

# **CONDUCTING THE 2023 CENSUS IN MONTENEGRO:**

**CIRCUMSTANCES, TRANSPARENCY  
AND SECURITY OF THE PROCESS  
DILEMMAS AND OPEN QUESTIONS**

# CONDUCTING THE 2023 CENSUS IN MONTENEGRO:

## CIRCUMSTANCES, TRANSPARENCY AND SECURITY OF THE PROCESS DILEMMAS AND OPEN QUESTIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

Montenegro is awaiting a census of population, households and dwellings in November 2023.

The dramatic developments related to this most significant statistical action have been ongoing since 2021. After the impossibility of conducting the census due to the introduction of temporary financing at the beginning of that year, the 42nd Government of Montenegro drafted the Law on Census and submitted it to the Parliament at the beginning of 2022. However, political events in that year unfolded rapidly, resulting in the subsequent fall of the 42nd Government, the election of the 43rd, and a vote of no confidence in the 43rd Government, which remains in a technical mandate to this day.

In December 2022, the Parliament of Montenegro adopted the Law on the Census of Population, Households and Dwellings<sup>1</sup> (the Law) in which, contrary to the established practice, the period of conducting the census was not specified, giving the Government the authority to define it through a by-law. In February 2023, the Government, in a technical mandate, issued a Decree stating that the census would be held in the period from November 1 to November 15.<sup>2</sup>

Although the political aspect of making this decision was very complex and even though it was made in the lead-up to the presidential and parliamentary elections, it seemed that, after 12 years, Montenegro would acquire the necessary data for the development of state policies.

However, since things are not that simple in our country, this process remains burdened with numerous issues and potential critical points: various dilemmas about the census have been raised in public, and serious accusations and doubts have been expressed. We have heard requests for postponement, threats of boycotts have emerged, calls to obstructions have been made, and campaigns have been launched suggesting to citizens how they should identify nationally and in terms of religion.

In these circumstances, and considering the experience with census actions and our membership in the Council of the Statistical System, we were of the opinion it was important to prepare a document in which we try to resolve some of the dilemmas existing in the public, to address important issues that have been little discussed so far, to present publicly our suggestions for improving the census process, regardless of its date.

The subject of our interest is, first of all, the analysis of the overall environment and transparency of the census procedure, the influence of partitocracy on the network of instructors and enumerators and the safety of the process from the perspective of adhering to important statistical laws, principles, and standards.

<sup>1</sup> Law on Census of Population, Households and Dwellings, Official Gazette of Montenegro, no. 140/22 of December 16, 2022

<sup>2</sup> Regulation on establishing the period of the Census of population, households and dwellings and the Census reference moment, Official Gazette of Montenegro, No. 025/23 of March 6, 2023

We have only sporadically addressed the preparedness of the Statistical Office (Monstat) regarding the quality of the preparation and implementation of the Methodology for preparing, organizing, and conducting the census (Methodology), wishing to draw their attention to the fact that in this process they have taken on the controversial and sensitive role of advocating and defending politicians' decisions on the public stage, decisions that essentially do not depend on them. We leave the detailed analysis of the methodology and its immediate implementation to experts who are more directly involved in this process.

We remain open to all well-intentioned suggestions, criticisms, and public debate on this analysis.

The CDT team

## POLITICAL AND SECURITY ENVIRONMENT FOR CONDUCTING THE CENSUS

International standards<sup>4</sup> regarding the environment for conducting the census are quite clear: it is important that the timing of the census does not overlap with major political events such as national or local elections campaigns. It is also crucial that the census is carried out in safe and stable political and social circumstances in the country. In times of political or military instability, the public is less likely to cooperate and the safety of enumerators may not be guaranteed. The level of security should allow enumerators to safely reach all parts of the country.

It is evident that the two election cycles that took place this year have formally ended. Thus, that part of the recommendation was indeed fulfilled.

However, we believe no institution or person can decisively assert that Montenegro currently has a politically stable situation. A country and a society that do not have a functioning parliament, whose government lost confidence more than a year ago, and whose judiciary has been in an ad interim capacity for years cannot be deemed stable. Considering that, through various public relations and other techniques, many things can become acceptable to citizens, including important decisions made by the government in a technical mandate, we recall the Venice Commission's opinion that "The Government in a technical mandate should refrain from undertaking new political initiatives and proposing new laws after losing the support of the Parliament".<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, it is necessary to understand the third part of this important recommendation, which has rarely been mentioned in the public: instability does not contribute to obtaining objective data, nor to the safety of those who are conducting the census. The lack of political stability leads to closed-mindedness and mistrust, which can negatively impact the adherence to official statistical principles, particularly those related to data quality, accuracy, and reliability.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Methodology for the preparation, organization and implementation of the census; Census of population, households and dwellings in 2023; Statistical Office of Montenegro, Podgorica 2023

<sup>4</sup> Conference of European Statisticians, Recommendations for the 2020 Censuses of Population and Housing, 2015

<sup>5</sup> "Tehnička Vlada da ne predlaže zakone" (Technical government to refrain from proposing laws), *RTCG online*, October 6, 2023

<sup>6</sup> Law on Official Statistics and System of Official Statistics, Article 6, Official Gazette of Montenegro, no. 018/12 of March 30, 2012, 047/19 of August 12, 2019

