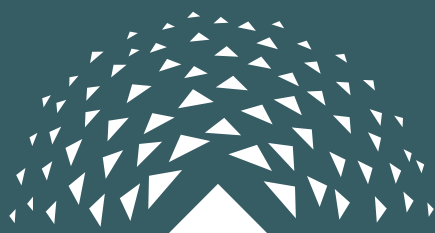


**The 2021 Census in North Macedonia:
Debates and Tensions**

A 2021-es népszámlálás Észak-Macedóniában:
viták és feszültségek

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Abstract: North Macedonia has successfully conducted a national census after a twenty-year hiatus. The census shows a catastrophic demographic decline and a sharp fall in the proportion of ethnic Macedonians. It has also had an important influence on the debate regarding the country's ethnic composition and power-sharing mechanism, which has been going on for two decades. The results of the census give new momentum to the political cohabitation dictated by the Ohrid Framework Agreement and the incessant fights between the representatives of the Macedonian and Albanian communities for more political influence and resources. Despite the positive reactions of the government and the praise of the international community, the controversies that have emerged regarding the results, the negative attitude of the parties, and the hostile behaviour of many political actors will further deepen the existing political fault lines and may lead to renewed ethnic conflicts.

Keywords: census, North Macedonia, emigration, depopulation, political power distribution

Összefoglalás: *Húsz év kihagyást követően újra sikeres népszámlálás zajlott Észak-Macedóniában. Az adatok katasztrofális demográfiai csökkenést és a macedón etnikum arányának jelentős esését mutatják. A census adatai nagy jelentőséggel bírnak az ország két évtizede vitatott etnikai összetételével és hatalom megosztási mechanizmusával kapcsolatos kérdésekben. A népszámlálás eredményei új lendületet adnak a macedón és albán közösség képviselői között zajló szüntelen harchoz a nagyobb politikai és anyagi erőforrásokhoz történő jobb hozzáféréshez, valamint az Ohridi Keretegyezményben foglalt kényszerű politikai együttműködéshez. A kormányzat és a nemzetközi közösség pozitív reakciói és dicsérete ellenére az eredmények kapcsán felmerült ellentmondások, a pártok negatív hozzáállása, valamint sok politikai szereplő elutasító magatartása tovább mélyítheti a meglévő politikai törésvonalakat és kiújuló etnikai konfliktusokhoz is vezethet.*

Kulcsszavak: *népszámlálás, Észak-Macedónia, kivándorlás, elnéptelenedés, politikai hatalom megosztás*

INTRODUCTION

On 30 March, 2022 Apostole Simovski, Director of the State Statistical Office of North Macedonia (SSO), [presented](#) the results of the long-awaited 2021 census. The much-debated and sometimes controversial statistical operation was conducted between 5 and 30 September, 2021.

According to the data, the population of the country has decreased by 9.2% since the last validated census in 2002. The resident population is 1,836,713, which is significantly less than the previously recorded number (185,834 fewer people in 2021 than in 2002). This decrease gives a sense of the severity of the problems related to emigration and the reduction in the number of births.

The census was also open to all citizens living outside the boundaries of the country. Including the 260,606 people who registered and participated in the census from abroad, the population totals 2,097,319.

The results also show a change in the ethnic ratio of the population compared to the last census, which gives the national headcount great political significance. Since 2002, the ratio of Macedonians has decreased by around 6% (from 65.14%), and the ratio of the Albanian community has also shrunk by around 1% (to 24.30%). At the same time, taking registered non-resident citizens into account, the ratio shows a slightly different picture. With these members of the diaspora, the ratio of Albanians is slightly higher at 29.52%, while the ratio of Macedonians drops to 54.21%.

Concerning other ethnicities, 3.86% are ethnic Turks, 2.53% are Roma, 1.3% are Serbs, 0.87% are Bosniaks, and 0.47% are Vlachs. These numbers do not show a substantial difference compared to the earlier census.

The only increase in absolute terms applies to the Bulgarian ethnic group, which has expanded from 1,417 to 3,504 persons since 2002. Although this is a substantial (although statistically insignificant) rise, according to the [Bulgarian government](#), there are around 100,000 ethnic Bulgarians in the country. This may precipitate new conflicts between the two governments, which have had a more amicable relationship recently.

In addition to the Bulgarian rejection of the results, all the opposition parties in North Macedonia and almost all ethnic minorities except Albanians have expressed their dissatisfaction with the published data and the methodology used.

Adding to these tensions, 132,269 people denied taking part in the national headcount. As a consequence, the data of these individuals was withdrawn from the national databases, without clearly defining their ethnic composition and religious affiliation. This uncategorised population makes up almost 7% of the total and questions the success of the whole operation. Without an exact determination of this dataset, many parts of the society will question the results of the census.

