

## Event Report

### **Bosnia and Herzegovina: Ethnicity, Politics, and Census -Or Why We Still Don't Know What Us Means-**

On 29 January 2018, the **Center for European Neighborhood Studies (CENS)** of the Central European University organized a roundtable discussion entitled **“Bosnia and Herzegovina: Ethnicity, Politics, and Census -Or Why We Still Don't Know What Us Means-“**. This event attempted to contextualize the socio-political strife surrounding the long-anticipated census in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) from 2013, whose results were published only in 2016.

In his opening remarks, Professor **Péter Balázs**, Director of CENS and former Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs, talked about the importance of the case of B&H. He said that this country inherited all the problems from the former Yugoslavia and if a solution for B&H could be found, this would serve as an example for the whole region.

The first speaker, **Marko Godart Prelec**, Professor of the School of Public Policy at CEU, gave an introductory talk before the panel discussion. He offered a frame within which the panelists discussed the case of census in B&H. He started his speech by mentioning that normally censuses are not seen as political issues, but nonetheless it became highly politicized in this case. Professor Prelec noted that there was a gap of 22 years between the census of 1991 and 2013, which is a rare phenomenon. Subsequently he mentioned that countries in the region too had also issues with conducting their censuses like Macedonia did in 2011. He then quoted Michel Foucault, saying that one way to look at the last 20 years of Bosnian history is: “Politics is the continuation of war by other means”. According to Professor Prelec, a naïve visitor would not notice that the legislature produces very low legal output. The country is functioning even though it was seriously damaged during the war. There is something that works, although the legislation is not effective. The country seems functional, which raises the question is governance really necessary? Concerning the census, Professor Prelec noted that all social groups within B&H looked at the census as an election campaign. There was a division among the Bosniaks whether to identify with their religion being Muslims or with the state and identify them as Bosnians. They feared losing the majority within the state.

The second presenter, **Toni Čerkez**, Student at the IR Department of CEU and Intern at CENS, discussed the ethnic dimension of the census and the altering age composition of the society. He found it problematic that many focus on the question of identity and argued that it would be more

beneficial to focus on structural factors. Toni also mentioned that only 3 major ethnic groups are recognized by the constitution as “constituent peoples” and the rest of minorities are seen as “others”. The census was not only framed as an election question, but it was also seen as an existential issue. He also stressed that B&H is aging and many are emigrating from the country to Western-European countries, especially Germany. He compared the census data from 1991 with the new results from 2013 by looking at the ethnic setup and the average age of society. He also critically noted that although the census was made in 2013, it was only published three years later with two different methodologies. Toni concluded by saying that strong homogenization happened between the two censuses - former ethnically mixed areas became significantly more homogenous with rare exceptions, such as Mostar. At the end of his talk, Toni also touched upon the difficulties with sending necessary documents to the EU, which hinder the accession talks of B&H.

**Borislav Buljić**, Nationalism Studies Alumnus of CEU, continued the panel discussion and focused on the linguistic character of the debate around the census and its political implications. He discussed the case of Serbo-Croatian language, which was standardized during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and he also looked at the situation of the language through time. Borislav said that in 1981, 99.2% of the population considered Serbo-Croatian as their mother tongue in B&H, but this has changed considerably by 1991. The 1991 census shows a huge variety of mother languages because the people were allowed to name their spoken language as they wished. Diversity has significantly increased in 1991 compared to the Yugoslav times. The new data from the 2013 census shows a converging trend and less diversity compared to the previous censuses. During his speech, Borislav told a touching personal story about the source of his inspiration to study the linguistic side of the issue. He also introduced the audience to two cases which illustrated that there is a growing desire for the separation of the formerly common language. He showed photos where the written information was shown in 3 different forms despite the fact that the languages are also identical. Borislav concluded his presentation by saying that the topic of language is still not really up for an open debate, because people are reluctant to talk about this openly.

The final speaker, **Hana Semanić**, Research Fellow at CENS, discussed religious distribution in the country, and concluded her talk by looking at the issue of unemployment. Hana introduced the religious structure of B&H based on the 1991 census and compared it with the results of the census from 2013. She emphasized the territorial changes concerning the religious composition and showed that the country experienced homogenization as opposed to former heterogeneity. The maps she showed during the presentation illustrated that former religious diversity was followed

by significant ethnic changes. She explained that damages due to the war and migration can be seen as the main reason for serious social changes. Hana also highlighted the fact that the number of atheists has decreased significantly in the recent years due to the fact that people gained more freedom to exercise their religion. Subsequently, she turned to the topic of unemployment in the country and discussed the relevant data from the census. She provided a critical account of the statistics and argued that the results seem unrealistic. When considering the empirical realities, the number of unemployed individuals is thought to be higher. For instance, if a person worked for at least one hour during the week of census collecting data, then he or she was counted as employed according to the census methodology. One can easily see why this might be problematic. Hana concluded her speech by observing that the issue of census is highly politicized and therefore one has to approach the data cautiously.

The presentations were followed by a lively questions and answers session, and the concluding remarks by Professor Péter Balázs, who thanked the speakers for their contribution. The director of CENS ended the event on a positive note. He said that there is hope, seeing that 3 young people from the three major ethnic groups are sitting together at the same table which can make us optimistic concerning the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina.