

CONSIDERATIONS ON CENSUS METHODOLOGY FOR RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

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Abstract

After numerous delays and controversies, on September 2021, a Population, and Housing Census has being conducted in the Republic of North Macedonia. The last census has been conducted 19 years prior, thus the new data was eagerly awaited by all the institutions and the relevant factors of the Macedonian society. However, after the data has been published, numerous reactions emerged, particularly about the religious affiliation of the population. The reactions were mainly in regards to the 13.4% of the population that were registered as Christians only, without specifying their denomination. Furthermore, in the published data, 132,260 citizens were registered as “individuals whose data were taken from administrative sources”, while it was not specified to which religious affiliation they belong to. Regarding these reactions, the State Statistical Office, which is the institution that conducted the census, stated that the census was conducted

in accordance with the most relevant international standards, however, they did not present any additional clarification regarding the religious affiliation data. In order to present a clear overview of the inconsistencies, and irregularities, regarding the religious affiliation data, this paper provides an account of the relevant international acts and suggestions for a population and housing census, as well as, an account of the methodological approach, and the way the questions regarding the religious affiliation are being formulated in the censuses of the neighboring, and other countries. Therefore, in order to meet this paper's goal, an analysis of the directions from international census acts, and their implementation in the methodology of the 2021 census in the Republic of North Macedonia, was carried out, as well as, their implementation in the methodology of a census, regarding the issue of religious affiliation, in other countries.

Keywords: census, methodology, religious affiliation, reactions

Introduction

In the intricate tapestry of a nation's development, the human capital serves as the foundational thread, weaving together the fabric of progress and well-being. Recognizing its pivotal role, accurate and reliable assessments of a country's human capital becomes an imperative. The census of the population and households emerges as a primary instrument, dedicated to unraveling the complexities of this essential constituent. Beyond mere enumeration, the data gleaned from such censuses serve as the bedrock for informed decision-making across diverse sectors. From shaping economic and developmental policies, to influencing local, educational, investment, and agricultural strategies, the census data becomes the compass guiding a nation's trajectory. Moreover, these vital statistics cast a discerning light on the vulnerable segments of society, shedding insights into the plight of the poor, elderly, people with disabilities, and migrants. Thus, the census stands not only as a numerical account but as a beacon illuminating the path towards comprehensive and inclusive national progress. This realization is additionally supported by the relation of the census data, and the monitoring of indicators of the Sustainable Development Goals. Specifically, for monitoring of 107 out of total of 231 SDG indicators, collected census data from each of the countries, are necessary (UNFPA 2022).

The most widely accepted definition of a population census is that of the United Nations, according to which the census is defined as: "The operation that produces official counting (or benchmark) of the population on a territory of a country, and in its smallest geographical sub-territories, at regular intervals, together with information of a selected number of demographic and social characteristics of the total population" (UNECE 2015). Thus, according to the UN recommendations along with the population census, a household census should be conducted as well, a

census which is defined as: “The operation that produces official counting (or benchmark) of all housing stock in the territory of a country and in its smallest geographical sub-territories, at regular intervals, together with information on a selected number of characteristics of housing” (UNECE 2015). Additionally, UNFPA (2022) recommends that a census should be conducted at regular time intervals, namely, once at every 10 years. This recommendation is based on the fact that the suggested time period provides a suitable comparison of the large census data, which are necessary for creating development planning policies, crisis management, creating social welfare programs, as well as analysis of the markets of a given country, or a region.