EARLIER CENSUSES

According to the SSO, data from [ten](#) censuses, including the most recent one in 2021, is available to researchers. Because the data from 1931 comes from a research study in 1964, the SSO generally compares the data collected after



World War II. It begins during the period of the People's Republic of Macedonia (1946-63; between 1963-1991 Socialist Republic of Macedonia), which was one of the six constituent socialist republics of the post-World War II Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. From the 1950s, a census was carried out every ten years to obtain comparable data on different characteristics of the population, with the aim of contributing to planning, and the operation of the state.

The first census carried out after the independence of Macedonia in 1991 was incomplete due to the turbulent period of transition and the Albanian boycott, and therefore it was repeated in 1994. In general, the censuses following independence have become highly over-politicized and are frequently controversial. The Macedonian population fears losing its country to the growing number of Albanians, whose demands for equal rights and political power-sharing has also been supported by much of the international community. The possibility of their demographic advantage over Albanians together with the disappearance of a desired Macedonian nation-state resulting in a divided, federalized state has caused a lot of political turbulence. In contrast, the Albanians, whose birth rate is higher than that of the Macedonians, accuse the authorities of deflating their numbers during the census so they can deny their rightful demands. According to them, many Albanians have never been counted due to controversies connected to citizenship issues after the dissolution of the federative Yugoslav state.

An analysis of the historical data sheets shows that the population in the country continuously increased after World War II, culminating at around 2 million in the 1990s (*Table 1*).

The data available on the ethnic background of the population (*Table 2*) shows that the majority of the population has always been Macedonian, and their proportion within the increasing population was more or less constant between 1948 and 2002, peaking in 1961 at 71.1%, and then slowly decreasing in the coming decades.

During the same period, the only significant changes happened in the number and proportion of the Albanian and Turk population. The number of Albanians increased, in contrast with the Turks, whose number shows a significant fall. This is, in part, due to heavy emigration to different western European countries, as well as Turkey.

Regarding the smaller ethnic groups, the negative changes may also have been caused by migration within Yugoslavia (Bosniaks to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbs to Serbia, etc.) as well as migration outside Yugoslavia, as these smaller and politically and socially less influential groups often assimilated into a culturally and/or linguistically more dominant group. There are also signs of "ethnicity trading", mainly among the more isolated or marginalized ethnic groups whose common denominator is their shared religious belief. In these cases, mainly followers of the Muslim religion have been incorporated by a bigger and sometimes more successful ethnic group (e.g. Albanians, Bosniaks, and Roma become Turks, or Turks, Bosniaks, and Roma become Albanians).

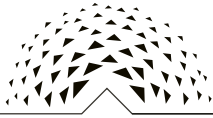
THE TWENTY-YEAR HIATUS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF THE 2021 CENSUS

As mentioned earlier, the last successful census was conducted in 2002. That census had important political consequences due to the armed conflict and political crisis in 2001, as well as the subsequent peace agreement between the Macedonian government and the representatives of the Albanian community. The so-called [Ohrid Framework Agreement](#) (hereinafter “Agreement”) mediated by the EU and the US was signed by four political parties. It established a framework for ending the armed conflict between the Macedonian state and the Albanian armed groups and concentrated on wide-ranging reforms, including an extended set of rights for minority groups.

The Agreement also regulated the issue of [official languages](#), with a provision giving official status at the municipal level to any language spoken by more than 20% of the population. As *Table 2* shows, the only group that qualifies is that of the Albanians.

Since 2002, the political scene in North Macedonia has been largely characterized by the implementation of the Agreement and the proliferating political demands of the Albanian communities. The obligations set by the Agreement mandated the participation of the Albanians in the political processes, giving them considerable power in the formation of any government. The delicate balance in the support of the electorate between the main Macedonian parties and the above-mentioned obligations have given disproportionate political power to the Albanian parties, regardless of their real status in terms of their proportion within the population or how many representatives they have in the Macedonian parliament.

The next regular census was due in 2011, and it soon became the subject of [political debates](#) between opposition party Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) and the governing nationalist Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE), as well as its ethnic Albanian coalition partner, Democratic Union of Integration (DUI). The census started on 1 October, but it was interrupted by the resignation of the State Census Commission on 11 October. The basic problem with the census was that the Albanian communities wanted to increase the size of their population in order to acquire extra rights based on the Agreement. According to them, the methodology required that all Albanians with Macedonian citizenship should be counted, even if they had not been a resident of the country for more than 12 months. In contrast, according to the Eurostat methodology, which was supported by VMRO-DPMNE, this group should not be recorded in the statistics. Taking into consideration the lack of political consensus on the methodology, the census was deemed a failure. What is more, the preparation and implementation cost around EUR



14 million, which deepened the scandal. To minimize the political damage, VMRO-DPMNE and DUI passed a bill to officially terminate the census, which was boycotted by SDSM.

