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### Bosnia's "Others" and the First Post-War Census

Last fall, Bosnians were poised to participate in their first census since before the ethnic war of the 1990s. But the most recent of several delays pushed the census back to October, creating more time for census "campaigns" to persuade Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs to check their corresponding box, or for "others" that do not identify with one of the three constituent groups to write in a mixed, minority, or apolitical "Bosnian" identity. Ivana Howard of the National Endowment for Democracy reports that, based on "very reliable sources," 35% of Bosnians declared themselves as something other than the three constituent groups in last October's trial census. If these numbers translate to the national level next October, the "others" could outnumber the Croat constituency—and could make the first step towards transforming Bosnia's ethnically-based constitution.

As Maureen Master, Protection Officer at UNHCR comments, countries with robust civil societies provide "a direct link between numbers and services," and NGOs "can convince undocumented populations that it would be in their interest to participate in the census." But Bosnians face an unusually politically charged census process, as Bosnia's experience with ethnic war between Muslim Bosniaks, Catholic Croats, and Orthodox Serbs in the 1990s still hinders civil society and renders the census' ethnic questions highly controversial. Meanwhile, Bosnia's stigmatized Roma minority may resist declaring their identity for fear of further marginalization. As an expert in Bosnian politics who chooses to remain anonymous due to the census' controversial nature explains, Bosnians are still trying to determine, "Is a religion a nation or is a religion a religion and...different than a nation?"

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The census delay, encouraged by the European Union, stems in part from technical difficulties. As Andy McGuffie, the E.U. spokesperson in Bosnia, explains in an email, "Any policy or programme for the development of Bosnia and Herzegovina whether social, economic, or otherwise" requires a countrywide census, and in order to "avoid unreliable results," the census must be delayed for at least six months.

Eliza Ronalds-Hannon, a reporter with the Organized Crime & Corruption Reporting Project in Sarajevo, acknowledges the E.U.'s issues with the census, including "not having enough census employees to go around" or "not having the infrastructure set up." But, she says, "[The E.U.] also made allusions to...not having the political support they needed to get those things done."

Ivana Howard, Senior Advisor for Europe at the National Endowment for Democracy, echoes Ronalds-Hannon's concerns. "The trial census did identify a couple of shortcomings both in the actual census taking process as well as legislation," she says, but "there's not even an effort right now to try to come up with a doable, credible monitoring effort that would...avoid any manipulation with the census and thereby later questioning its numbers and delegitimizing the whole process." Howard adds that the E.U. was slow to respond to civil society's demands that the census form include a write-in section for the ethnic category of "other," despite the fact that "declar[ing] even a mother tongue is in direct conflict with some of the E.U. laws and standards."

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Many Bosnians plan to check one of the three constituent identities in October. Especially in smaller towns, Bosnians may feel more pressured to align with one ethnic identity. As Ronald-Hannon explains, "If you have a town of Muslim refugees...a town that was a refugee town and now is still a pocket of Bosniaks in [the Serb] Republic of Srpska, for instance...it's going to be hard to not feel pressured to identify as Bosniak as opposed to Bosnian when...your community wants to represent the fact that you weren't wiped out."

In other words, given the country's history of genocide, Muslim Bosniaks have ample reason to identify as "Bosniak" and to make the survival of their community known. Emir Pandzo, a twenty-six-year-old Muslim living in Sarajevo, explains in an email, "Considering the fact that many of the refugees have not yet returned to their homes, the census can give misleading information about the ethnical distribution of the population in Bosnia and Herzegovina." He also worries that "many Bosniaks will be placed into the 'Other' group, because of using imprecise terms when declaring themselves."

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But some Bosnians feel that their identity cannot be explained by the terms “Bosniak,” “Croat,” or “Serb.” As Matt Lutton, a photographer based in Belgrade, Serbia explains, “People’s responses are way more complicated than most accounts that we read in the media. If anybody gives you a simple answer like ‘Of course, I’m Serb, I’m Orthodox,’ it’s probably not that simple.” Lutton continues, “It’s easy to look at Banja Luka and Sarajevo and...somewhere in the Croatian part of Herzegovina and say, ‘That’s the stronghold for this identity.’ But most people that I know...come from much more complicated backgrounds.”

Darko Brkan of the Sarajevo-based NGO [Zašto ne?](#) or “Why not?,” who played a key role in persuading Bosnian officials to add a write-in option under the category for ethnic identity, launched a two-tier campaign to ensure that Bosnians “others” would be represented in the census. Brkan and his team both “focus on different populations to declare as Others on the census” and “minimize the potential of census fraud...[by] teaching people what the census process is, what are their rights on the census, [and] monitoring the census.”

Despite competition from constituent groups’ campaigns (the Bosniak campaign, he says, has received an estimated ten million Euros from Turkey to ensure Muslims are properly counted) Brkan emphasizes Bosnians’ freedom to choose their identity freely. “Everybody should have a right to know the position of everybody in the whole process and actually make their decision freely based on collecting all the information,” he says.

Brkan and his team’s ultimate goal “is to change the constitutional settings of the country...in order for all the discrimination to be ended or at least for everybody that’s not one of the three constituent peoples to...get equal rights.” The option of “other” on the census not only gives voice to Roma, Jews, or Bosnians of mixed backgrounds but also to those who disapprove of the constitutional model set out by the Dayton Peace Accords, which grants constituency to the three major groups only. This model, Brkan explains, “discriminates against anybody who feels that...their civic identity is more their political being than their ethnic identity.”