In the period from 5th to 30th September 2021, 19 years after the last one, a population and a housing census has been conducted in the Republic of North Macedonia (RNM). But from its very beginning, the census was followed by a number of reactions and distrust from the opposition parties, and various civic associations. Despite the State Statistical Office’s (SSO) assurances, that the census was being prepared, and it was going to be conducted, in accordance with the international standards and methodology, the date of the census’ beginning has been contested since its very conception. More specifically, the opposition remarked that the planned period for the census conduction, from 1st till the 21st April 2021, is not adequate, and it would cause an additional health risk to the population, having in mind the health circumstances at the time, caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Following the opposition’s reactions, for which an agreement for postponing of the census has been reached, other numerous reactions and remarks about the census followed, which later resulted in conception of the national block “I Will Not Open the Door.” This block was unifying political parties, associations and Macedonian citizens from North Macedonia, as well as, from foreign countries. Besides the remarks about the population health risks, they also stated their remarks on the applied methodology for the

preparation and conduction of the Census (United Macedonia 2022). Despite the warranties given by the SSO's director, in which he states that the Census will cover the entire population and households in the Republic of North Macedonia, thus giving a realistic representation of the matters, the reactions did not subside ("Герасимовски" 2021). Very soon, the national bloc called for a boycott of the Census.

Reactions and criticisms on the census' results

After the completion of the Census, and the data processing, on 30th of March 2022, SSO had published the first set of data on their web site. This event, as was the announcement of the decision for the census conduction, was also followed by many reactions from the political parties, civic associations, religious groups, experts, etc. The results regarding the religious affiliation were the ones attracting the most reactions as well as, an extensive media coverage. At first, these reactions were aimed at the surprisingly small number of atheists, only 355 citizens, while the number of the Evangelical Protestant Christian believers had risen to 8,764 citizens. This kind of reaction was based on the comparison by which 6,746 citizens have declared themselves to be Catholics, as well as on the data from 2002 census in which 520 citizens have declared as Protestants (Блажевски 2022). After these reactions, SSO released an announcement, as well as a public apology regarding the technical error while processing the religious affiliation data. Namely, they explained that a permutation of the data between the options, "atheist" and "Evangelical Protestant Christian" have been made (State Statistical Office 2022). After the publication of the final results of the Census, in the data on religious affiliation, in addition to: Orthodox, Catholics, Protestants, Evangelists and Evangelical-Methodists, it was stated that 242,579 citizens declared themselves as Christians (see: T-

1). This was followed by numerous reactions in the public regarding this category, and in addition clarification was sought to which church, religious community or religious group the citizens who declare themselves as “Christians” belong to (Заревска 2022b). Additionally, the number of Orthodox Christians dropped by 19% in comparison to the 2002 census, and according to the public reactions, this was due to the citizens’ registering as being Christians, without specifying the denomination. At the same time, another confusing data was added, namely, 132,260 citizens, or 7.2% of the resident population in North Macedonia were registered as “individuals whose data is transferred from administrative sources” (see: T-1). Moreover, even though the data, for this category of citizens, was being given in the religious affiliation overview, an explication for their religious affiliation, was not presented.

T-1: Total resident population in the Republic of North Macedonia by religious affiliation, Census 2021

Total resident population in the Republic of North Macedonia according to the statement of religious affiliation, by sex, Census 2021			
	Gender - TOTAL	Male	Female
Religious Affiliation - TOTAL	1836713	911087	925626
Orthodox	847390	416832	430558
Muslims (Islam)	590878	295843	295035
Catholics	6746	2828	3918
Christians	242579	119978	122601
Protestants	1313	638	675
Evangelists	678	334	344
Evangelical-Methodists	889	433	456
Jehovah's Witnesses	1137	523	614
Not a believer (atheist)	8764	5146	3618
Did not plead	1964	1068	896
Others	1221	621	600
Unknown	894	505	389
Persons for whom the data is taken from administrative sources	132260	66338	65922

Source: State Statistical Office “Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in the Republic of North Macedonia 2021” (final data).