What happened with the 2011 census was further complicated by the investigation of the Special Prosecutor's Office (SPO) that was [initiated](#) in 2018 against the leaders of DUI and VMRO-DPMNE, Ali Ahmeti and Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski. According to the investigation, the two leaders caused significant financial damage to the state by stopping the census to further their political interests. The indictment states that the real reason why the census was interrupted was probably not the political disagreement between the coalition partners but their fear of the possible consequences of the recorded data and the unsuccessful organisation of the census. According to the SPO, both Ahmeti and Gruevski intended to cover up the real economic situation of the country, which had resulted in a massive emigration of the working-age population. Due to a change in the law, the evidence used by the SPO was invalidated, and the whole investigation was cancelled in 2020.

PREPARATION FOR THE 2021 CENSUS

SSO started the preparation of the 2021 census in this context. The legal framework of the census is based on several domestic and international regulations (the most relevant domestic regulation was the [Law](#) on Census of Population, Households and Dwellings, 2021), and it is considered suitable by Eurostat and other international partners for conducting a professional statistical operation.

The census should have started in April 2021, but the COVID-19 pandemic and the high infection rate among the population forced the government to [postpone](#) it to 5 September, 2021. Only a few critical issues emerged during the preparation, for example, difficulties recruiting enumerators and as a consequence, the recruiters receiving training behind schedule.

To clarify the methodology and organisation of the census, the SSO made a document [available](#) for download to anyone, including enumerators, experts, NGOs, political parties, and citizen participants.

In 2021, in contrast with the earlier years, the census was not only conducted in North Macedonia but also outside the country, among the diaspora of Macedonian nationals, who could register via a mobile application that was in operation from early March 2021.

The fact that the largest opposition party, right-wing VMRO-DPMNE, the messages of which mainly addressed the ethnic Macedonian nationalist groups within and outside the country, was [ambiguous](#) and hesitant regarding its support or boycott of the census, made the diaspora survey imbalanced in terms of the incoming data.

The Levica (Left) party's opinion was more clear-cut in that this anti-establishment party, which is known for its extreme nationalist ideas and anti-NATO and anti-EU approach, called for a total [boycott](#) of the census. Their declarations were expressed by influential political personalities and had a tangible effect on a considerable part of the population, those of a more nationalistic sentiment, who also often hold anti-Albanian attitudes. As a result, many Macedonian nationals refused to take part in the survey, which distorted results regarding the number of non-resident Macedonians.

It is worth mentioning that the most nationalistic Macedonians mainly live in Canada, Australia, and the US, and they are regularly mobilized in political campaigns and are inclined to finance nationalist campaigns.

Paradoxically, the behaviour and boycott of several Macedonian diaspora groups helped the Albanian politicians, who overtly supported the census and actively campaigned among Albanians living abroad. They could also [exploit](#) the fact that the diaspora survey was prolonged because of the pandemic.

GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE RESULTS

According to the 2021 census, the total population of the country is 2,097,319, out of which residents make up 1,836,713 persons, while non-residents (diaspora members who have lived outside the country for more than 12 months) number 258,932 people. 132,260 citizens were not enumerated or refused to participate in the census, which is 7.2% of the population.

Regarding the ethnic composition of the resident population: 58.44% are Macedonian, 24.30% Albanian, 3.86% Turk, 2.53% Roma, 1.3% Serb, 0.87% Bosniak, and 0.61% Vlach. The Bulgarian population is only 0.19%.

The proportion of men compared to the proportion of women is slightly lower among the resident population and significantly higher among non-residents (*Table 3*). The higher proportion of men among the non-resident population implies that there is a greater willingness among men to leave the country, which also results in losing the younger generation as an active workforce.

As for the religious composition of the resident population (*Table 4*), the proportions of Orthodox believers (46.14%) and those of the Christian faith (13.21%) add up to the approximate proportion of Macedonian ethnic nationals (58.44%). This has been criticised by many parties because the majority of the Macedonian population is traditionally Orthodox, and it seems unlikely that there are fewer Orthodox believers than the ethnic Macedonian population. The considerable number of Christians has been [explained](#) by inadequate questioning techniques and a misunderstanding of the difference between religious affiliation and denomination.



The higher proportion of Muslims (32.17%) incorporates not only the Albanian but the Bosniak, Turk, and Roma population as well, whose total proportion in the resident population is about the same (31.88%).

It is also interesting to study self-identification by the mother tongue, which in the case of the Macedonian language demonstrates more frequent Macedonian language usage than their surveyed proportion in the society. The growth in the number of Macedonian speakers mainly comes from other historically embedded Slavic ethnicities (e.g. former Yugoslav citizens: Serbs, Croats, Montenegrins, and Bosniaks), who still preserve some part of their ethnic characteristics although they have been fully integrated into the Macedonian society.

This also applies to the 3,504 people who self-identified as Bulgarian, even though the number of Bulgarian speakers is only less than half of that, 1,519 (*Tables 2 and 5*). A further complication is that some dialects of Macedonian and Bulgarian are very close to each other.

The picture is different regarding non-resident nationals (*Table 6*). The majority of the approx. 260,000 people who participated via the mobile application are Albanians regarding their ethnic affiliation. The difference is quite significant between the proportion of Albanians (66.42%) and Macedonians (24.55%), probably owing to the above-mentioned fact that a substantial part of the Macedonian diaspora boycotted the census.

Considering the emigration trends of the last several decades, the ethnic Macedonian diaspora should be much bigger, since in absolute terms it exceeds the number of other emigrated ethnicities. In general, [international organisations](#) agree that the entire diaspora (including every ethnic nationality) is around 5-700,000 people. The difference between these numbers and the 260,000 participants demonstrates that the census met with indifference in diaspora circles.

There are 598,632 households and 839,174 dwellings in the country. Compared to the 2002 data, there was a 6.1% and 20.2% increase in these categories, respectively. Most households have 1 to 4 members, which adds up to 1,240,199 persons, approximately two-thirds of the total population. These changes indicate that the traditional extended family model, which was more prevalent and characteristic in the past, has started to disappear. In addition, the internal migration towards bigger cities creates a higher demand for more dwellings. This increased interest in purchasing property contributes to rocketing apartment prices, resulting in even smaller and less adequate living quarters.

The general trend of leaving the countryside is creating an uneven population density and settlement pattern. Around 30% of the resident population (526,502 people) live in the capital. As a consequence, Skopje far outnumbers the size of Kumanovo, the second largest municipality. The size of the population in the ten most populous municipalities outside Skopje varies from around 100,000 to 45,000, and their total number is 642,565 (*Table 7*).

However, these numbers also incorporate the population of many smaller towns and villages, which further reduces the size of the population in the city centres of the municipalities. This applies to all municipalities outside Skopje. The remaining 660,000 people live in municipalities that have fewer than 40,000 inhabitants (*Table 8*). It is notable that the majority of the population is fleeing the countryside, with many heading to the big centres to achieve a presumed higher standard of living.

Because emigration has caused a demographic decline, some parts of the country have become uninhabited, and the eastern part of the country is more and more depopulated. Since 2002 another [58 villages](#) have lost their population and became ghost settlements (2002: 147; 2021: 205). In the mountainous western part of the country, some municipalities have [lost](#) more than 40% of their population in comparison to 2002. The depopulation is so devastating here that it is also causing administrative problems in terms of the election process. According to the local authorities, there are not enough eligible voters to elect mayors according to the requirements of the current legislative framework. Unfortunately, at present, neither the central nor the local administrations have strategies to keep the population from leaving the rural areas.

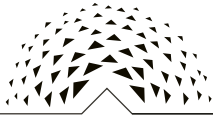
EVALUATION OF THE RESULTS COMPARED TO THE 2002 CENSUS

The population of North Macedonia has diminished by approx. 186,000 people, which is 9.2% less than two decades ago (*Table 1*). This has fundamentally been caused by the [high level](#) of continuous emigration towards the EU countries. Those who have emigrated permanently are primarily part of the more educated and younger generation. This phenomenon is creating labour shortages in the domestic labour market, leading to lost investment possibilities and macroeconomic problems.

In addition, the economic downturn has further increased emigration and accelerated the ageing of the society, leading to an aggravation of the whole demographic composition. Consequently, a less active aged workforce needs to maintain a growing inactive population. In 2021, the number of active, working-age persons (aged between 20-59) was only 981,205. In addition, there were about 382,000 persons under the age of 18.

The data also indicates that the society is rapidly losing its active female fertile population, which is reflected in the shrinking fertility rate as well as the negative natural change (*Table 9*).

However, the biggest change in the 2021 dataset compared to 2002 is the size of the Macedonian ethnicity. Although 64% of the population identified as Macedonian in 2002, only 58.44% did the same twenty years later. Considering the



entire population (residents and non-residents), the proportion of Macedonians is even smaller, standing at 54.21%. Albanians more or less have the same proportion within the resident population, with 25.17% in 2002 and 24.30% in 2021. However, in the total population, the proportion of Albanians jumps up to 29.52% (*Table 10*).