The security aspect of the census process has thus far remained in the background until now. We have not had many opportunities to be informed by Monstat or the Government about the safety of citizens, the safety of enumerators and instructors, and to hear whether there are any risks in this process. This is especially important given that recent events in this country and its immediate vicinity, considering the overall political and security context, could negatively impact security in general, and, hence, the safety of the census process. If we add the fact that there are protests, roadblocks and public announcements of obstructions of the process related to the census<sup>7</sup>, it becomes clear that the issue of safety must not be underestimated or relegated to the background. Also, ignoring, trivializing, or intentionally misinterpreting the part of the recommendation that census takers must be allowed to safely reach every part of the country does not seem so trivial when we recall that not so long ago there were attempts to prevent political gatherings. Therefore, the entry of census takers into the dwellings of those who may potentially boycott or even obstruct the census process is not without risks.

The environment for conducting the census is further complicated by two processes taking place at the political level. Specifically, representatives of the opposition parties and the majority of national parties representing less numerous ethnic groups have publicly requested the postponement of the census. These demands differ to some extent – on the one hand, the opposition led by the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) is asking for a six-month postponement of the census until 17 conditions are met, warning that a census boycott is possible otherwise.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, one of the leaders of the Albanian community in Montenegro, Nik Djeljosaj, has called for a one-month postponement of the census and the replacement of Monstat's leadership,<sup>9</sup> a request later echoed by the President of the Bosniak National Council and the recently-resigned MP of the Bosniak Party, Suljo Mustafic.<sup>10</sup> Following these events, the presidents of the Bosniak, Albanian, Croatian, Muslim, and Roma National Councils issued a joint statement on October 15, requesting that the census be "postponed for a certain period." This situation has further complicated the environment in which the census is supposed to take place, as it is inconceivable to hold the census properly if it does not include participation from minority ethnic groups.

Here, it is important to note the fact that the rapporteur of the European Parliament (EP) for Montenegro, Tonino Picula, has submitted an amendment to the EP report, stating that the population census should be conducted after the political impasse in the country is resolved.<sup>11</sup> This became yet another another request for the postponement of the census, stamped with the approval of this parliamentary body's members. We will address the outcome of the EP's discussions on this matter in a future analysis.

<sup>7</sup> "Poruka sa protesta na Bogetićima: Cilj popisa je da se umanjí broj Crnogoraca" (Message from the protest at Bogetici: The goal of the census is to reduce the number of Montenegrins), *Antena M*, October 13, 2023

<sup>8</sup> "Predsjedništvo DPS-a predložíće bojkot popisa ako do ponedjeljka ne dobiju odgovor institucija" (DPS Presidency will propose a census boycott if institutions do not respond by Monday), *Mina*, October 13, 2023

<sup>9</sup> "Đeljošaj: Popis odložiti za 30 dana i zamijeniti rukovodstvo Monstata" (Djeljosaj: Postpone the census by 30 days and replace the leadership of Monstat), *Dan online*, September 22, 2023

<sup>10</sup> A.I. Mustafić: Prolongiranje početka popisa za mjesec dana bi značilo mnogo (Mustafić: Postponing the start of the census for a month would mean a lot), *Pobjeda online*, October 3, 2023

<sup>11</sup> "Picula predlaže odlaganje popisa: Izvršiti ga kada se završi politički zastoj" (Picula suggests postponing the census: Conduct it once the political stalemate is resolved), *Pobjeda online*, October 16, 2023

Simultaneously, another process is taking place that is difficult to understand in democratic and developed societies: the citizens of Montenegro are bombarded with messages through billboards, videos and messages published on social networks about how they should identify themselves in the census. This has gone so far that the content of these messages has been officially commented on by neighboring countries, which will be discussed later. Leaving aside the inappropriate treatment and underestimation of citizens by suggesting how they should identify themselves, along with direct pressure and a process resembling ethnic engineering, the most important question arises in statistical terms: is it possible to respect key statistical principles and obtain reliable and objective data in such an environment?.

## TRANSPARENCY AND INCLUSIVENESS OF THE PROCESS

The transparency of statistical processes and open, formal and planned communication with the public have traditionally not been Monstat's strong suit.<sup>12</sup> Since gaining independence, this institution has failed to develop both strategies and techniques for adequate communication with its environment. This was the case again, and Monstat began to communicate more openly only after significant delays and intervention by public actors and with the international community's assistance. Nevertheless, whether with intentional or unintentional delays, it is important to acknowledge the fact that Monstat has understood the importance of direct communication with users of statistics and various members of the public and has started communicating more openly.

A more significant conversation on the transparency of the process began on September 27, when our organization requested that the methodology be made public. That finally happened approximately about 15 days after our request, on October 12, 2023.

