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# To be a Bosniak or to be a citizen? Bosnia and Herzegovina's 2013 census as an election

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**ABSTRACT.** Bosnia and Herzegovina's first post-war population census, held in 2013, was accompanied by campaigns associated with each of the country's three main ethnic groups, which sought to maximise their share of the recorded population. These campaigns were challenged by a rival 'civic' campaign that instead stressed the right to freedom of self-identification, however. This article compares the aims, methods and framings used by this civic campaign with those of the most prominent of the 'ethnic' campaigns – that of Bosniak ethnic entrepreneurs. It demonstrates that the two campaigns were each motivated by a combination of symbolic motives, centred on recognition and highlighting discrimination, and instrumental motives relating to the country's power-sharing institutions. The limited success of the civic campaign in countering the messages of its rival ethnic campaigns demonstrates the difficulties that civic movements face in mobilising citizens in consociational democracies such as BiH.

**KEYWORDS:** Balkans, civic nationalism, consociationalism, demography, ethnic nationalism

## Introduction

In his classic study of ethnic conflict, Donald Horowitz notes that in deeply divided societies, elections tend to resemble ethnic censuses but also that population censuses become contests 'to be "won"'. 'So the election is a census', he summarises, 'and the census is an election' (Horowitz 1985: 196). Both of these observations apply to Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Elections to the country's power-sharing institutions, established by the Dayton Agreement that ended the war of 1992–95, have largely been dominated by ethnic parties. The country's first census since independence, conducted in 2013, meanwhile, resembled an election campaign, with politicians and civil society organisations associated with each of the country's three largest ethnic groups – Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats – seeking to ensure the maximisation of their share in the population statistics. That such campaigns were a feature of the census is perhaps not surprising, and indeed similar mobilisation has been a feature of censuses in other deeply divided societies. What

is more noteworthy is that these ethno-nationalist campaigns faced competition from organisations that stressed citizens' rights to self-identification, free from political pressure. Some members of this campaign went further, suggesting that people should opt out of identifying as Bosniak, Serb or Croat and instead declare themselves to simply be 'Bosnians'.

In order to understand why this 'civic' campaign emerged and to consider the extent to which it was successful, this article compares the campaign's aims, methods and framing of appeals with those of the most prominent of the 'ethnic' campaigns – the Bosniak campaign to encourage identification with the largest of BiH's 'constituent peoples' – and assesses the relative success of the two. In doing so, the article contributes to our understanding both of census politics in deeply divided societies, by examining a case of resistance to ethno-national categorisation, and of the challenges of civic mobilisation under a consociational political system.

The article briefly surveys the literature on census politics in deeply divided societies, which identifies the census as a key site for the negotiation, legitimisation and contestation of identities. This literature suggests that census campaigns are motivated by both symbolic and instrumental rationales, and I adopt this categorisation as a way of analysing the 2013 Bosnian census campaigns. After introducing the political context of BiH's first post-war census, the article then considers the Bosniak and civic census campaigns in turn, outlining what their aims were, the methods they employed and the ways in which they framed their messages, before turning to the campaigns' reactions to the results of the census. While the analysis shows that the civic campaign was partially successful in influencing the design of the census, its results demonstrate that only a small proportion of the population were willing to reject ethnic identification. The article concludes by reflecting on what the case tells us about the difficulties of successful civic mobilisation in BiH.

### **Census politics in deeply divided societies: a framework for analysis**

Against the conventional, 'statistical realist' view of censuses as exercises that enumerate objects that '[exist] previous to and outside of statistics' (Labbé 2000, cited by Kertzer and Arel 2002: 19), anthropologists have argued that the census plays a significant role in the social construction of identities. Benedict Anderson's (1991) work stands out here for foregrounding the colonial census, alongside the map and the museum, as a key institution in the construction and reification of ethnic and racial identities. Drawing on Hirschman's (1987) analysis of the evolution of the identity categories employed in censuses of what is now Malaysia, Anderson argues that:

It is extremely unlikely that ... more than a tiny fraction of those categorized and subcategorized would have recognized themselves under such labels. These 'identities', imagined by the (confusedly) classifying mind of the colonial state, still awaited a

reification which imperial administrative penetration would soon make possible. (Anderson 1991: 165)

Similarly, James Scott highlights the power of the state, through institutions such as the census, to shape identities, arguing that 'the state, of all institutions, is best equipped to insist on treating people according to its schemata' and that categories invented by officials such as census takers 'can end by becoming categories that organize people's daily experience precisely because they are embedded in state-created institutions that structure that experience' (Scott 1998: 82–83).

From this perspective, then, 'official statistics do not simply mirror, but help produce social realities' (Lieberman and Singh 2017: 1). The designers of official categorisation schemes do not get things all their own way, however, and citizens are not merely passive subjects of categorisation. As Starr notes, '[w]hen institutions classify ... they often confront the self-conceptions of the subjects' (Starr 1992: 269). Populations often resist, subvert or attempt to influence the design of official categorisations. In this vein, Urla argues that '[i]n asking how quantifying techniques and discourses operate as technologies of power, we cannot assume that quantification is always a form of domination imposed upon an unwitting and silent populace' (Urla 1993: 837). In her study of the Basque language movement, Urla notes that 'minorities may also turn to statistics as a means of *contesting* state power and hegemonic constructions of social reality' (emphasis in original). Similarly, Patriarca argues that while people might conform to categorisations employed in official statistics, '[c]ensus-takers and statisticians ... have little control over the life of the categories and classifications that they establish' (Patriarca 1996: 11). Kertzer and Arel argue that since the first modern censuses, states' attempts to pigeon-hole individuals into categories of identity have faced resistance (Kertzer and Arel 2002: 27). They cite an example from Bernard Cohn's (1987) study of the census in colonial India, where in 1931 in Lahore, activists from the Arya Samaj movement distributed a leaflet instructing people how to answer questions on religion, sect, caste, race and language. This literature demonstrates how 'the census constitutes a site where the state, citizens, and groups representing majorities and minorities negotiate national identities' (Bieber 2015: 873).