The absolute number of other nationalities (Bosniaks, Serbs, Turks, etc.) has also shown a slight decrease. On the other hand, these shrinkages have not caused a significant change in the proportion of these ethnic groups in the total population. A significant growth could only be detected in the number of Bulgarians, whose number increased from 1,417 to 3,504, but their proportion (0.07% and 0.19% respectively) has remained almost negligible (*Table 2*).

One of the most problematic parts of the 2021 census is that 132,000 people (7.2% of the resident population) were not assessed, and their data was withdrawn by the use of different administrative sources. This is the third largest group after the Macedonians and Albanians, and almost all ethnic groups or their representatives have claimed these people as their [own](#). The Macedonian nationals believe that this 7.2% causes the basic difference between 2002 and 2021, explaining the 'missing' Macedonians. However, several other ethnicities also think of it as their lost or partly lost population. Some Albanian public figures, not satisfied with the growth of the number of Albanians in the total population, have claimed that by sharing these people proportionately among the existing lines, the percentage of Albanians may [exceed 30%](#), even reaching [more than 40%](#).

The Bulgarian government claimed 100,000 Bulgarian in North Macedonia have also been [discovered](#) in this 7.2% unsurveyed people by the majority of the Bulgarian politicians.

REACTIONS AND CONTROVERSIES

[President](#) Stevo Pendarovski, the [SSO](#), and the government have evaluated the statistical operation positively in general. They perceive it as a highly successful operation, since it has implemented the plans and respected all international standards. Considering the controversial 7.2% of the population that went unsurveyed, several explanations have emerged. [Some](#) blamed the summer holiday season, the agricultural activities in the countryside, and the fear of COVID-19 infections. Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski, on the other hand, focused his blame on VMRO-DPMNE and Levica, [accusing](#) them of causing damage to the Macedonian ethnicity by calling for a boycott of the census.

The European Commission also [welcomed](#) the census and emphasized the importance of the data for the further planning activities and functionality of the state, which has also been [emphasised](#) by the Prime Minister.

Ali Ahmeti, leader of the Albanian coalition party DUI, also praised the census and [expressed](#) his satisfaction with its implementation and results. He emphasized the proportion of 29.5% of Albanians in the total population, also highlighting the fact that the Albanian community has become stronger in the capital, making up 22.8% of residents (20.04% in 2002). Referring to a graph that was published later, he even talked about 31.57% Albanians and 57.86% Macedonians among the resident population.

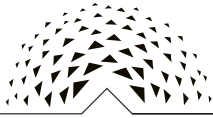
These non-official and highly dubious numbers were created by the DUI by adding the 132,000 unsurveyed residents to the surveyed population and dividing it among the different ethnicities. This kind of baseless statistical engineering demonstrates the intent of DUI to put themselves on equal footing with the Macedonians on every level of the state. The higher the percentage they have, the better their arguments are supported to abolish all ethnicity-based legal obstacles that still hinder them from achieving full constituent status.

In contrast with the official praise, the opposition VMRO-DPMNE claimed that the census was a total failure. They blamed the government for losing 9.2% of the population and for the steep reduction of the proportion of ethnic Macedonians. The large-scale emigration of people is clear evidence of the mistaken policies of the SDSM-DUI government [according to](#) MP Antonio Milososki. He also stated that the missing 7.2% proved that the government had not been able to implement a successful census, and therefore anyone had the right to doubt the results.

Party leader Hristijan Mitskoski [agreed](#) that the census was not only unsuccessful but also incomplete due to the missing data. Therefore, he demanded the resignation of the government as well as an early election. He emphasized that the census would be repeated in case of a new VMRO-DPMNE government. Interestingly, these accusations emerged without any critical response from the government or public figures regarding the responsibility of the VMRO-DPMNE governments between 2002 and 2017 concerning the negative results of the census.

The opposition Alliance for Albanians also [expressed](#) its doubts regarding the results. According to the party, it was a serious mistake that 7.2% of the population could not be identified concerning their ethnicity and religious affiliation. They also formulated some remarks about the discrepancies between the size of the non-resident population and the real size of the diaspora published in studies conducted by various international organisations.

Levica, the party that had boycotted the census, clearly stated that they would not accept the results. They opposed the methodology, including the non-resident survey, and claimed that the process simply took place as political machination led by SDSM-DUI. Having studied the results, they [discovered](#) several presumed numerical mistakes and subsequent corrections. Due to these alleged violations of the law, the party decided to turn to the Public Prosecutor's Office, accusing the SSO director of breaching the law.