Although Monstat justified the non-disclosure of the Methodology by the time needed to implement the comments of the European Union (EU), i.e. Eurostat, we have not been able to see this opinion in its entirety. Public statements were also made that the Methodology is fully in line with European standards.<sup>13</sup> Upon our insistence to read these comments for the preparation of this document, we were told that the opinion arrived in the form of an email and, therefore, could not be made public. Nevertheless, Monstat has publicly announced the communication with Eurostat related to the topic of census monitoring.<sup>14</sup>

A significant problem with the transparency of the census process relates to the publication of the names of members of census commissions, state instructors, and municipal instructors. Our CDT research team has analyzed the Monstat website and the websites of Montenegrin municipalities over the past six days, and these are our preliminary conclusions:

<sup>12</sup> However, it should be noted that, based on our previous research, Monstat maintains a high level of institutional openness and provides necessary information in accordance with Article 12 of the Law on Free Access to Information.

<sup>13</sup> B.H. "Pejović: Metodologija za sprovođenje popisa usaglašena u potpunosti sa EU standardima" (Pejovic: Methodology for conducting the census fully compliant with EU standards), *Vijesti online*, September 24, 2023

<sup>14</sup> "EUROSTAT neće pratiti popis u Crnoj Gori" (EUROSTAT will not monitor the census in Montenegro), *CDM*, October 13, 2023.

<sup>15</sup> The CDT research team, with the assistance of regional and municipal coordinators and other external sources, conducted field verification of instructors who will be involved in the upcoming census. We thoroughly analyzed the available lists on the municipal websites. This report provides a snapshot as of October 17, 2023, at noon.

- The transparency of the work of census commissions is at an extremely low level

There is no information on the websites of 22 municipalities about the identities of members of the census commissions. This information is only available on the websites of the municipalities of Berane, Kotor and Rozaje<sup>16</sup> – the members of the census commissions in Berane and Kotor are listed in the decision on the selection of instructors who will participate in conducting the census, while in Rozaje this information is available in the list of enumerator candidates.

- Finding an updated list of state instructors responsible for conducting the census is impossible.

The Monstat's website features the Decision on the Establishment of the Commission for the Performance of Duties of a State Instructor in the Census of Population, Households, and Dwellings,<sup>17</sup> dated April 9, 2021. The estimated date for the completion of this commission's work is December 31, 2021. It is not known to what extent the census structure has changed over the more than two years that have passed since the decision was made, or who the current state instructors are.

- The transparency and availability of municipal instructors' names are not satisfactory.

We could not find a list of municipal instructors on the websites of the municipalities of Andrijevica, Kolasin, Rozaje and Savnik. It should be noted that this information is not available for the Municipality of Petnjica, whose website is not functional. While this information was previously available on the website of the Municipality of Budva, at the time of writing this document, it was not possible to access the municipality's website<sup>18</sup>. The public call for the engagement of instructors in the municipality of Tuzi has been extended until October 16, and it is indicated in the call that the list of candidates for instructors will be published on October 19.

The list of candidates was published on the websites of the municipalities of Bijelo Polje, Cetinje, Danilovgrad, Gusinje, Podgorica, Ulcinj, Zeta and Zabljak.

In the remaining ten municipalities, the elected municipal instructors were announced.

- Monstat did not publish complete data on the composition of commissions and instructors in one place.

The Monstat website does not provide a list of selected municipal commissions and instructors, as was the case in 2011. This has reduced transparency and data availability since citizens who are interested in this information must conduct their "mini-research" and visit 25 different websites instead of having such relevant information available in one place.

- Monstat did not provide the public with precise information about the number of registered enumerators by the municipality and the dynamics of their registration.

<sup>16</sup> On October 17, 2023, at noon.

<sup>17</sup> Statistical Office – Monstat, Decision on the Establishment of the Commission for the Performance of Duties of a State Instructor in the Census of Population, Households, and Dwellings.

<sup>18</sup> Snapshot taken on October 17, 2023, at noon.



Monstat has not published detailed information about the number of registered census enumerators, only stating that 4,047 candidates have applied to become enumerators in Montenegro. It was also announced that the deadline for applications had been extended in the municipalities of Bar, Budva, Cetinje, Kolasin, Kotor, Tivat, Savnik, and Zabljak until October 18 in Tivat and until October 20 for the other municipalities<sup>19</sup>. Upon reviewing the websites of the municipalities, we subsequently found that this deadline was extended both in Tuzi and Podgorica until October 20.

These pieces of information are extremely important for the census process since the lack of enumerators can be an indicator of several important things: that the boycott has already begun, or that political parties are waiting to propose their candidates, or that the census will be extended due to the lack of necessary human resources for its implementation.

- Monstat has announced that the training of the members of the Commission for managing the preparation and implementation of the Census of Population, Households and Dwellings was held in the period July 26–28, 2023, as well as training for state instructors in the period September 22–26, 2023. For instructors and enumerators, other training sessions will be held on October 23–25 and October 28-29, respectively.<sup>20</sup>

The noteworthy lack of transparency in the key part of the process concerning the publication of the names of census commission members and instructors has not contributed to the citizens' trust in the census process. Some of these mistakes can still be corrected, while others cannot, since the moment when the public should have received this important information has passed. When one looks at the results of our research on the composition of the commissions and the structure of municipal instructors, we believe that the reasons for this lack of transparency will become significantly clearer.

## "PROFESSIONALIZATION" OF CENSUS COMMISSIONS AND MUNICIPAL INSTRUCTORS

Although Monstat has repeatedly stated in its public statements that the census will achieve the depoliticization of the administration and that the census will be conducted by professionals rather than individuals delegated by political parties, this has not proven to be true.