After the Census results were published, the first to release a public announcement was the Synod of the MOC-OA, in which the disagreement with the registered religious affiliation “Christians” have been stated. The Synod had criticized the applied methodology, and further stated that in the


part for religious affiliation, there is no clear distinction made between, affiliation to a religion (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, etc.), affiliation to a faith (Orthodox Christianity, Hasid Judaism, Sunni Islam, etc.) and affiliation to a church or religious communities/groups (Macedonian Orthodox Church, Islamic Religious Community, Jewish Community, etc.). It was also stated that on 13th of September 2021, following a reaction from members of the Orthodox Religious Community, Synod of the MOC-OA made an appeal, for the Orthodox Christians to declare themselves as Orthodox, not only as Christians (Macedonian Orthodox Church 2022). Due to such inconsistencies, the Synod of the MOC-OA remarked that the religious affiliation census' results, do not give a realistic image of the religious affiliation in RNM, and therefore the Synod considers the results as not relevant. It was further noted that the registered religious affiliation "Christians", is a "serious statistical error" in 13.4% of the citizens (Macedonian Orthodox Church 2022).

Regarding these inconsistencies, The Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups had issued a public announcement, stating that, "The results of the Population Census, namely, the part about the citizen's religious affiliation, do not match the real religious map of the society, which is conditioned by two factors: 13.21% declared Christians, which is religious affiliation, which incorporates religious affiliation through the denominations, and the 7.2% of citizens for which there is no census data" (Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups 2022). Thus, the Commission had pointed out, that such display of the religious affiliation of the population in RNM, does not give a clear image for the country's religious map. Moreover, it was remarked that the results of the Census, do not accurately present the religious subjects, belonging to different religious affiliations, which are registered in the Unique Court Register. Additionally, in the Commission's statement had been stated that

the SSO was not consulted when the methodology for the Census' conduction, had been determined.

Following the many public reactions, SSO had issued an announcement, in which they stated that they followed and implemented international standards and suggestions for conducting a Population Census, when the questionnaire for the Census was being made (Заревска 2022a). It was also stated that a special code was given for the "Christians" category, in accordance with the Code of Codes for Census Questions, which was implemented in the Census' application, based on the register of this religious affiliation, in the previous censuses. However, it was not specifically pointed out, in which prior census the religious affiliation "Christians" had been enumerated, since in the 2002 census results, such affiliation was not enumerated (see: T-2).

T-2: Total resident population in the Republic of Macedonia by religious affiliation, Census 2002


 Tabel a 4. Vкупно населени e na Republ i ka Makedoni ja spored i zjasnuvaweto za veroi spovedta, po pol
 Table 4. Total population of the Republic of Macedonia according to declaration by religion, by sex

	Veroi spoved Religion						
	vkupno	pravosl avni	musli -mani (i sl am)	kato- l i ci	protes- tanti	osta- nati	
	Total	Orthodox	Moslems (Islamic)	Catholics	Protes- tants	Other	
Republ i ka Makedoni ja	2022547	1310184	674015	7008	520	30820	Republic of Macedonia
ma` i	1015377	654630	341441	3156	241	15909	male
` eni	1007170	655554	332574	3852	279	14911	female
Skopje	467257	343197	109954	2457	216	11433	Skopje
ma` i	229485	166504	55839	1037	96	6009	male
` eni	237772	176693	54115	1420	120	5424	female
Gazi Baba	72222	54242	15968	248	14	1750	Gazi Baba
ma` i	36177	26995	8176	105	8	893	male
` eni	36045	27247	7792	143	6	857	female
Bul a-ani	1104	1104	-	-	-	-	Bula-ani
ma` i	582	582	-	-	-	-	male
` eni	522	522	-	-	-	-	female
I dri zovo	1589	691	892	1	-	5	Idrizovo
ma` i	821	342	473	1	-	5	male
` eni	768	349	419	-	-	-	female

Source: State Statistical Office "Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in the Republic of Macedonia 2002" (final data).