Similar negative reactions arrived from almost all minority groups as well. One of the loudest indignations [came](#) from Bulgaria, where most political parties and political entities expressed doubts concerning the results and claimed it as evidence of the state-sponsored anti-Bulgarian sentiment. Regardless of their political affiliation, they spoke about the falsification of data, intimidation, and repression of and discrimination against Bulgarian people living in North Macedonia. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria [issued](#) a statement that the census lacked transparency and credibility. Rumen Radev, President of Bulgaria, also sharply criticized the census and declared it clear proof of the illegitimate and [unlawful](#) functioning of North Macedonia. He also [emphasized](#) the fact that without getting clear guarantees from Skopje for respecting the rights of the Bulgarian minority, Bulgaria has to veto the opening of EU accession talks with Skopje.

The fundamental problem is that the Bulgarian authorities are convinced that there are approximately 100,000 Macedonian citizens who have applied for and obtained Bulgarian citizenship via a simplified naturalisation process during the last few decades. The Bulgarian politicians are confident that these people are real Bulgarians, despite the general understanding that most of these Macedonians only applied for Bulgarian citizenship in order to get a passport issued by an EU member state, through which they can obtain economic advantages (e.g. work permits, rights of free movement within the EU). Because the majority of the Bulgarian political elite shares this view, the results of the census have caused a public outcry.

Another foreign entity that has openly [accused](#) the Macedonian authorities of having disrespected the rights of one of its constituent minorities was Turkey. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey supported the claims of the North Macedonian Turkish minority organization, stating that the process lacked transparency and an honest approach toward the Turks. The organisation expressed its annoyance and stated that they could not accept either the results or the way the census was carried out. Many technical problems with the survey, pressure in the field, and the manipulation of the data were all factors in getting false results, which can under no circumstances reflect the real number of Turks living in North Macedonia. Therefore, they filed a grievance against the SSO, citing the unanswered calls they made to the authorities indicating these problems during the census. It is worth mentioning that the proportion of resident Turks is almost the same as in 2002 (2002: 3.85%; 2021: 3.86%). The fall of their numbers from 77,959 to 70,961 might be explained by emigration, a process which has been equally shared by all communities of the country.

Several smaller ethnicities have also complained about the results. The Democratic League of Bosniaks [claimed](#) that several technical problems emerged during the use of the mobile application, hindering the participation of many diaspora Bosniaks. They also suggested that the enumerators may have falsified the data because of the non-transparent conduct of the headcount in the field.

Although their proportion has not changed significantly compared to 2002 in terms of absolute numbers (Table 2), there has been a real decrease (2002: 19,570; 2021:18,163).

There were a lot of negative reactions among the Roma population as well. Their non-government organisation Ajava also [expressed](#) that they could not accept the published results. They claim that earlier there had been about 100,000 Roma, and that the displayed 46,000 is clear evidence of manipulation. According to their assessment based on the 2002 data and natural population change considering birth and mortality rates, there should have been a significant increase in the Roma population instead of a dramatic fall. Their claims are supported by the existence of the still perceptible phenomenon that Roma persons declare another ethnicity and support other ethnic (Turkish and Albanian) parties instead of their own for financial incentives or due to a threat of losing social support. This aspect is worsened by the fact that most Roma are Muslim, and the prestige of being Roma is the lowest in the society.

In addition to the parties and ethnic communities, the Macedonian Orthodox Church–Ohrid Archbishopric (MOC-OA) has also [criticized](#) the government for the results of the census. According to their message, the methodology of assessing the religious affiliation of the population was flawed and lacked a systematic approach, resulting in the discrepancy between the number of ethnic Macedonians and the number of Orthodox believers (Tables 2 and 7). The representative of the most influential church in North Macedonia not only doubted the results but also hinted at a possible and deliberate intention to divide and weaken the Orthodox community.

CONCLUSION

The 2021 census was an important statistical as well as political operation; however, its results have reproduced and deepened several political fault lines. The organisation of the census can be deemed a success, and several statistical data sets will assist the authorities and the municipal and state administrations in outlining more effective and efficient policies.

However, the main political focus and most sensitive part of the census, namely the proportion of Macedonians and Albanians, has created new tensions. Based on the data, the Albanian community strives to acquire even wider access to every part of state power in order to achieve its aims, such as equal constitutional rights to the Macedonians and a real Macedonian-Albanian state.

Furthermore, the sharp population decline, disappearing settlements, a rapidly ageing society, and economic hardships, which have caused emigration to the West, highlight the non-functionality of the state and the failed policies of the present and former governments.



