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North Macedonia before the April census

This year, for the first time in 19 years, a census will be conducted in North Macedonia. The last one took place in 2002, and the decision was made by the Macedonian parliament on January 21, 2021 to finally conduct it after it had been postponed several times. Consequently, the exact number of inhabitants of North Macedonia is unknown. The census continues to evoke political emotions and ethnic tensions.

Censuses in Macedonia. Since Macedonia's declaration of independence in 1991, there have been two censuses in the country – in 1994 and in 2002. According to the data from the last of them, the country had around 2 million inhabitants (2 022 547). Macedonians constitute 64.18%, and the second largest nationality are Albanians – 25.17%. Some Albanians, however, claim that these numbers are significantly underestimated, and in fact they constitute up to 35-40% of the country's total population. Apart from them, Turks (3.85%), Roma (2.66%), Serbs (1.78%), and Vlachs (0.48%) live in North Macedonia.

The next census was scheduled for 2011, initially in April, then postponed to October. Due to strong tensions within the government coalition, however, it was stopped due to technical problems and methodological inconsistencies. In 2018, Macedonia's Special Prosecutor launched an investigation against former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity, VMRO-DPMNE) and his co-coalition partner Ali Ahmeti, leader of the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI). They were suspected of intentionally interrupting the census procedure because they feared results that could negatively affect the government.

Due to the lack of a census for the last two decades, the exact number of inhabitants of North Macedonia is unknown. According to Apostol Simovski, director of the State Statistical Office, there may be 300,000-400,000 fewer people than in 2002. Such a significant decrease in the population may have resulted primarily from the emigration of Macedonians and a significantly lower number of births.

Census in 2021. Prime Minister Zoran Zaev reintroduced the topic of finally conducting a new census, and in 2019, it was decided to organize the census in April 2020. Due to the need to hold early election, the date of the census itself was also postponed to 2021. On January 21, 2021, the Macedonian parliament passed a new law mandating a population census of households, with 62 votes in favour. Opposition parties, including VMRO-DPMNE and the Left (*Levica*), boycotted the vote. VMRO-DPMNE has announced that it will collect signatures to repeal the adopted law. The members of the Alliance for Albanians and the Alternative (AA-A) helped the government to guarantee the quorum (62 votes). It is worth adding that in addition to Darko Kaevski, a member of the ruling Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), being absent due to coronavirus infection, the leaders of all Albanian parties were also absent from the vote.

The census is scheduled for April 1-21. Last year, authorities began preparations for the census by purchasing new computers for the State Statistical Office and conducting pilot censuses on small samples of people. According to A. Simovski, thanks to the purchased data collection equipment, the results of the census will be known within six months from the date of its completion. Previously, it took 1.5 years before the results were known. Moreover, the possibility of participating in the census was guaranteed to those citizens who temporarily reside outside the country.

Discussion about the census. The largest opposition party, VMRO-DPMNE, is calling on the government to postpone the census by another year, noting that other countries, such as Germany and Bulgaria, have postponed theirs. The largest opposition party also accuses the government of failing to consult with them and

not implementing changes in line with EU standards. Moreover, the party's leader, Hristijan Mickoski, accuses the government of politicizing the census, a lack of transparency, and the desire to falsify data. To prevent falsification of data, VMRO-DPMNE has proposed buying fingerprint devices that, aside from the census, could also be used during local elections planned for October 2021. VMRO-DPMNE is also demanding precise definitions of census categories, such as Macedonian resident and immigrant. H. Mickoski has already announced that VMRO-DPMNE will call for a boycott of this year's census.

VMRO-DPMNE addressed a letter to President Stevo Pendarovski urging him not to sign the census bill. The president indicated that the proposal of fingerprint devices was not a controversial idea if using them would increase the credibility of the entire process. At the same time, he expressed concern that there was little time left to implement the proposal. In turn, Prime Minister Zoran Zaev said that the government was trying to meet the opposition's proposals, but would not agree to postpone the census.

Some Albanian politicians (primarily from the Alliance for Albanians) point out that the census may exacerbate ethnic tensions. Albanian politicians are afraid that the Albanian minority may lose some of the rights and privileges guaranteed by the constitution if it turns out that they make up less than 20% of the country's population. The DUI politicians are already warning that they are not going to recognize the census results if Albanians are less than 20% of the population. Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, in order to ease tensions, has emphasized that there will be no constitutional changes based on the data collected during the census. The aim of the census is to update state statistics. Moreover, Skender Rexhepi, a representative of the AA-A parliamentary group, postulated that a specially created state commission should oversee the census organization procedure instead of the State Statistical Office.

Conclusions. A census will be conducted in North Macedonia in April 2021 for the first time in almost two decades. Its organization is necessary to finally estimate the exact population of the country. The lack of detailed data makes it difficult for authorities to introduce reforms not only in the area of the economy, but also in the education and health systems. It also makes it impossible to update the electoral list of citizens. Conducting a census is also necessary from the point of view of accession negotiations with the European Union. The EU has been insisting for years that it should be organized as soon as possible. The European Commission has noted the progress of Macedonia in producing social statistics, including those concerning income and living conditions. On the other hand, statistics on migration require significant improvement.

Due to the fact that conducting a census requires direct contact between citizens and those conducting the survey, the possibility of rescheduling its organization should be considered. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, countries such as Germany have already decided to postpone the census for another year. It should be remembered, however, that in 2020, precisely during the pandemic, the Macedonian authorities managed to hold early parliamentary elections.

The organization of a census in North Macedonia is directly related to ethnic issues and politics. Identifying the accurate number of Albanians, in particular, creates controversy. On the one hand, Albanians probably still have a higher birth rate than Macedonians. On the other hand, Albanians probably emigrate more often. If it turns out that they do not constitute more than 20% of the total population of North Macedonia, it can be assumed that part of the Macedonian opposition will demand that the rights guaranteed to Albanians be stripped and that they be treated in the same way as other minorities – Turks, Serbs, Bosniaks, Roma, and Vlachs. Moreover, the results may have a negative impact on the functioning of the coalition government, which includes the strongest Albanian party, DUI. Therefore, any possible irregularities related to the census process may contribute to destabilizing the country, and the politicization of the process of registering residents will increase distrust of its results.