Ivana Howard mentions that many Bosnians opting for the identity of “Other” are part of the younger generation that was born during or soon after the war; older Bosniaks who prefer to write in “Muslim,” which denoted Muslim identity in former Yugoslavia far more commonly than “Bosniak”; or older Bosnians of all ethnic groups who “are just fed up” with ethnic division—those who, “if Bosniak decided to declare themselves as Muslim, if Serb decided to

declare themselves as just Orthodox, or if just Croat declare themselves just Catholic, not as an ethnic group.”

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Sarajevo-based photographer Jasmin Brutus falls into this category, identifying as “Other” for political reasons. “Dayton’s Peace agreement stopped the war but you know we must move on,” he says. “If the three major ethnic groups have presidents, why don’t I have my president?”

In a [photography project](#) he calls “Bosnian Roma People—The Others,” Brutus has photographed dozens of Bosnian Roma, a group that could help push the population of the “other” demographic group past that of the Croat constituency. On his project’s site, Brutus condemns his country’s mistreatment of “others,” whether through the demonization of mixed marriages or the ethnic segregation of public classrooms, must change. “What is ordinary, normal and unremarkable practice in other democratic countries,” he writes, “is roundly condemned in the [Bosnian] media as unacceptable, filthy, and against God’s law.” And the Roma, he concludes, suffer the worst discrimination of all Bosnian ethnic groups.

Brutus’ photography project has given him the opportunity to speak with several Roma citizens. “Sometimes people talk about their problems because they need someone to listen [to] them,” Brutus says. “Every word almost, I remember.” None of his Roma friends, however, have mentioned the census. “They have their worries,” he says, “how to live today and tomorrow.” Lutton, Brutus’ friend and fellow photographer, gives a similar report: “[Identity] is not something that generally came up in conversation. It’s much more...pressing, day to day needs...very rough, survival kind of situations.”

Maureen Master stresses the importance that Roma specify “Roma” under the ethnic category of “other” on the census. Master notes, “Because many [Roma] are not registered in the civil registries or even registered at birth, they don’t have a birth certificate.” If the census provides an accurate count of Roma, however, the highly mobile population that often resides “in informal or so-called illegal settlements” could be better accounted for, and more importantly, could access rights such as public education more readily. Currently, Maureen says, “When Roma children go to school they face a great deal of discrimination from the other children and from the teachers and administrators.... We estimate that one-third of Roma children go to school.”

Even though Roma could potentially demand more rights if they identified in large numbers on the census, Masters comments that Roma often identify as Serb, Croat, Bosniak, or even other minorities because they fear the stigmatization that comes with the label “Roma” or “gypsy.” Brkan shares Master’s concerns, predicting that Roma might “tend to declare [with] the majority ethnicity in the area where they live.” But if they declare themselves as Roma, “It will be much easier for the rest of the civil society to really assist them.”

Howard predicts that with the aid of campaigns like Brkan’s, Roma communities could voice their identity in strong numbers in October. “A campaign that forces first of all accurate and fair census taking in Roma communities...and calls on the Roma community...to rally declare themselves as such, I don’t see how this cannot make an impact.”

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Elvir Sejdic, a 21-year-old Sarajevan Roma and cousin of Dervo Sejdic, a Bosnian Roma who successfully established within the European Court of Human Rights that Bosnia’s constitution violated the European Convention on Human Rights, agrees that Roma can and should identify as such on the census. Through his neighbor and translator, 24-year-old Admir Mujic, Elvir says, “This is like an election for us. It’s going to be better...There are some Roma begging and being aggressive, but mostly we are regular, good people.”

Mujic adds, “The people in this country in Bosnia and Herzegovina, they don’t see [Roma] as the right population for the country, like they are here, but they are not here.” Like Elvir, he hopes that the census will help afford Roma citizens more political and educational rights.

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Some experts worry that bureaucratic delays will hinder the census process further. As Ronalds-Hannon notes, “Whether or not the census actually happens in October is the first question.” Others, especially Brkan, fear that corrupt officials could skew census results, especially those regarding the question of ethnicity.

But when asked whether Bosnia’s “others” could outnumber the Croat constituency, Brkan answered emphatically, “I’m not saying that it could, I’m saying it will.” Brkan expects that as a direct result of the census, more state offices would open for “others,” since state employment law requires civil service employment to resemble the ethnic structure of the population. As for long-term results, Brkan looks forward to “a set of constitutional legal

changes throughout the whole political system of Bosnia,” especially increased political representation and civil rights for the “others.”

Ivana Howard has some reservations about the census’ impact, noting that “so far there has not been an example in which this system was successfully challenged and adapted to become something better.” Nonetheless, she admits, “I have subscribed a little bit to this optimism that Darko has conveyed to you.” No matter the census’ results, she says, the process has provided civil society with a common cause to rally around—with “an issue that truly affects everybody’s life.” Perhaps most significantly, Howard explains that the census constitutes the first indigenous attempt at constitutional reform. In a country often subjected to international pressures, the census process provides a unique opportunity for Bosnians, “othered” or not, to change Bosnia.