In explaining why ethnic entrepreneurs seek to influence group members' responses to identity questions, Kertzer and Arel note that census politics has an emotional dimension, in that the census confers recognition on groups, but also an instrumental dimension, whereby 'the pursuit of entitlement translates into a contest for achieving the "right" numbers'. They argue that '[i]dentity politics is a numbers game, or more precisely a battle over relative proportions, both within the state and within particular territories of the larger state' (Kertzer and Arel 2002: 30). Bieber similarly points to symbolic and instrumental motives, highlighting three reasons for political interest in the census in divided societies. First, where legal entitlements such as minority rights are linked to census results, 'minority representatives have a vested interest

in securing a high number of minorities in particular regions' (Bieber 2015: 887). Second, even where such entitlements are not legally binding, 'numerical strength is crucial for making claims and symbolic entitlement', serving to distinguish between those groups that are obviously minorities and those that can claim (co-)ownership of the state. Finally, the size of a group as demonstrated by the census provides political parties claiming to represent the group with political capital and legitimacy. Where parties are dependent on ethno-national appeals, a significant number of people opting out of identification with parties' preferred identity categories threatens to undermine their power (Bieber 2015: 888).

As the brief discussion here suggests, where the existing literature has examined attempts to influence census outcomes, it has done so by analysing the campaigns of ethnic entrepreneurs. In order to broaden the focus of this literature, the present article provides a comparative analysis of ethnic *and civic* campaigns in BiH. Whereas ethnic parties and campaigns seek to represent the interests of a single group within society, civic movements attempt to bring people from across ethnic divides together in pursuit of common goals, potentially leading to social and political transformation of a deeply divided society (Murtagh 2016: 150).

In order to understand what motivates these campaigns and how they frame their appeals, the article adopts the analytical distinction between symbolic and instrumental motives for engagement with the census. To operationalise this framework, I draw on semi-structured interviews conducted with 17 key participants in the campaigns and the broader Bosnian census process, the campaigns' own published materials, and media coverage of their activities.<sup>1</sup> Interviews were conducted in Sarajevo, Banja Luka and Tuzla in October and November 2017, with participants selected based on an initial internet search, consultation with a project advisory group, and some chain referrals. The majority of the interviews were conducted in English, but a small number were conducted in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian with the assistance of a translator. The published materials were identified through detailed searching of organisations' websites, social media channels, and English- and local-language media.

### **The 2013 census in Bosnia and Herzegovina**

Prior to 2013, the last census to have been conducted in BiH was the final Yugoslav census, which took place in April 1991.<sup>2</sup> A year later, the country had declared its independence from Yugoslavia, marking the start of a conflict that lasted for more than three and a half years and which resulted in the death of approximately 100,000 combatants and civilians, and the displacement of many times that number. The Dayton Agreement, which finally brought the conflict to an end in 1995, preserved the territorial integrity of BiH but recognised the state as the home of three 'constituent peoples' – Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats – and granted significant power to two territorial entities, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) and the Republika Srpska

(RS). Dayton represented a compromise whereby the Bosniak and Croat Federation leadership accepted the existence of the Serb-dominated RS as the price for preserving BiH's borders, and the leadership of the RS accepted some minimal powers being given to the central state (Belloni 2007: 15–17). Dayton also established a new constitution, setting out a complex system of consociational power sharing whereby the constituent peoples are guaranteed representation at all levels of government in both entities and in state institutions, which are headed by a rotating three-member state presidency.

While the significant casualty toll of the conflict and the internal displacement and refugee flows it resulted in meant that a post-war census was desperately needed, the nature of the institutions created by Dayton presented significant obstacles to such an exercise. Since the establishment of a state-level statistical office in 1998, the country's statistical system has been made up of three offices: the Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina at the state level, the Federal Office of Statistics in the FBiH, and the Republika Srpska Institute of Statistics in the RS.<sup>3</sup> This arrangement, along with the power-sharing nature of the country's political institutions, which grant extensive veto powers to the representatives of the constituent peoples, made reaching agreement on holding a census elusive, with the result that BiH did not participate in the 2000 global census round.

The country came under increasing pressure during the mid-2000s to commit to holding a census in the 2010 round. The UN Development Programme (UNDP) expressed concern in 2004 that BiH still lacked reliable sources of data on poverty and economic dislocation resulting from the war. In 2005, UNDP and the European Commission's Delegation in Sarajevo published a joint paper anticipating a census to be held as part of the 2010 census round (Perry 2013: 5). Later, EU officials came to present a census as a *de facto*, if not formal, condition of BiH's progress towards membership, as a requirement for structural reform amongst other demands of the accession process (Weber and Perry 2017: 13).

A significant obstacle to conducting a census was disagreement between the representatives of the three constituent peoples. Bosnian Serb politicians were the keenest to hold a census, proposing legislation for one as early as 2004, since they expected it to demonstrate the extent of the Serb majority in the Republika Srpska. Parties representing Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks were less enthusiastic about collecting identity data. Croat parties feared that a census would demonstrate the extent of population decline amongst Croats, whereas for Bosniak parties the concern was that it would confirm the results of ethnic cleansing of Bosniaks from areas such as the Drina Valley and the northern RS (Armakolas and Maksimović 2014: 70; Perry 2013: 5–6).

Eventually, in February 2012, a political compromise was reached and the Parliamentary Assembly adopted a law on the census, specifying that it should take place in April 2013 (Perry 2013: 6). The law included a definition of 'usual residents' who would be enumerated, and also a list of topics, including ethnic/national affiliation, religion and mother tongue. The Agency for Statistics



quickly published a draft questionnaire, indicating that what came to be known as the three 'sensitive questions' would be presented in what some commentators described as a 'closed' format (Perry 2013: 11).<sup>4</sup> For example, the question on ethnicity/nationality was accompanied by tick boxes for 'Bosniak', 'Croat', 'Serb' and 'Other', with a write-in option only available to those selecting 'Other'.<sup>5</sup> The draft questionnaire established that people would be able to opt for a 'do not declare' option for ethnicity/nationality and religion but that the language question would be mandatory (an important caveat, given that language can be used as a proxy for ethnic/national belonging in BiH). Following pressure from civil society, the Agency published a modified draft of the questionnaire in July 2012, with each of the three sensitive questions now immediately followed by an open text box, with the tick boxes relegated beneath. The agency explained that with the new census form, an enumerator would ask the sensitive questions and record responses as stated, either by writing in the answer or, should the answer match, by ticking the relevant box (Perry 2013: 12–13).