Monstat's Director, Miroslav Pejovic, stated that the new law was "made in order to depoliticize the census" and, commenting on the composition of the census commission, emphasized that "there is one participant from the Employment Agency of Montenegro to animate unemployed citizens to take part in the census."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> "Pročitajte šta je Monstat odgovorio DPS-u" (Read what Monstat replied to the DPS), *CdM*, October 13, 2023

<sup>20</sup> "Pročitajte šta je Monstat odgovorio DPS-u" (Read what Monstat replied to the DPS), *CdM*, October 13, 2023

<sup>21</sup> Emisija Naglas: Popis - Statistika ili politika? (Naglas Talk Show: Census - Statistics or Politics), *YouTube: RTCG Official Channel*, October 10, 2023

However, our analysis of the lists of selected municipal instructors (which we could find on official websites) unambiguously points to the significant involvement of party activists and/or government officials.<sup>22</sup> Also, our analysis shows a significant number of individuals with close relations to party and public officials.

Our findings are also confirmed by the investigative efforts of journalists<sup>23</sup>, but also by the correction of the list of municipal instructors in Nikšić following public protests, which represents a kind of public acknowledgement of this problem.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, in this process, as opposed to the 2011 census, when the census structure was also under the party's control of the government and the opposition, we got a census administration predominantly close to the ruling structures.

This deviation should be a concern for everyone, since the Law on the Census (Article 6) stipulates that the principles of official statistics are applied when conducting the census. These principles are defined in Article 6 of the Law on Official Statistics and the System of Official Statistics, which proclaims the professional independence of the official statistics producer from political, administrative, and regulatory bodies, as well as from private sector entities.

It is necessary to know that in the proposal of the resolution of the European Parliament it is stated that the European Parliament expects the census to be conducted openly and transparently without any political interference.<sup>25</sup> provided by several relevant and independent sources, it is clear that this segment of the census procedure is highly problematic.

In addition to this, our researchers found a large number of employed individuals on the available lists of municipal instructors. Leaving aside the logical question of how employed individuals will be absent from their work for 15 days to conduct the process, the key question remains – why were the obligations of the census commission not respected before the start of fieldwork, which stipulates that unemployed individuals (including students and pensioners) are given preference when selecting instructors and enumerators?<sup>26</sup>

In addition to mistrust and problems with the objectivity of data collected by enumerators who are under political control, a clearly and visibly politicized administration populated by party activists represents a significant safety problem and an invitation to incidents that could become a significant burden on this census process under the described conditions and context.

<sup>22</sup> The CDT research team assisted by regional and municipal coordinators and other external sources, conducted field verification of instructors who will be involved in the upcoming census. We thoroughly analyzed the available lists on the municipalities' websites. This report provides a snapshot as of October 17, 2023.

<sup>23</sup> "Popisivače obučavaju političari i njihovi rođaci" (Politicians and their relatives train enumerators), *Vijesti*, October 14, 2023.

<sup>24</sup> "Opština Nikšić: Utvrđen konačni spisak izabranih kandidata za instruktore za popis" (The Municipality of Nikšić: Final list of selected candidates for census instructors determined), *RTNK*, October 13, 2023

<sup>25</sup> Motion for a European Parliament Resolution on the 2022 Commission Report on Montenegro, September 26, 2023

<sup>26</sup> Methodology for the preparation, organization and implementation of the census; Census of population, households and dwellings in 2023; Statistical Office of Montenegro, Podgorica 2023

## RISKS AND UNRESOLVED METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

The methodology is a very comprehensive document, the detailed analysis of which CDT, as we have already emphasized, leaves to experts who have experience in that field.

In this document, as we have already mentioned, we want to raise some of the most significant dilemmas that emerged during the preliminary analysis of the published document, which can catalyze further discussion to fully understand the process and inform the citizens about it.

First and foremost, we need to address the possibility of a census boycott. Instead of open and valid communication with all interested parties taking place in the preparation of the process, and a dialogue leading to solutions that could satisfy all involved, the discussion has shifted to the violation of the law. The director of Monstat, Miroslav Pejovic, announced that calling certain political entities to boycott the census is a call for breaking the law.<sup>27</sup> This statement requires further elaboration. First of all, we believe that state officials' statements regarding important social actions should not contain any indication of what could be perceived as intimidation of citizens. The proposal of the European Parliament on Montenegro also emphasizes that the census must be conducted without intimidation or fear of prosecution<sup>28</sup>. It is also important to know that those who heed the call for a potential boycott and accept the policy of 'closed doors' in practice are unlikely to be punished. Legal provisions are set up in such a way that they are difficult to implement in practice. Furthermore, our country does not have precise records of who lives at which address, and a significant number of people do not have the habit or that kind of culture to keep track of government records and report changes of residence or domicile, making it very difficult to legally determine where these people actually live and whether they acted against the law when they refused to provide data.<sup>29</sup> This makes it very difficult to prosecute violators. In our work related to the control of the voter list, we were able to see for ourselves this fact and we know for sure that the state does not have precise information on whether and who lives at a particular address.