In the SSO announcement was also stated that the Religious Communities were accustomed with the content of the preparations, before the beginning of the Census. It was additionally stated that during the preparation for the Census, a meeting was held, with the director and the deputy director of the SSO, heads of all religious communities in the Republic of North Macedonia, the director of the Commission for Relations with the Religious Communities and Religious Groups, and the director of the Agency for Emigration, under the patronage of the Foreign Affairs Minister. The main topic at this meeting, at which only the heads of the three largest religious communities in RNM participated, was, securing a support for the self-registering process, of the Macedonian Diaspora (State Statistical Office 2021a). The announcement of the meeting did not indicate whether other topics were discussed, so it remains unclear whether the attendees discussed the methodology that will be applied to the Census, that is, the formulation of the question about religious affiliation.

In the period after the announcement of the results, that is, in the first half of April 2022, the Institute for Political Research Skopje, the Internet portal Religija.mk and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, conducted a survey of the attitudes of believers regarding the results of the Census (Божиновски и Николовски 2022). Within the framework of this research, a national survey of a representative sample was conducted in which, according to the authors, all relevant socio-demographic characteristics of the population in the Republic of North Macedonia were observed. According to the findings of this research, 72% of the respondents stated that they declared their religious affiliation in the census. At the same time, for 35% of the respondents, the official results of the census are not a realistic presentation of the situation regarding religious affiliation in the country. Also, 45% of respondents believe that more information was needed for a precise statement regarding religious

affiliation (among Orthodox Christians, the percentage of those who believe that more information was needed regarding religious declaration is 54%). When asked about the recommendations from religious communities for the declaration of religious affiliation in the census, only 5% of the respondents gave an affirmative answer, while 84% indicated that they had no recommendation from the religious community to which they belong to, regarding the declaration of religious affiliation (Божиновски и Николовски 2022).

Formulation of the question about religious affiliation

Religion belongs to the group of traditionally defined demographic and social data which are collected during the population census. But some countries omit the question of religion from the census, because they consider that there is no need for such data, because there are certain legal barriers, or because it is a sensitive issue (UNSD 2017). According to the Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia, Article 19 states that the freedom of religion is guaranteed to the citizens. In doing so, it is emphasized that citizens are guaranteed: “free and public, individually or in community with others, expression of faith” (Службен весник 2011). With the guarantees and protection of freedom of religion formulated in this way, the legal prerequisite for the inclusion of the issue of religion in the census has been met.

But according to the UN Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, if a country decides to include the question of religious affiliation in the census, then it should specify a definition of religion that is most appropriate to its needs (UNSD 2017). It is also pointed out that due to the fact that the issue of religion is a sensitive issue in a large number of cases, it is necessary for respondents to be informed

about the purpose of the data they provide, as well as the protection thereof. The SSO, in the Methodology for the Preparation, Organization and Conduct of the Census, adopted a modified version of the definition of religion from the Principles and Recommendations for Population and Home Censuses, stating that: “Religion is generally regarded as a set of beliefs and practices, usually involving acknowledgment of a divine or higher being, power or principle, by which people order the conduct of their lives both practically and in a moral sense” (State Statistical Office 2021b). At the same time, it is pointed out that the respondent, of his own volition, can give an answer to the question about religious affiliation, and he can also not answer this question. However, in the instructions on the question of religious affiliation, given in this Methodology of the SSO, the question of “religious affiliation” and “religion” are simultaneously stated, that is, the question itself in the census form is stated as “Religious affiliation (religion)” (State Statistical Office 2021c). This formulation of the question does not distinguish between belonging to a religion and a creed, which was actually stated in the reaction of the Synod of the MOC-OA.

And while the SSO indicates that the wording of the question of religious affiliation is done in accordance with the UN Census Recommendations, these recommendations do not require a specific wording of the question of religion, but it is noted that: “Questionnaires should, as with ethnicity, include write-in (open) responses to allow small groups of local denominations to identify freely” (UNECE 2015). Finally, despite such recommendations, each of the countries is left with the opportunity to choose the form of the question, while the main emphasis is placed on stating the option for respondents who do not belong to any religion, that is the choice “no religion”, and the option not to answer the question, that is, stating the “no answer” option. Also, these recommendations emphasize that the decision to ask the question about religion in the census of a particular country is determined by several factors