The format of the three sensitive questions seemingly agreed upon, in January 2013 it was announced that the census would be delayed by six months. This followed a recommendation by the International Monitoring Operation (IMO), established by the European Commission, the Council of Europe and Bosnian Council of Ministers to monitor the census, which suggested that preparations were not sufficiently advanced (International Monitoring Operation 2012c: 24). Amid concern that the format of the sensitive questions might be reverted to the original version, civil society organisations threatened to call a boycott of the census should this happen (Arnautović 2013). The census finally took place, with the revised questions, between 1 and 15 October 2013. While there were reports of irregularities in the enumeration, from a technical perspective, the census 'unfolded relatively smoothly' (Perry 2015: 58). Preliminary results were published in November, but there was a significant delay before the release of the final results, including data from the three sensitive questions, due to disagreements amongst the entity and state statistics agencies. Faced with an EU-imposed deadline, the Agency for Statistics published the complete results in June 2016, without the agreement of the RS Institute of Statistics (Toe 2016). The IMO concluded in its final report in October 2016 that 'the census in Bosnia and Herzegovina was as a whole conducted in compliance with international standards' and that 'the census results are in general considered valid and useful for economic and social policy planning' (International Monitoring Operation 2016: 9). While this confers international recognition on the published results, they remain contested domestically, with the RS Institute of Statistics arguing that the published population statistics include a large number of people that it does not consider to have been resident at the time of the census and publishing its own version of the results (Republika Srpska Institute of Statistics 2017). To understand this contestation, it is necessary to examine the campaigns that accompanied the census enumeration, which is what the article now turns to.

***Bitno je biti Bošnjak: the Bosniak campaign***

As enumeration approached, an effort to encourage Bosniaks to answer the three sensitive questions on the census in a structured and specified way emerged, driven by several organisations, including the largest Bosniak political party, the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), and coalitions formed for the specific purpose of this mobilisation. Two coalitions were particularly active. As Perry (2013: 13) notes, the first to call on Bosniaks to identify as Bosniaks, as practicing Islam and as speaking the Bosnian language was a coalition called *Fondacija Popis 2013* [Foundation Census 2013], which brought together five key social institutions, including the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Bosniak Institute. The second coalition was formed of NGOs, including the Bosniak Movement for Equality of Peoples, as well as overseas and diaspora organisations such as the Institute for Research on Genocide, based in Canada, and the Congress of North American Bosniaks, which came together in August 2012 under the slogan *Bitno je biti Bošnjak* [It is important to be Bosniak].<sup>6</sup>

Two key methods of the *Bitno je biti Bošnjak* campaign were its use of banners and signs outside of mosques and its production of videos stressing the importance of Bosniaks responding to the three identity questions in a structured way. One video, for example, featured men tearing tape from their mouths to declare '*Ja sam Bošnjak, vjera mi je Islam, jezik mi je Bosanski*' ['I am Bosniak, my religion is Islam, my language is Bosnian'].<sup>7</sup> Other videos were notable – and controversial – for featuring children discussing the importance of Bosniak identity (Armakolas and Maksimović 2014: 60).<sup>8</sup> Much of this campaign was not centrally directed, as one of its leaders explained in an interview:

I didn't work on the internet campaign [but] when the census ended in October and when I went online, I typed in '*Bitno je biti Bošnjak*' and I saw 3 million results – people created some improvised videos in the villages ... banners.<sup>9</sup>

Both coalitions also ran public events and panel discussions. According to a member of *Fondacija Popis 2013*, whereas the *Bitno je biti Bošnjak* events were focused almost exclusively on the three sensitive questions and involved members of the coalition instructing Bosniaks how to answer these questions, the *Fondacija* events covered the census more broadly, giving more space for audience questions and interaction, in line with the group's self-portrayal as a neutral information provider.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the *Fondacija* website contained significant amounts of information on the census.<sup>11</sup> Yet the coalition was also involved in encouraging Bosniaks to identify in the same structured manner as *Bitno je biti Bošnjak* did, for example, through a leaflet illustrating which answers they should give, accompanied by inspirational quotes from wartime Bosnian president Alija Izetbegović and author Alija Isaković.<sup>12</sup>

In order to understand why a campaign emerged to instruct Bosniaks to identify in a structured manner, it is necessary to look to broader debates



about Bosniak ethnicity and the implications of Bosniaks' status as the largest of the three constituent peoples. The group now commonly referred to as Bosniaks were not given their own category in the Yugoslav census until 1971, when Muslim nationality was added alongside Serb, Croat and Yugoslav categories as a result of decisions on official recognition taken in the 1960s (Markowitz 2007: 52; see also Bieber 2015: 880–82). This category survived through to the final Yugoslav census in 1991, but in 1993, the *Bošnjački sabor* [Bosniak Assembly] officially adopted the name 'Bosniak' (Bougarel 2018: 143; Bringa 1995: 33–36). The 2013 census was the first in which people could identify under this label (Armakolas and Maksimović 2014: 71). This opportunity, however, came with the possibility that Bosniaks might split themselves between several descriptions. A key concern for campaigners was that their target population should not act in such a way to split the group between 'Bosniaks' and 'Muslims', given that many older citizens would have memories of the old, Yugoslav census categories. As one campaigner argued: 'we had ... to explain this to the people, which was very hard because some people said that they were born as Muslims, lived as Muslims and asked what kind of a term was this new one'.<sup>13</sup>

The threat was not only that some Bosniaks might identify as Muslim in response to the ethnic/national affiliation question but also that they might opt to describe themselves simply as 'Bosnian'. This 'danger' was perceived to stem partly from Bosniaks' status as the largest of the three constituent peoples and also from the actions of the civic campaign, which were thought to be more likely to influence Bosniaks than Serbs or Croats. As Armakolas and Maksimović (2014: 71) argue:

[W]ith Bosnian Serbs and Croats by and large attracted by nation-building processes of their neighbouring mother states, Bosniaks are largely alone in promoting the idea of tying national identification with an independent Bosnian state. However, this leaves them exposed to the attractiveness of political versions of 'Bosnianness'.