This raises a significant question and leads to a real possibility of underestimating the population. We will leave the discussion about how to address the issue of missing data in this case for the subsequent parts of our reviews.

Another significant risk is overestimating the population. Some potential political and financial reasons here should be mentioned as inspiration for further discussion.

First, there is a clear and visible tendency that national communities want to influence an increase in their share of the total population, as evidenced by the campaigns we wrote about earlier. It is clear that these structures operate on the logic that more members of our nation means more influence.

<sup>27</sup> "Pejović: Pozivanje na bojkot popisa je poziv na kršenje zakona" (Pejović: Calling for a boycott of the census is a call for breaking the law), *Analitika*, October 15, 2023

<sup>28</sup> Motion for a European Parliament Resolution on the 2022 Commission Report on Montenegro, September 26, 2023

<sup>29</sup> In addition to this, penalty provisions for enumerators, controllers, instructors, and individuals covered by the census, that are supposed to protect the personal data of citizens by stipulating penalties for misuse of the census process, have been worded in a way that leaves gaps and does not guarantee that the penalties are applicable in practice.

There is also the potential need for the former and current authorities to "hide" the significant emigration flow,<sup>30</sup> which is evidenced by all relevant research, and thus try to minimize their responsibility for the significant outflow of the population from Montenegro. Further, some municipalities have such a reduced number of inhabitants that raising the question of their purpose is a matter of time. They certainly have an interest in showing a larger number of inhabitants than they really have. They certainly have an interest in showing a larger number of inhabitants than they actually have. It is also important to bear in mind that municipalities have the potential to draw significant financial resources based on the number of inhabitants, which clearly motivates their overestimates regarding the number of inhabitants.

It should be added that, with the introduction of the obligation to enumerate the "diaspora", the risk of overestimating the number of inhabitants has significantly increased. It is not entirely clear how the determination of who is actually diaspora will be done, how it will be distinguished from the permanent population (those who truly live in Montenegro), and most importantly, how this process will be controlled. For anyone with even a basic understanding of the residence registry, it is entirely clear that it contains a multitude of people who, besides those who are temporarily abroad and do not have the appropriate legal status in the country in which they reside, misuse domestic legislation to assert any rights in Montenegro that they do not fundamentally deserve.

In this context, the issue of immigrants, of whom there are over 80,000 according to various estimates, should not be underestimated<sup>31</sup>. Since these are mainly people who came to Montenegro to escape the war in Ukraine, we should not underestimate their motivation, which is completely understandable for us, to not be completely honest in their answers to the enumerators, especially regarding the length of their stay in Montenegro.

Another important risk to consider is the potential extension of the census period beyond the planned 15 days. Such an extension is not an unknown phenomenon, especially in neighboring countries. International recommendations suggest that a short census period is desirable to minimize double counting and errors, which can occur despite a precise reference date. On the other hand, the shorter the enumeration period, the greater the number of field staff that must be employed. This increases costs and can reduce data quality. Short periods are sometimes feasible in small countries, while longer periods are often needed in countries with a more widely dispersed population.<sup>32</sup>

It should be taken into account here that, according to the available information, we already lack a certain number of enumerators. It should also be borne in mind that the number of enumerators is roughly the same as in the previous census, but the questionnaire is somewhat more extensive, and certain categories (the diaspora) require significantly more responses than before, which necessitates more time for conducting interviews with citizens, which inevitably increases this risk.

<sup>30</sup> Dragan Koprivica, Gordana Radojevic, *Dok čekamo odgovorniju vlast: Zašto Crnoj Gori nije stalo do sopstvenog stanovništva? (While Waiting for a More Responsible Government: Why Montenegro doesn't care about its population)*, Center for Democratic Transition, 2023

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Conference of European Statisticians, *Recommendations for the 2020 Censuses of Population and Housing*, 2015

As we said, the extension of the census is not problematic per se, but in the described context, in the circumstances of a potential boycott or even obstruction, it could become a more serious problem.

At the end of this section, we believe it is crucial to emphasize the issue of controlling all segments of the process. This has become a highly significant question, especially after Eurostat announced that it would not monitor the census. The methodology defines control mechanisms, and the effectiveness of these mechanisms can only be analyzed towards the end of the process. Therefore, in conditions of reduced trust, external monitoring of all significant aspects of the census is of great importance. Monstat has an immense responsibility here because it will ultimately depend on their demeanor in this area whether the results of the census will be valid and thus widely accepted by the domestic and international public.

## THE INFLUENCE OF NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES AND RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES ON THE CENSUS ENVIRONMENT

Even the previous population census in 2011 took place amid the interference of neighboring states and other actors and their influence campaigns on citizens' self-identification. More than a decade later, in the era of digital media, it has become evident that Montenegro lacks mechanisms to protect its internal processes from unwanted external influences. It is clear that these risks were not considered during the census preparation, and no protective mechanisms were foreseen, except for the naive hope that citizens would only trust Monstat's campaign.

The Republic of Serbia was the first to express its interest in the census. Its president, Aleksandar Vucic, announced before the 2020 elections that the elections in Montenegro were of importance to the Serbian people, but the census was most important to them<sup>33</sup>. A few months later, he expressed concern about the census and announced that it would be a disaster if it turned out that Serbs were disappearing<sup>34</sup>.