Unfortunately, the extremely critical claims of the opposition parties and smaller ethnicities further blur the picture and raise doubts about the sustainability of the present policies. This may lead to a highly volatile political and economic situation, as well as a flare-up in ethnic relations in the foreseeable future.

APPENDIX

All the statistical data used in the study is available on the homepage of the State Statistical Office: [PX-Web - Select table \(stat.gov.mk\)](http://px-web.stat.gov.mk)

Table 1.

Size of population in North Macedonia 1948-2021

1948	1,152,986
1953	1,304,514
1961	1,406,003
1971	1,647,308
1981	1,909,136
1991	2,033,964
1994	1,945,932
2002	2,022,547
2021	1,836,713

Source: State Statistical Office of North Macedonia

Table 2.
Resident population of North Macedonia according to main ethnic groups 1948–2021

Ethnic group	census 1948		census 1953		census 1961		census 1971		census 1981	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Macedonians	789,648	68.5	860,699	66.0	1,000,854	71.2	1,142,375	69.3	1,281,195	67.0
Albanians	197,389	17.1	162,524	12.5	183,108	13.0	279,871	17.0	377,726	19.8
Turks	95,940	8.3	203,938	15.6	131,481	9.4	108,552	6.6	86,691	4.5
Romani	19,500	1.7	20,462	1.6	20,606	1.5	24,505	1.5	43,223	2.3
Serbs	29,721	2.6	35,112	2.7	42,728	3.0	46,465	2.8	44,613	2.3
Bosniaks	1,560	0.1	1,591	0.1	3,002	0.2	1,248	0.1	39,555	2.1
Muslims										
Aromanians	9,511	0.8	8,668	0.7	8,046	0.6	7,190	0.4	6,392	0.3
Bulgarians	889	0.1	920	0.1	3,087	0.2	3,334	0.2	1,984	0.1
Croats	2,090	0.2	2,770	0.2	3,801	0.3	3,882	0.2	3,349	0.2
Montenegrins	2,348	0.2	2,526	0.2	3,414	0.2	3,246	0.2	3,940	0.2

Ethnic group	census 1991		census 1994		census 2002		census 2021	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Macedonians	1,328,187	65.3	1,295,964	66.6	1,297,981	64.18	1,073,299	58.44
Albanians	441,987	21.7	441,104	22.7	509,083	25.17	446,245	24.30
Turks	77,080	3.8	78,019	4.0	77,959	3.85	70,961	3.86
Romani	52,103	2.6	43,707	2.2	53,879	2.66	46,433	2.53
Serbs	42,775	2.1	40,228	2.1	35,939	1.78	23,847	1.30
Bosniaks	31,356	1.5	6,829	0.3	17,018	0.84	16,042	0.87
Muslims			15,418	0.8	2,553	0.13	1,187	0.06
Aromanians	7,764	0.4	8,601	0.4	9,695	0.48	8,714	0.47
Bulgarians	1,370	0.1	1,682	0.1	1,417	0.07	3,504	0.19
Croats	2,878	0.1	2,248	0.1	2,686	0.13	2,145	0.12
Montenegrins	3,225	0.1	2,318	0.1	2,003	0.10	1,023	0.0

Source: [Wikipedia](#)
Retrieved: 12-05-2022



Table 3.
Total enumerated population, total resident population,
and total non-resident population

Ethnic affiliation	Total enumerated population			Total resident population			Total non-resident population		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Total	2 097 319	1 054 178	1 043 141	1 836 713	911 087	925 626	260 606	143 091	117 515
Macedonians	1 137 030	562 424	574 606	1 073 299	527 580	545 719	63 731	34 844	28 887
Albanians	619 187	317 411	301 776	446 245	222 607	223 638	172 942	94 804	78 138
Turks	83 443	42 917	40 526	70 961	35 914	35 047	12 482	7 003	5 479
Roma	49 104	25 112	23 992	46 433	23 630	22 803	2 671	1 482	1 189
Vlachs	9 208	4 755	4 453	8 714	4 483	4 231	494	272	222
Serbs	24 759	13 334	11 425	23 847	12 807	11 040	912	527	385
Bosniaks	18 163	9 099	9 064	16 042	7 900	8 142	2 121	1 199	922
Other	22 171	11 654	10 517	17 990	9 307	8 683	4 181	2 347	1 834
Undeclared	552	298	254	450	243	207	102	55	47
Unknown	1 442	836	606	472	278	194	970	558	412
Persons for whom data is taken from administrative sources	132 260	66 338	65 922	132 260	66 338	65 922	-	-	-

Source: State Statistical Office of North Macedonia

Table 4.
Total resident population in the Republic of North Macedonia by religious affiliation