The sense of risk that Bosniaks might identify as Bosnian was heightened by a story published in the *Dnevni list* newspaper in November 2012, which claimed that in the test census held in October, some 35 per cent of respondents gave their ethnicity as Bosnian and/or Herzegovinian (see Bieber 2012). A number of other surveys had also demonstrated that a large minority of Bosnians consider themselves first and foremost citizens of BiH rather than as members of the constituent peoples (see, for example, Oxford Research International 2007).<sup>14</sup>

Campaigners therefore argued that there was a risk that Bosniaks would be split amongst various categories and needed to be educated about the consequences of this. For instance, a press release published by the Congress of North American Bosniaks in November 2012 stated that even prior to the census being announced, 'many Bosniaks were confused regarding the terminology Bosnian, Muslim or Bosniak. This dilemma is a direct result of decades

of exclusion and obstruction of Bosniaks from suing their national identity as Bosniaks' (Congress of North American Bosniaks 2012). Prominent SDA politician Sulejman Tihić also stressed that 'it's important to explain to citizens that they're no less Bosnians if they declare to be Bosniaks, love Bosnia no less if they declare to be Bosniak and not Bosnian' (Arnautović 2013).

The desire to unite Bosniaks under a single label had both symbolic and instrumental elements. Symbolically, the census provided an opportunity for recognition of the Bosniak identity after a long period of what campaigners perceived as denial of that identity. At a press conference held by *Fondacija Popis 2013* in Sarajevo in September 2013, for instance, campaigners argued that '[t]he name Bosniak as the autochthonous European people present in this area will after the census, officially be registered in all statistical data of Eurostat' and that '[t]his is the first time in history that Bosniaks can freely and openly say who they are and what they are' (Anadolija 2013). Similarly, the Congress of North American Bosniaks stated in a press release in November 2012 that '[t]he traditional Bosniak name binds the Bosniak people as an indigenous nation of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the territorial area of Bosnia and Herzegovina along with its legal system of government and its community' (Congress of North American Bosniaks 2012). While the label 'Bosniak' was important for *Bitno je biti Bošnjak* campaigners, a key member of *Fondacija Popis 2013* argued in an interview, by contrast, that it was not the precise name that mattered (illustrating this by arguing that Bosniaks could change their name to Martians for all the name mattered) but rather that for a century, 'there have been constant efforts that that group does not exist'. The interviewee referred to the UN Charter and its provisions regarding the culture, political aspirations and right to self-determination of peoples, arguing that this gave Bosniaks the right to 'name themselves however they choose'.<sup>15</sup> A *Bitno je biti Bošnjak* interviewee also cited historical attempts to deny Bosniaks' identity, arguing that in early Yugoslav censuses, Bosniaks 'had to declare either as Serbs or Croats'.<sup>16</sup>

More instrumentally, campaigners emphasised potential links between population shares and political representation. At the September *Fondacija* press conference, a representative of the Islamic Community stated that 'the census results will have direct political implications because of the distribution of collective rights in BiH' (Anadolija 2013). Similarly, speaking in February 2013, Sejfudin Tokić, one of the leaders of the *Bitno je biti Bošnjak* coalition, stated that the census was a historically important event, with 'long-term consequences for the constitutional set-up in Bosnia-Herzegovina and its future', claiming that the 'more Bosniaks are enumerated in the census, the more stable BiH will be and its European democratic future will be clearer'. Tokić also expressed fears about initiatives for constitutional reform that would involve the reorganisation of the FBiH, which could result in a 'reduction of living space for Bosniaks', referring to this as the potential 'Palestinisation of the Bosniak people' (FENA 2013). Members of both groupings recognised the potential attractiveness to Bosniaks of identifying simply as 'Bosnian'. In an

interview, a member of the *Bitno je biti Bošnjak* coalition argued that ‘a large number of people love this country, and it seemed very logical for them to declare as Bosnians’. The same interviewee, however, also stated that should Bosniaks have self-identified as Bosnians, then they would have been opening themselves up to discrimination under the current constitutional framework, arguing that in doing so, ‘a large number of our people [would step] outside the rights given to the constituent peoples’.<sup>17</sup> The interviewee elaborated that ‘our people [Bosniaks] cannot run for office in the Republika Srpska entity, and additionally if some people were to declare as Bosnians they wouldn’t have the right to run for office in the Federation too’.<sup>18</sup> Both this interviewee and a representative of *Fondacija Popis 2013* contrasted the Bosnian political system with ‘Western systems’, using the United States as an example. The *Bitno je biti Bošnjak* representative pointed out that ‘all the people there are Americans in the national sense, and they can be whatever they want in the ethnic sense’.<sup>19</sup> The *Fondacija Popis 2013* member argued that while it might be desirable for there to be a similar, overarching Bosnian identity, with the capacity to encompass private, ethnic identities, this was something that could only be achieved in the distant future. The interviewee stated that he would be willing to sign up to identifying as ‘whatever they put in front of me, if you are able to persuade Mostar and Banja Luka’ – meaning that he would identify as Bosnian if it could be guaranteed that Croats and Serbs would do the same.<sup>20</sup>

Bosniak campaigners stressed in interviews that they did not necessarily support the current constitutional arrangements. Rather, they were operating within its constraints and according to its incentive structures. One, for instance, spoke of ‘the unfortunate domination of the three peoples and the discrimination of the Others’ under the Dayton constitution.<sup>21</sup> This concern for discrimination against ‘Others’ also extended, for one interviewee, to an argument that, should Bosniaks choose to identify as Bosnian, then they would be denying ‘genuine Others’, such as those from mixed backgrounds, the opportunity of having a category of their own. Relaying the story of a mixed-ethnicity relative, the interviewee asked ‘what would be available for him?’, explaining: ‘he cannot identify himself as any group, including now the ethnic group of Bosnians, which is sort of generic and should be available for somebody like him’.<sup>22</sup>

As well as targeting Bosniaks inside BiH, both coalitions engaged extensively with the diaspora. In line with international guidelines (see UNECE 2006: 35; UN Statistics Division 2008: 102–03), the census law defined ‘usual residents’ as those people who, at the time of enumeration, had lived in their place of residence for at least 12 months, or who had arrived there within the past 12 months but intended to stay for at least a year. Where citizens were working abroad temporarily for a period of less than 12 months, the law specified that they should be included in the count, but some diaspora groups argued that the census should also include non-resident citizens (Perry 2015: 57), and portrayed their exclusion as an attempt to legalise wartime expulsions of Bosniaks, particularly from the RS. A Bosniak diaspora organisation in

Chicago, for instance, stated in its web magazine that '[t]he census introduces the final phase of eliminating refugees and displaced persons: their removal from the population register' (quoted in Armakolas and Maksimović 2014: 86). As a compromise, a supplemental form was made available online, allowing members of the diaspora to be counted, but not as part of the census proper (Perry 2015: 57).