In December last year, the census in Montenegro was also discussed in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia<sup>35</sup>, where mayors and other representatives from several Montenegrin municipalities reported on the position of Serbs in Montenegro before the Committee for Diaspora and Serbs in the Region<sup>36</sup>.

The Administration for Cooperation with the Diaspora and Serbs in the region has supported Serbian organizations' work in Montenegro for years. At this year's public competition, a number of projects were supported, including the project of the Serbian National Council of Montenegro "Publishing Activity - Towards the Census of the Population in Montenegro"<sup>37</sup>.

<sup>33</sup> "Vučić: Izbori u Crnoj Gori važni, ali važniji popis 2021. godine" (Elections in Montenegro are important, but the census in 2021 is more important), *Pobjeda*, August 26, 2020

<sup>34</sup> "Vučić o popisu u Crnoj Gori: Srpski narod da se izjasni bez pritiska kao i njihovi očevi i djedovi!" (The Serbian people should declare themselves without pressure, just like their fathers and grandfathers!), *Borba*, January 5, 2021

<sup>35</sup> "Раичевић о попису 2023: Треба да нађемо терапију кад имамо успостављену дијагнозу" (Raičević on the 2023 census: We need to find therapy since we have a diagnosis), *In4s*, December 17, 2022

<sup>36</sup> "Иза организоване хајке стоји хаотичан страх од пописа" (Behind the organized hunt is chaotic fear of the census), *In4s*, January 11, 2023.

<sup>37</sup> Decision on co-financing projects that contribute to preserving and strengthening the bonds between the home country and the diaspora, as well as the home country and Serbs in the region, Directorate for Cooperation with the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region, June 23, 2023

Numerous organizations on this list are already active in the pre-census campaign, such as the In4s portal, which received support for the project "Anti-Serbianism in Montenegro," or the organization "We Know Who We Are," which is exclusively focused on the population census and received funds for an internet portal to combat disinformation.

The In4s online portal started the census campaign with billboards<sup>38</sup> two years ago, which continues to this day and has sparked numerous controversies, including examples of disinformation and historical revisionism. The media could not get an answer to the question of who finances this campaign. This campaign has gone so far that the Republic of Croatia has issued a protest note to the Montenegrin authorities because it appropriates well-known figures from Croatian history.<sup>40</sup>

Two Serbian houses funded by the Government of Serbia in Berane and Podgorica, and the organizations gathered in them, which are beneficiaries of grants from the Administration for Cooperation with the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region, have also engaged in various activities related to the census in recent months. The Serbian Culture Summer in Berane was organized with the support of the Government of Serbia. "In honor of Vuk (Karadzic)", the significance of the census<sup>41</sup>, the Serbian origin of Bosniaks and Muslims<sup>42</sup> and the constitutional discrimination of the Serbian language<sup>43</sup> were discussed. Similar panels were organized in Podgorica<sup>44</sup>.

Experience from 2011 tells us that other neighboring states are not immune to interference in the Montenegrin population census, and it is expected that we will observe their activity in the coming weeks. However, until this moment, no significant public appearances have been recorded, so we will write about them, if there are any, in the forthcoming reflections on census-related events.

Religious organizations remain traditionally interested in questions about religion, nation, and language.

Similar to the state of Serbia, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) directly intervened in the census process. During his recent visit to Podgorica, the Patriarch of the SOC, Porfirije Peric, told those gathered that he supports them in expressing and witnessing their identity as believers of the SOC and speakers of the Serbian language on every occasion<sup>45</sup>. In March 2021, following a meeting between the Patriarch of the SOC and the Democratic Front, it was announced that free self-identification in the upcoming population census in Montenegro is of the utmost importance to the SOC.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>38</sup> "ИН4С пописна кампања и на српском приморју!" (In4s Census Campaign on the Serbian Coast), *In4s*, July 21, 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Zeljka Vucinic, Vuk Lajovic, Mihailo Jovic, "Ako ne znaš, pitaj političare - zahuktava se politička kampanja za popis stanovništva" (If you don't know, ask politicians - the political campaign for the census is heating up), *Vijesti*, October 11, 2023

<sup>40</sup> "Hrvatska uputila protestnu notu Crnoj Gori zbog kampanje 'Ponosni na svoje srpsko'" (Croatia sends a protest note to Montenegro due to the campaign 'Proud of Their Serbian Heritage'), *Slobodna Evropa*, October 10, 2023

<sup>41</sup> Voban Novovic, "Пјесничко вече 'У славу Вука' у Беранама" (Poetic Evening 'In Honor of Vuk' in Berane), *Sputnik*, October 6, 2023

<sup>42</sup> "Академска трибина-Срби, Бошњаци и Муслимани у Црној Гори" (Academic Forum - Serbs, Bosniaks, and Muslims in Montenegro), *Srpske novine*, July 22, 2023

<sup>43</sup> "Академска трибина: 'Уставна дискриминација српског језика у Црној Гори'" (Academic Forum: 'Constitutional Discrimination of the Serbian Language in Montenegro') *Srpske novine*, August 18, 2023.