Religious affiliation	Total	Total %
Total population	1 836 713	100
Orthodox	847 390	46.14
Muslims (Islam)	590 878	32.17
Catholics	6 746	0.37
Christians	242 579	13,21
Protestants	1 313	0.07
Adventists	371	0.02
Baptists	70	0.00
Evangelists	678	0.04
Evangelical Methodists	889	0.05
Reformists	50	0.00
Jehovah's Witnesses	1 137	0.06
Members of the Jewish (Moses) community	74	0.00
Hare Krishna	96	0.01
Members of an unlisted religion	113	0.01
Non-believers (atheists)	355	0.02
Undeclared	16	0.00
Unknown	76	0.00
Evangelical Protestant Christians	8 764	0.48
Agnostics	1 964	0.11
Buddhists	894	0.05
Persons for whom data is taken from administrative sources	132 260	7.20

Source: State Statistical Office of North Macedonia



Table 5.
Total resident population in the Republic of North Macedonia by mother tongue

Mother tongue	Total	Total %
Total	1 836 713	100
Macedonian	1 127 394	61.38
Albanian	447 001	24.34
Turkish	62 723	3.41
Romani	31 721	1.73
Vlach	3 151	0.17
Serbian	11 252	0.61
Bosnian	15 615	0.85
English	378	0.02
Arabic	53	0.00
Bulgarian	1 519	0.08
German	140	0.01
Greek	182	0.01
Danish	4	0.00
Armenian	20	0.00
Italian	62	0.00
Chinese	13	0.00
Norwegian	3	0.00
Polish	133	0.01
Portuguese	14	0.00
Romanian	123	0.01
Russian	437	0.02
Slovak	46	0.00
Slovenian	146	0.01
Serbo-Croatian	416	0.02
Ukrainian	49	0.00
Hungarian	55	0.00
Filipino	17	0.00
French	41	0.00
Dutch	50	0.00
Croatian	958	0.05
Croatian-Serbian	34	0.00
Montenegrin	87	0.00
Czech	33	0.00
Swedish	14	0.00
Spanish	34	0.00
Sign language	27	0.00
Other languages	106	0.01
Unknown	402	0.02
Persons for whom data is taken from administrative sources	132 260	7.20

Source: State Statistical Office of North Macedonia

Table 6.
Citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia absent abroad for more than 12 months covered by the Census, by ethnic affiliation

Ethnic affiliation	Total	Structure %
Total	258 932	100
Macedonians	63 572	24.55
Albanians	171 982	66.42
Turks	12 368	4.78
Roma	2 639	1.02
Vlachs	492	0.19
Serbs	821	0.32
Bosniaks	2 097	0.81
Other	4 855	1.88
Undeclared	95	0.04
Unknown	11	0.00

Source: State Statistical Office of North Macedonia

Table 7.
The 10 largest municipalities outside the capital

Kumanovo	98 104
Bitola	85 164
Tetovo	84 770
Prilep	69 025
Gostivar	59 770
Ohrid	51 428
Struga	50 980
Strumica	49 995
Veles	48 463
Shtip	44 866

Source: State Statistical Office of North Macedonia



Table 8.
Number of municipalities and number of inhabitants

Number of municipalities	Population number (from...to)
3	40 000 >30 001
5	30 000 > 20 001
19	20 000 >10 001
16	10 000 >5001
17	5000 >2086

Source: State Statistical Office of North Macedonia

Table 9.
Changes in the main demographic indicators

	Average population	Live births	Deaths	Natural change	Crude birth rate (per 1000)	Crude death rate (per 1000)	Natural change (per 1000)	Total fertility rate	Female fertile population (15-49 years)
2021p	1,836,713	18,580	28,816	-10,236	10.1	15.7	-5.6	1.69	388,056
2002	2,020,157	24,154	17,962	6,192	12.0	8.9	3.1	1.57	526,937

Source: [Wikipedia](#)
Retrieved: 13-05-2022

Table 10.
Total enumerated population, total resident population,
and total non-resident population, structure

Ethnic affiliation	Total enumerated population	Total resident population	Total non-resident population
	Total	Total	Total
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00
Macedonians	54.21	58.44	24.45
Albanians	29.52	24.30	66.36
Turks	3.98	3.86	4.79
Roma	2.34	2.53	1.02
Vlachs	0.44	0.47	0.19
Serbs	1.18	1.30	0.35
Bosniaks	0.87	0.87	0.81
Other	1.06	0.98	1.60
Undeclared	0.03	0.02	0.04
Unknown	0.07	0.03	0.37
Persons for whom data is taken from administrative sources	6.31	7.20	-

Source: State Statistical Office of North Macedonia