Despite the provision made to enumerate the diaspora in a parallel process, some groups – particularly Bosniak ones, given the extent of Bosniak displacement during the war – engaged in a campaign to encourage members of the diaspora with properties in BiH to visit the country for the census. Both the *Bitno je biti Bošnjak* and *Fondacija Popis 2013* coalitions organised events in countries with significant Bosniak diaspora populations (see, for example, Bošnjaci.net 2013; *Raja Chicago* 2013), and the *Fondacija* provided instructions on its website explaining how members of the diaspora could be enumerated.<sup>23</sup> As Perry (2013: 14) notes, there were media reports that some organisations were even funding return trips. Also encouraging diaspora enumeration were rumours that emigrants might stand to lose their property rights if they were not included in the census. While interviewees were keen to stress that they did not attribute these rumours to the actions of the Bosniak campaign,<sup>24</sup> it is clear that '[m]isinformation flowed easily in the absence of facts and comprehensive myth-busting' (Perry 2013: 14).

In justifying actions aimed at encouraging members of the Bosniak diaspora to return to BiH to be enumerated, activists made appeals to international legal principles, arguing that these should override the census law. A member of *Fondacija Popis 2013* argued, for example, that the exclusion of citizens from the census based on the fact that they had been absent for more than 12 months was in conflict with the right of refugees to return to their pre-war property and that people had the right to be enumerated if they had an intention to return to BiH, regardless of how long they had been absent.<sup>25</sup> A statement by the Institute for Research of Genocide, Canada, addressed to Bosnian and international institutions and published as enumeration was coming to an end in October 2013, put this more strongly, arguing that:

[M]ore than a million citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina who were expelled from their homeland as a result of aggression and genocide are currently experiencing added crime through Census. Citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina who were ethnically cleansed and now live all over the world are not being included in the Census as if they are non-existent. (Boyle et al. 2013)

### ***Budi građanin/građanka: the civic campaign***

The Bosniak and other ethnic campaigns to influence citizens' responses to the census faced a rival, civic campaign, which emerged from the lobbying that took place following the publication of the draft census questionnaire, featuring 'closed' identity questions, in February 2012. Many of the activists

associated with the civic campaign would have preferred if the census had not asked questions on identity at all, but since the questions to be included had been specified in the census law (which was drafted and adopted without consultation with civil society), there was no space for arguing that they should be omitted. As one activist explained:

[We were] trying to intervene at the point where the law on census had already been adopted. And that already poses severe constraints on any kind of activism because the law stipulated actually very precisely questions that are going to be asked and particularly those questions that we are going to address as part of our actions, advocacy.<sup>26</sup>

The early aim of civic activists was therefore to open up the questions on ethnicity/nationality, religion and language. Their success in doing so was made possible because of the presence and role of the IMO. Rather than attempting to lobby politicians or the Agency for Statistics directly, activists instead directed their arguments at the IMO, which in turn persuaded politicians to modify the questionnaire.<sup>27</sup> Štefan Füle, the EU's enlargement commissioner, confirmed in a response to a question in the European Parliament in October 2012 that the sensitive questions had been made more open, after the IMO and the European Commission had raised them with the Bosnian Council of Ministers and Parliamentary Assembly, and stated that the Commission would continue to engage in dialogue with civil society actors about the census (Füle 2012).

In campaigning for more open questions, members of the civic campaign made appeals to international standards, and in particular the UN's principles and recommendations for population and housing censuses. These define ethnicity, religion and language as outside of the 'core' topics, meaning that the decision to include them is dependent on national need and circumstances. The recommendations specify that due to the subjective and potentially mixed nature of individuals' ethnic identification, questions about ethnicity should, where asked, acquire data through self-declaration and allow for multiple affiliations (UN Statistics Division 2008: 139). The UN Economic Commission for Europe's recommendations for the 2010 census round went further, stating that ethnicity questions should 'always be based on the free self-declaration of a person' and that 'questionnaires should include an open question and interviewers should refrain from suggesting answers to the respondents'. A similar recommendation was made for questions on religion, and the recommendations also stated that questions on main or mother language should include an open box (UNECE 2006: 96–97). Appeals to these recommendations were picked up by the IMO, which noted with concern in its early reports that the sensitive questions on the draft questionnaire were not in the open format recommended by European guidelines (International Monitoring Operation 2012a: 19; International Monitoring Operation 2012b: 16–18).

According to one activist, the civic campaign pushed for an open format by arguing that 'we have to do it [the census] according to international standards

because we have to make comparisons with other countries ... and when we have the same methodology and the similar questionnaires, then you can make it easier'.<sup>28</sup> The *Inicijativa za slobodu izjašnjavanja* [Initiative for Freedom of Declaration], an ad hoc coalition of organisations concerned about the census process, posted images on social media of other countries' census questions on ethnicity, religion and language, demonstrating how these questions were more open than those of the draft Bosnian questionnaire.<sup>29</sup> IMO reports make clear that these appeals influenced the final design of the questionnaire. The second report, published in July 2012, notes that 'discussions held with civil society representatives as well as articles published in the BiH press, show the need for more urgent decision in formulating these questions as open-ended' (International Monitoring Operation 2012b: 17). After the final, revised questionnaire had been published, the third IMO report stated that 'the latest formulation of the questions as semi opened is acceptable compromise for the NGOs' (International Monitoring Operation 2012d: 13).

