national structure of the population. This indicates how political influences are infiltrating in what should be an independent statistical activity of social significance.

On the other hand some opposition parties, national minority organizations and some representatives of civil society organisations are seeking the postponement of the census for various reasons, including the need for a stable political environment. This indicates political instability affecting the census process. Manipulation of the census is not only political, but also extends to social networks. Pages that encourage statements on national and religious issues can further divide society and create tensions. This is happening at a time when society is already divided by changes in the political scene.

In addition, apart from the fact that the census is not used as a tool for collecting objective data, but as a tool for the promotion of political goals and the affirmation of certain identities, political actors in Montenegro also use the census to undermine their political opponents. The results of the census could be used as arguments to challenge the legitimacy of certain parties or political groups, depending on how the population will express itself. It additionally creates serious political instability.

Seeing the census as an opportunity to affirm one's ethnic and religious identities leads to additional tensions and conflicts, and the data collected during the census will be used more to undermine trust in institutions and political processes, than to enact important demographic and social policies. Therefore, there is also a problem of citizens' mistrust towards the institutions

that should ensure the reliability of the entire population census process. All this calls into question the timeliness of keeping the census.

The question that arises is how to stop the abuse of the population census for political purposes and preserve peace and stability in the region. Boycotting the census is one way, but it can also have negative consequences, including a lack of accurate data for planning policies and resources. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen the transparency of the census through census commissions that would be composed not only of political actors from the government and the opposition, but also of representatives of civil society organizations and international control over data entry to prevent manipulation. In order to solve these problems and restore the purpose of the census as a statistical action, the census should be a transparent and impartial process, and not a tool for achieving political goals or for manipulating the masses. This is not possible at the moment, so the logical request is to postpone the census. Society, political parties and institutions need to reassess their priorities and reconsider the purpose of the census. Only in that case, it would be possible to obtain objective and reliable data on the population, without political pressure and manipulation.

Population censuses should represent a vital instrument for the proper management and planning of societies. However, it seems that the Montenegrin government, which is under the influence of the foreign factors, is prone to political manipulations and abuses of the census in order to further polarize and divide the Montenegrin population on national, ethnic and religious grounds. The population census is the basis for policy makers in order to efficiently allocate resources, make effective political decisions and ensure equal rights to all citizens. However, when the census is misused, the consequences can be devastating to society. It seems that Montenegro is faced with such a fear.