and circumstances, highlighting the national needs for such data and the appropriateness of asking a religious question in the census of a country. At the same time, it is pointed out that the amount of collected data on this topic depends on the requirements of a specific country, that is, whether only the data on the religion of each citizen is sufficient, or whether the data on the specific denomination to which they belong are also relevant. In this regard, it is stated that in countries where there are several denominations, this will also be reflected on the space in the questionnaire provided for the question of religion, especially in cases where write-in answers are requested (UNECE 2015). According to Prof. Nenad Pokos, whose scientific research is related to the demography of Croatia, specifically regional demography and changes in the structure of the population, faith is an important part of an individual's identity, as well as an indicator of the social and cultural diversity of a country (Tašev 2021). This kind of consideration is also indicated in the UN Census Principles and Recommendations, where it is stated that: "Depending on national circumstances, cultural diversity may be measured by language spoken in the home or community, religion and national or ethnic group" (UNSD 2017). Pokos also indicates that based on the data on religious affiliation, the policy of a certain state towards religious communities, that is, freedom of religion, is determined. At the same time, he points out that the answers to questions about religion and affiliation to a certain religious community are of great importance for both small and large religious communities that exercise their rights based on their share in the population of a country. Also, according to him, these data help religious communities in planning and organizing their activities at the local and regional level (Tašev 2021). Finally, the UN Recommendations state that the census classification of religious affiliation data should be comprehensive. In order to increase the consistency and comparability of the data, the following classification of religions is indicated in them: 1. Christianity (Catholic;

Orthodox; Protestant – including Anglican, Baptist, Brethren, Calvinist, Evangelical, Lutheran, Methodist, Pentecostal, Pietist, Presbyterian, Reformed, and other Protestant groups; Jehovah's Witnesses; Oriental Christian; Other Christian); 2. Islam (Alawit – Nusayris); Ismaili (Seveners); Ithna'ashari (Twelvers); Shia; Sufi; Sunni; Zaydi (Fivers); 3. Judaism; 4. Buddhism; 5. Hinduism; 6. Sikhism; 7. Other religious groups; and 8. No religion (UNECE 2015).

Formulation of the question about religious affiliation in other countries

Regarding the possibility of a different wording of the question about religion, we cited examples from other countries, as well as expert (legal) analysis of census data. In doing so, the census questionnaires from Croatia and Australia for the censuses conducted in 2021 have been analyzed as characteristic examples. In addition, the analysis of the legal aspects of the collection, use and significance of the statistical data on religious affiliation from the census in Serbia, conducted in 2011, is indicated.

During the analysis of the legal, that is, the methodological framework of the census in Croatia, it can be seen that the State Statistics Office, as the competent authority for its implementation, emphasizes compliance with the European Statisticians Recommendations for the 2020 Censuses of Population and Housing, as well as with the decrees of the European Parliament and of the Council (Croatian Bureau of Statistics 2022). Within the questionnaire for this census, in addition to the question of religious affiliation, that is, to which religion the respondent belongs, the question of which religious community the respondent belongs to is also stated (Croatian Bureau of Statistics 2021). When asked about affiliation to a religious community, one can choose one of 54 registered churches or religious

communities in the Republic of Croatia, or choose the option “I am not a member of a church or a religious community.” Likewise, if the person does not want to declare in any of these ways, the question can remain unanswered. The choice to list two questions related to religion, according to Prof. Nenad Pokos, is a reflection of the previous census from 2011, in which the question about religion was of a semi-open type, that is, during the choice of answers, only one answer was offered, only for members of the Catholic religion, while for all other religious communities the answers were entered manually. As a consequence of this, the majority of Greek Catholics and Old Catholics declared themselves as Catholics only, after which they were shown together with Roman Catholics (Tašev 2021).