Leading up to enumeration, members of the civic campaign engaged in a range of activities to emphasise that citizens should not feel pressured when answering the three sensitive questions and to highlight the politicisation of the census. In the words of one activist, 'what we tried to explain, is that actually the question is how you identify politically, not how you identify in terms of your collective identity'.<sup>30</sup> Some activists made clear how they would personally opt out of ethnic identification and instead identify as Bosnian and/or Herzegovinian in response to the ethnic/national affiliation question, but the civic campaign in general avoided recommending specific responses in the way that the ethnic campaigns did.<sup>31</sup> Here again, campaigners appealed to the international norm of the right to self-identification (see *Koalicija Jednakost* 2013). Members of the campaign created animations featuring characters called the 'Freedom Defenders'<sup>32</sup> and took part in television debates with members of the Bosniak ethnic campaign.<sup>33</sup>

Civic campaigners also made use of the census as an opportunity to protest against discrimination in BiH, and in particular, discrimination against citizens who do not consider themselves as belonging to one of the three constituent peoples. *Koalicija Jednakost* [Coalition Equality], which brings together organisations based in cities including Sarajevo, Banja Luka and Mostar, for example, organised a campaign called *Budi građanin/građanka – Za BiH bez diskriminacije!* [Be a citizen – For a BiH without discrimination!], which involved public figures such as Dervo Sejdić (a member of BiH's Roma community who in 2009 successfully challenged the country's constitution at the European Court of Human Rights) being photographed holding signs with slogans such as '*Ja sam čovjek*' ['I am human'] and '*Ja sam za BiH bez diskriminacije*' ['I am for a BiH without discrimination'] (Klix.ba 2013b). Relatedly, some saw identification as 'Bosnian' as a reaction against what they saw as the SDA's nationalist, homogenising agenda and attempts to emphasise Bosniak indigeneity since the adoption of that label in 1993, which they argued was unnecessarily antagonistic towards Serbs and Croats.<sup>34</sup>



For many involved in the civic campaign, identifying as Bosnian had not just a symbolic rationale, but also instrumental purposes linked to constitutional reform. As one activist put it, identifying as Bosnian in the census had a certain 'subversive power'.<sup>35</sup> The leaked figures from the test census appeared to give hope to those dissatisfied with Dayton's institutionalisation of ethno-politics. Professor Besim Spahić, for example, speaking at an event in Oslo in January 2013, pointed to the high number of respondents purportedly identifying as Bosnian in this exercise 'in both entities' as evidence that those people were 'fed up with the current situation' (Klix.ba 2013a). For some, identifying as other than a member of one of the constituent peoples was part of a broader strategy aimed at promoting constitutional reform:

I was also thinking if there is a large group of people or large percentage of people who are not belonging – who are not considering themselves as Serbs, Bosniaks or Croats – then there is a chance that you have a legitimacy to advocate for constitutional changes, of course, to provide equality for everyone.<sup>36</sup>

Some campaigners hoped that this legitimacy might have flowed from census results showing that the number of 'Bosnians' or 'Others' exceeded the number of Croats (as the smallest of the three constituent peoples). Other figures, however, were more cautious regarding constitutional reform, perhaps reflecting broader scepticism amongst civic voices about the value of engagement with formal politics that was also a feature of the widespread protests against corruption and poor social conditions that took place in 2014 (see Murtagh 2016).<sup>37</sup> One interviewee, for example, argued that 'I think that people are aware it is a trap' to aspire to constitutional reform through the census, since reform talks would likely end in political deadlock. Nonetheless, the interviewee noted:

[A] hope that if you could have really a citizen option, then you can play in the medium term a different kind of game, because then you can see yourself entering inside the institutions and maybe from inside, doing things.<sup>38</sup>

A persistent dilemma for civic voices in BiH is that their desire for reform abandoning some of the more corporate, ascriptive elements of the consociational institutions established by Dayton – such as the rotating presidency with its guaranteed representation of the three constituent peoples but not those who do not identify as Bosniak, Serb or Croat – broadly coincides with the interests of many Bosniak politicians, and is therefore often written off as being driven by a Bosniak agenda. As McCulloch explains, 'the SDA presents a pluralist platform but does so knowing that, as the representatives of the largest community in Bosnia, it would benefit from the introduction of majoritarian democracy'. Similarly, the more moderate Party of Bosnia and Herzegovina (SBiH) argues for the prioritisation of individual over group rights but remains essentially a Bosniak party (McCulloch 2014: 37). Bosnian Serb parties, meanwhile, oppose any move towards a unitary state, which would involve the

abolition of the RS, and Croat political parties have at times pushed for the establishment of a third, Croat entity. The result is, as Touquet (2011: 459) notes, that the 'civil option is not an entirely politically neutral term', due to what Bieber (2010) terms 'the co-optation of moderation', whereby Bosniak politicians use civic discourse to mask more familiar ethno-national interests.

Members of the civic campaign saw in the census, however, an opportunity to make an argument for the recognition of a 'fourth constituency' in BiH, existing alongside the three constituent peoples, untainted by the usual association with Bosniak elites. As a representative of the citizens' association *Zašto ne?* [Why Not?], a member of *Koalicija Jednakost*, explained:

We were not afraid of the political consequences of the census. We just used the census as a perfect spot to make the debate, where we wouldn't be clouded by the Bosniak mainstream politics at the same time – which in most cases resembles the messages of the civic constituency, because that's their way of influencing their power through being the majority. So they would adhere to most of the civic messages because it would just suit their own interests.<sup>39</sup>

For this interviewee, then, the difficulty of assembling a parliamentary majority in favour of constitutional reform only added to this sense that the census was an ideal forum to highlight the potential of a fourth constituency, because SDA politicians had thrown their weight behind the Bosniak campaign instead.

## The results

If the 2013 Bosnian census resembled an election campaign, then who won? As noted earlier, there was a significant delay before the final results, including those for the three sensitive questions, were published in June 2016. Some in the civic campaign recalled that as this delay dragged on, they started to think that it might have been a sign that many people had rejected identification with the constituent peoples. Speculation arose that, faced with a shock result revealing that a significant number of people had identified as Bosnian rather than as Bosniak, Serb or Croat, the authorities were deliberately delaying release. As one activist explained, 'when the results didn't come out, people were hoping, there was a lot of gossip about the fact that probably they didn't want to release the results, because it was this fourth force there'.<sup>40</sup> Another interviewee recalled that the length of the processing time made people suspicious that the results were being manipulated.<sup>41</sup>

When the results were finally released, however, it was clear that the Bosniak and other ethnic campaigns had 'won'. The final results showed that 50.1 per cent of the population had declared as Bosniak, 30.8 per cent as Serb and 15.4 per cent as Croat in response to the ethnic/national affiliation question (Recknagel 2016) – a total of 96.3 identifying with the constituent peoples.