<sup>44</sup> "Сусрети пјесника у Подгорици: 'У славу Вука'" (Meetings of Poets in Podgorica: 'In Honor of Vuk'), *Srpske novine*, October 3, 2023 *Srpske novine*

<sup>45</sup> "Патријарх Порфирије у Подгорици: Знамо ко смо, којим језиком говоримо и ком народу припадамо" (Patriarch Porfirije in Podgorica: We know who we are, which language we speak, and which people we belong to), *In4s*, October 14, 2023

<sup>46</sup> "Popis u CG od najvitalnijeg značaja za SPC" (Census in Montenegro of the utmost importance for the Serbian Orthodox Church), *RTCC Portal*, March 12, 2021



The Metropolitan of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church (MOC) Mihailo Dedeic recently called on citizens to support the MOC in the census regardless of their national affiliation and religious orientation.<sup>47</sup>

The representative of the Bosniak side, Edib Saljic, published a video clip<sup>48</sup> on YouTube, in which the main imam of the Islamic community in Rozaje and other recognizable participants remind citizens of the desirable formula for self-identification: religion – Islam, mother tongue – Bosnian, national affiliation – Bosniak.

It is evident that these influences are not conducive to the quality conduct of the census and significantly limit the application of official statistical principles.

## DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS ABOUT THE CENSUS

The disinformation campaign about the census in Montenegro has been ongoing since 2021. Various media outlets, individuals, and social media pages have disseminated inaccurate narratives about the most important statistical action.

This campaign serves as the media logistics for the phenomena discussed in this document, further undermining the conditions and environment in which the principles of official statistics can be effectively implemented.

To better understand how disinformers, media manipulators, and disinformation proliferators operate and what topics they address, we provide several illustrative examples based on the work of our portal Raskrinkavanje.me.

One of the key narratives on which this campaign is based is the one about the intention to "erase the Serbs from the population list of Montenegro".

Thus, *Informer*<sup>49</sup> and *Republika*<sup>50</sup> have been writing for years about the "dirty plan of the Montenegrins" to set the conditions for the potential population census in Montenegro, promoting the narrative that the intention is to "delete" the Serbs from the census in Montenegro as well. The same narrative was continued by *Večernje novosti*,<sup>51</sup> which was triggered by the Ministry of Finance's decision not to send the Draft Census Law to the European Commission in November 2021. According to them, their aim was to make Serbs "invisible."

<sup>47</sup> Press release regarding the census, Montenegrin Orthodox Church, October 11, 2023.

<sup>48</sup> "2023 Census of Population - Edib Saljic," *YouTube: Edib Saljic*, October 11, 2023

<sup>49</sup> "PROPAO PRLJAVI PLAN ZA POPIS U CRNOJ GORI! Pitanja o veri, naciji i jeziku – OSTAJU! Sada su Srbi na potezu" (DIRTY PLAN FOR THE CENSUS IN MONTENEGRO FAILED! Questions about faith, nationality, and language - REMAIN! Now it's up to the Serbs), *Informer*, October 14, 2021

<sup>50</sup> "PROPAO PRLJAVI PLAN ZA POPIS U CRNOJ GORI! Pitanja o veri, naciji i jeziku – OSTAJU! Sada su Srbi na potezu" (DIRTY PLAN FOR THE CENSUS IN MONTENEGRO FAILED! Questions about faith, nationality, and language - REMAIN! Now it's up to the Serbs), *Republika*, October 14, 2021

<sup>51</sup> V. Kadic, "CILJ JE DA SE SRBI NE VIDE: Nacrt zakona o popisu još nije poslat Briselu, niti se zna kada će u Skupštinu" (THE GOAL IS TO MAKE SERBS LESS VISIBLE: The draft Law on Census has not been sent to Brussels yet, and it is not known when it will be submitted to the Parliament), *Večernje novosti*, November 8, 2021

An almost identical narrative about "erasure" also came from the opposite side through an article published on the *Aktuelno* online portal.<sup>52</sup> It claimed that the census was conducted to have "as few Montenegrins as possible," stating that the actors of the census "have been given the obligation to bring the number of Serbs in Montenegro at least on par with Montenegrins." In the form of a column, it was also claimed that "Montenegrins are facing institutional extinction" due to the census.<sup>53</sup>

Following this, it was suggested that Serbs are already a majority in Montenegro. This time, the executor was Aleksandar Rakovic,<sup>54</sup> a right-winger from Serbia, who stated for *Tanjug* that "Serbs are already a majority in Montenegro" and that "40 percent of Montenegro's population currently identifies as Serbs," almost a year before the scheduled period for the census in Montenegro.

Nevertheless, the most dominant disinformation narrative has all the characteristics of historical revisionism and sporadically, yet regularly, appears in the media and on social media. It involves a false and easily verifiable claim: that in the 1909 census, 95 percent of Montenegro's population identified as Serbs.

*Vecernje novosti*<sup>55</sup> has been repeating this fake news since 2020. This year,<sup>56</sup> this newspaper published the same misinformation<sup>57</sup> at least two more times. In the meantime, the same falsehood was published many more times on social networks. Here is an example of how it is presented by the IN4S online portal.<sup>60</sup>

As the census approaches and the political debate intensifies regarding the conditions and environment for its conduct, the list of topics addressed by disinformers has expanded with the launch of various types of campaigns and influences described in this document. Here are some interesting examples:

Believe it or not, the census logo itself became a subject of debate<sup>61</sup> – it was claimed that it was designed to represent a chapel on Mount Lovcen, which has been a long-standing obsession of local history revisionists.