A characteristic feature of the census in Australia is the period of conducting the census, that is, the census is conducted every five years. But apart from this exception, all other elements are in line with The 2020 World Population and Housing Census Program launched by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Statistics Division (ECOSOC 2015), and hence the methodological framework is in line with the Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses (UNSD 2017). The question about religion is listed within the group of questions on cultural diversity, and that is the only optional question on the Census (Australia Bureau of Statistics 2018). At the same time, several answers are offered to the question about religion, that is, religions and faiths, while for the rest there is a (marked) space for write-in answers. This space is intended for all respondents who do not identify with any of the offered answers or would like to specifically name the religion they practice. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2018), this design of the answers is conditioned by the vast number of religions practiced in Australia, so listing them all would make the question too long and difficult. It is also indicated that when designing the questionnaire for each census, the most common answers from the previous

census are listed. In this way, according to the Bureau, it is easier for the majority of respondents to choose, and the same approach is used for questions about country of birth, origin and language spoken at home. When preparing answers to the religion question, the Bureau applies the Australian Standard Classification of Religious Groups. In doing so, this classification is also being updated, in order to enable an inclusive approach (Australia Bureau of Statistics 2024). Due to this approach of the Bureau, the request of Belinda Delios and the Macedonian associations and communities was accepted, to insert the category “Macedonian Orthodox” within the religious groups listed in this classification (“Македонка во Австралија” 2022). The main argument for such a request was the frequent identification in the Western world of the Orthodox religion with the Greek Orthodox.

Regarding the statistical data on the national, linguistic and religious affiliation of the population in the Republic of Serbia, a legal analysis was published by the Republic Institute of Statistics and the Institute of Comparative Law. Within the framework of this analysis, a special review was made of the census in the Republic of Serbia, conducted in 2011. In the part of the analysis that refers to the data on religious affiliation, Vladimir Đurić (Ђурић 2014), reviews the formulation of the religion question, which was given in an open form (Републички завод за статистику 2011), as well as the census classification of religions. In doing so, he points out that despite the fact that the data on religious affiliation must be consistent with the answers given by the persons who were covered by the census, this does not mean that the state authorities could not determine a more detailed classification of religions, in order to increase the consistency and comparability of the data, without harming the freedom of declaring one’s religious affiliation. According to Đurić, such a classification would cover certain religious denominations, which have age-old origin and are recognized throughout the world, while there is no dispute regarding their

existence. At the same time, he points out that such a classification is partially provided for in the Methodological Guidelines for conducting the census, which is in accordance with international recommendations for conducting the census in the period around 2010 (Ђурић 2014). However, in the questionnaire for the 2022 census in Serbia, the question about religious affiliation retained the same formulation (Republički zavod za statistiku 2022).

Conclusion

The basic purpose of a population census is to provide information about the size, distribution and characteristics of the population of a particular country. At the same time, this information enables the formation of comparable basic statistical data for the specific country as a whole, as well as for each of its administrative units, localities and small areas. Such data are of crucial importance for understanding and assessing the demographic, social and economic circumstances of each country, in order to be able to develop sound national policies aimed at its development and the well-being of the population living in it. Data on the number of the population as a whole, that is, data on certain geographic regions, as well as sub-groups within the population of a country, are particularly important in determining the distribution of government funding and services. With all this in mind, population and housing census presupposes careful and thorough planning, realization and implementation.

Despite the emphasis by the SSO that the formulation of the question on religious affiliation was made in accordance with the UN Population Census Recommendations, in the content of these recommendations, apart from indicating the inclusion of write-in answers and the declaration of respondents who do not belong to any religion, strict formulation of the

question of religion is not required. Finally, as seen in examples of censuses in other countries, conducted in the same year, it can be noticed that apart from the question of religious affiliation, the question, to which religious community the respondent belongs to, is also stated, and, on the other hand, several answers are offered to the question of religion, that is, religions and denominations, while for the rest, a space is marked for a write-in answer. If, in the 2021 census in North Macedonia, such formulation was applied to the question of religious affiliation, perhaps the inconsistencies and ambiguities that arose from the obtained results would have been avoided.

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Latin

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