The results for religion and language followed a similar pattern. For civic campaigners, these results were clearly a disappointment, although they responded to them in diverse ways. One campaigner described the results as a wake-up call, making her realise just how deeply divided BiH was.<sup>42</sup> Another reasoned that ‘people were thinking practically’ when they completed the census, recalling several anecdotes about friends who worked in the public sector and had identified as Bosniak for fear of facing discrimination or losing their jobs if they did otherwise.<sup>43</sup> Others, including those who were involved in monitoring the census, noted reports of irregularities with the enumeration process and suggested that the results could not be regarded as reliable.<sup>44</sup> They also pointed to the fact that the ethnic campaigns had the backing of BiH’s main political parties and therefore had much greater resources.

Convenient myths appeared to assist each of the campaigns at different stages of the census. The rumour that members of the diaspora would stand to lose property rights no doubt amplified the calls made by the Bosniak campaign for emigrants to return to the country to be enumerated. Interviewees also pointed to anecdotal evidence of the impact of the idea that by identifying other than as a member of the three constituent peoples, citizens might open themselves up to discrimination. While reassurances of the confidentiality of census data might have assuaged these concerns, the rumours need to be understood in the context of BiH’s low levels of social and institutional trust (see Dyrstad and Listhaug 2017; Håkansson and Sjöholm 2007). By contrast, the leaked results from the test census might have been expected to provide a boost for the civic campaign, demonstrating the potential size of the ‘constituency’ of people prepared to reject ethno-national identification and signalling to those considering identifying as Bosnian that they would not be alone. Reflecting on the leaked figures, interviewees acknowledged that they were most likely fabricated by a journalist, with one describing them as ‘fake news’ and explaining that even if the proportion of people in the test exercise describing themselves as Bosnian had been correct, the sample was not a representative one in any case.<sup>45</sup> The news about the test census appeared to suit the civic campaign, and so its members did not do much to counter the *Dnevni list* story. However, as things turned out, this news might have had the opposite effect, spurring the ethnic campaigns into action.

Members of the Bosniak campaign expressed their satisfaction at the census results, by contrast. A representative of *Fondacija Popis 2013* stressed that the precise proportion of people identifying as Bosniak did not matter, so much as what the proportions implied about the future of the state. He argued that the results avoided a ‘confusing situation’ (presumably where ‘Bosnians’ were significant in number) and went on to state:

Who cares whether it is 49 per cent Bosniaks? Whether it’s 48 per cent or 50 per cent, it doesn’t mean anything. Either you will get – you won’t be able to get anything because you already have a gridlock in political situations either way, it’s in the sense of time – it’s clearly a trend whether that is 45, 46, 47 or 48 per cent, 50 per cent, it’s a trendline in respect of 50 years.<sup>46</sup>

The same interviewee did, however, express regret that a compromise could not be found between the Agency for Statistics and the RS Institute of Statistics regarding the final results. There is a certain irony here, given that the RS Institute grants a prominent place to the actions of the Bosniak campaign in its detailed analysis of the census process, in which it explains its reasons for rejecting the published results (Republika Srpska Institute of Statistics 2017: 69–72). Indeed, an official at the Institute described the Bosniak campaign as an ‘anti-campaign’, which ‘was at least ten times stronger’ than the official public information campaign about the census.<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

It is unsurprising that the first post-war census in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with its political system based on the principle of group rights, was accompanied by campaigns led by ethnic entrepreneurs seeking to mobilise people to maximise their group's share of the recorded population. What is more notable is that these campaigns faced competition from a group of organisations that sought to highlight individuals' right to self-identification, some of which encouraged people to reject ethnic identification and instead adopt a civic ‘Bosnian’ identity for the purposes of enumeration.

Analysing the motives behind the civic campaign run by these organisations alongside those of the most prominent of the ethnic campaigns run by Bosniak ethnic entrepreneurs, this article has demonstrated the symbolic and instrumental rationales for census mobilisation in BiH. Symbolically, the 2013 census was important as it was the first to feature a Bosniak tick-box, and ethnic campaigners portrayed attempts to dissuade Bosniaks from identifying as such as amounting to discrimination against the group and as furthering the aims of those who committed genocide during the 1992–1995 war. The civic campaign, meanwhile, also made appeals based on ideas of fighting discrimination, but with a focus instead on that inherent in the country's constitution. This provides for a complex system of power sharing between representatives of Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats, with the result that ‘Others’ face constitutional discrimination, which the civic campaign sought to highlight. More instrumentally, the Bosniak ethnic campaign can be understood as a response to the incentives provided by the constitution, in that campaigners argued that by stepping outside of the constitutional logic of the three constituent peoples, their target audience would potentially surrender their group-based political rights. Members of the civic campaign, by contrast, saw in the census an opportunity to contest and subvert the logic of the constitution by demonstrating that a significant number of Bosnian citizens did not identify with any of the three constituent peoples, with some hoping that this would generate pressure for constitutional reform. While many in the civic campaign were pessimistic about the chances of forcing reform through census results, this pessimism meant that they were able to campaign without the risk of their

agenda being co-opted by Bosniak political parties, who were instead invested in efforts to maximise the Bosniak share of the population.

The case of the 2013 census demonstrates the significant barriers that civic movements face in post-war BiH. While the civic campaign was able to score an early victory in its demand that the census questions on ethnicity/nationality, religion and language should take a more open format than initially planned, this was only possible thanks to the campaign's appeals to international actors to intervene. Appeals to citizens to opt out of ethnic identification, meanwhile, tended to be made by individual campaigners rather than being part of an overall campaign strategy and met with little success. The ethnic campaigns, by contrast, including the Bosniak one analysed here, had the backing of prominent politicians, were better funded, organised through religious and cultural institutions, and gave clearer instructions on how people should identify. The ethnic campaigns also likely benefitted from the widespread fear amongst citizens that by failing to identify with one of the country's three 'constituent peoples' on the census form, they might open themselves up to discrimination – a fear that has to be understood in the context of a lack of trust in assurances of the privacy of census returns. While some in the civic campaign saw the census as an ideal opportunity to build pressure for constitutional reform free from association with politicians narrowly representing the Bosniak majority, their efforts to do so ultimately served to highlight the challenges of civic mobilisation in a consociational context.