<sup>52</sup> Slavko Mandić, "Popis da Crnogoraca bude što manje" (Census to reduce the number of Montenegrins as much as possible), *Aktuelno*, September 28, 2023

<sup>53</sup> Adnan Hamfo Pejcinović, "Crnogorci pred institucionalnim gašenjem" (Montenegrins on the Verge of Institutional Extinction), *Antena M*, October 6, 2023

<sup>54</sup> "Raković: Srbi su već sad većina u Crnoj Gori" (Raković: Serbs are already the majority in Montenegro), *Borba*, October 29, 2022

<sup>55</sup> V. Kadić, "RASPAO SE PLAN DA SRBE SVEDU NA 10 ODSTO! Kakvo će biti "prebrojavanje" stanovništva u Crnoj Gori posle odlaska DPS" (THE PLAN TO REDUCE SERBS TO 10 PERCENT HAS FAILED! What will the population count look like in Montenegro after the DPS's departure) *Vecernje novosti*, October 4, 2020

<sup>56</sup> V. Kadić, "PREKO POPISA KORENIMA? Hoće li se o identitetskim pitanjima građani Crne Gore konačno izjasniti slobodno", (BACK TO ROOTS THROUGH THE CENSUS? Will the citizens of Montenegro finally declare themselves freely on identity issues," *Vecernje novosti*, September 26, 2023

<sup>57</sup> V. Kadić, "NA POPISU 4.500 POPISIVAČA: Pripreme u Crnoj Gori" (4,500 ENUMERATORS FOR THE CENSUS: Preparations underway in Montenegro), *Vecernje novosti*, October 5, 2023

<sup>58</sup> Nina Djuranović, "Popis stiže, dezinformacija sve više – 1909. se nije izjašnjavalo o nacionalnosti" (The census is coming, disinformation is on the rise – In 1909 census, there was no declaration of national affiliation), *Raskrinkavanje*, September 26, 2023

<sup>59</sup> Marko Vukajlović, "Nacionalnost se nije pisala na popisima 1909. i 1921." (National affiliation was not recorded in the 1909 and 1921 censuses), *Raskrinkavanje*, October 13, 2023

<sup>60</sup> "Raičević: Nestanak Srba u Crnoj Gori popisima – Sa 94,38 procenata 1909. godine na 1,78 posto 1948. godine"(Raković: The demise of Serbs in censuses: Serbs in Montenegro reduced from 94.38 percent in 1909 to 1.78 percent in 1948), *IN4S*, 2023

<sup>61</sup> Nina Djuranović, "Manipulisanje simbolikom logotipa popisa"(Manipulating with the symbolism of the census logo) *Raskrinkavanje*, September 25, 2023



It was not unexpected for politicians to get involved in disinformation about the census. Officials of several parties made inaccurate claims<sup>62</sup> – that the census is necessary to determine how many homes former government officials have, which has no basis in truth.

The key institutions are not immune to the incomplete information of the citizens - the media reported that MONSTAT<sup>63</sup> stated that there was no possibility to postpone the census, although such a possibility exists, because the date of its holding is not regulated by the Law but by a by-law that the Government can change at any session.

When it comes to disinformation about the census, it is worth noting one more detail. Although MONSTAT has an internal document – Instructions for Responding to Misinterpretation or Misuse of Statistics<sup>64</sup>, which obligates it to protect citizens from misinformation, or rather to publicly respond to criticism, misuse or misinterpretation of official statistics in the media, this single mechanism for combating disinformation has been very rarely used for years.

In the course of preparations for the census, our team recorded two MONSTAT interventions in this regard: one regarding false claims by representatives of several parties that the census would reveal how many homes former government officials have<sup>65</sup> and another addressing the DPS's claims about a policy of punishment related to a potential census boycott.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Darvin Muric, "Popis ne može utvrditi koliko bivši funkcioneri imaju stanova"(Census cannot determine how many houses or apartments are owned by former officials), *Raskrinkavanje*, October 10, 2023

<sup>63</sup> Jelena Jovanovic, "Vrijeme održavanja popisa određuje Vlada, a ne zakon" (The timing of the census is determined by the Government, not the law), *Raskrinkavanje*, September 28, 2023

<sup>64</sup> LPR assessment on the implementation of the European Statistics Code of Practice in Montenegro, Draft report 04/30/2012.

<sup>65</sup> "Monstat odgovorio ZBCG: Popisom se ne prikupljaju informacije o tome koliko pojedinci imaju kuća ili stanova", (Monstat's response to ZBCG: The census does not collect information about how many individuals have houses or apartments), *Portal Analitika*, October 17, 2023

<sup>66</sup> "MONSTAT: Netačna tumačenja iz DPS-a, lice obuhvaćeno popisom dužno da u njemu učestvuje" (MONSTAT: Incorrect interpretations from DPS, individuals covered by the census are obliged to participate), *CDM*, October 17, 2023



AKCIJA<sup>CDT</sup>