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### Notes

1 I do not cite all of these interviews individually, because some informed more general rather than specific aspects of the analysis.

2 A 'Federation-wide social mapping exercise' did take place in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) in 2002 (Markowitz 2007).

3 Until the 2004 Law on Statistics, Brčko District, which is not a part of either of the entities, had its own statistics bureau, but the law made this a branch of the Agency for Statistics.

4 As a member of the organisation *Zašto ne?* (a citizens' association aiming to improve government accountability through increasing civic participation) pointed out, whether the questions were closed or semi-open was actually dependent on how the enumerator asked them, and the script for enumerators was not published alongside the draft questionnaire. Interview with *Zašto ne?* member, Sarajevo, 27 October 2017. The first report of the International Monitoring

Operation (2012a: 19) notes that the questions 'are formulated as semi-open and not as open questions as suggested in [Conference of European Statisticians] Recommendations'.

5 In former Yugoslavia, as elsewhere in post-socialist Europe, the term 'nationality' tends not to refer to citizenship but is rather viewed as analogous to ethnicity. See Bringa (1995: 23–29) for a detailed discussion.

6 According to one *Bitno je biti Bošnjak* interviewee, the coalition eventually had more than 100 NGOs as members. Interview with *Bitno je biti Bošnjak* member, Sarajevo, 2 November 2017.

7 See <https://youtu.be/cmd-WXoY6v8>.

8 See, for example, <https://youtu.be/wDJ06knmBHM>.

9 Interview with *Bitno je biti Bošnjak* member, Sarajevo, 2 November 2017.

10 Interview with *Fondacija Popis 2013* member, Sarajevo, 17 October 2017.

11 See <http://www.popis2013.net/index.php>.

12 See <http://popis2013.net/download/afisa-popis-2013.pdf>.

13 Interview with *Bitno je biti Bošnjak* member, Sarajevo, 2 November 2017.

14 Interview with *Bitno je biti Bošnjak* member, Sarajevo, 2 November 2017.

15 Interview with *Fondacija Popis 2013* member, Sarajevo, 17 October 2017.

16 Interview with *Bitno je biti Bošnjak* member, Sarajevo, 2 November 2017.

17 A similar argument is made by the Congress of North American Bosniaks in its press release: 'All those who primary identify themselves as Bosnians and Herzegovinians must also declare their identity as Bosniaks because it is one of only three constituent ethnic groups officially recognised by the Dayton Constitution' (Congress of North American Bosniaks 2012).

18 Interview with *Bitno je biti Bošnjak* member, Sarajevo, 2 November 2017. While it is true that Bosniaks from the RS cannot run for the seat on the rotating presidency reserved for a Serb from the RS, the idea that census forms could be used as evidence of self-declared ethnicity for electoral purposes seems to go against the principle of confidentiality of census data.

19 Interview with *Bitno je biti Bošnjak* member, Sarajevo, 2 November 2017.

20 Interview with *Fondacija Popis 2013* member, Sarajevo, 17 October 2017.

21 Interview with *Bitno je biti Bošnjak* member, Sarajevo, 2 November 2017.

22 Interview with *Fondacija Popis 2013* member, Sarajevo, 17 October 2017.

23 See <http://popis2013.net/index.php?docid=975>.

24 For example, a member of the civic campaign noted that while these rumours were quite prominent, 'I never heard someone telling them "okay, you are going to lose your property" – these are just rumours'. Interview with civil society activist, Tuzla, 1 November 2017.

25 Interview with *Fondacija Popis 2013* member, Sarajevo, 17 October 2017.

26 Interview with *Inicijativa za slobodu izjašnjavanja* member, Sarajevo, 2 November 2017.

27 Interview with *Inicijativa za slobodu izjašnjavanja* member, Sarajevo, 2 November 2017.

28 Interview with civil society activist, Tuzla, 1 November 2017.

29 See [https://www.facebook.com/pg/inicijativaza.sloboduizjasnjavanja/photos/?tab=album&album\\_id=1624293624508951](https://www.facebook.com/pg/inicijativaza.sloboduizjasnjavanja/photos/?tab=album&album_id=1624293624508951).

30 Interview with *Zašto ne?* member, Sarajevo, 27 October 2017.

31 Interview with *Zašto ne?* member, Sarajevo, 27 October 2017. See also Malagić (2013).

32 See <http://zastone.ba/en/watch-the-second-video-from-the-equality-coalition-the-party/>.

33 See, for example, <https://youtu.be/bBNsQICExTw>.

34 Interview with *Koalicija Jednakost* member, Sarajevo, 20 October 2017.

35 Interview with *Koalicija Jednakost* member, Sarajevo, 20 October 2017.

36 Interview with civil society activist, Tuzla, 1 November 2017.

37 Indeed, many of the individuals involved in the census campaigns were also involved in the 2014 protests and the subsequent *plenum* movement and in the earlier protests about the failure of parliament to adopt legislation on the issuance of identification numbers to new-born babies, which took place in 2013.

38 Interview with civil society activist, Sarajevo, 30 October 2017.

39 Interview with *Zašto ne?* member, Sarajevo, 27 October 2017.

40 Interview with civil society activist, Sarajevo, 30 October 2017.

41 Interview with *Koalicija Jednakost* member, Sarajevo, 20 October 2017.



- 42 Interview with civil society activist, Sarajevo, 30 October 2017.
- 43 Interview with civil society activist, Tuzla, 1 November 2017.
- 44 Interviews with *Zašto ne?* member, Sarajevo, 27 October 2017 and Roma activist, Sarajevo, 27 October 2017.
- 45 Interview with *Zašto ne?* member, Sarajevo, 27 October 2017.
- 46 Interview with *Fondacija Popis 2013* member, Sarajevo, 17 October 2017.
- 47 Interview with RS Institute of Statistics official, Banja Luka, 25 October 2017.

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