



SECOND PERIODICAL REPORT

MEDIA MONITORING

POPULATION CENSUS 2021

For the period: September 5 - 17, 2021

CONTENTS

1. SUMMARY	3
2. INTRODUCTION	4
3. MONITORING METHODOLOGY	4
4. KEY FINDINGS OF THE MONITORING	5
4.1. Volume of Coverage	7
4.2. Thematic Distribution of Articles	8
4.3. Sources of information	9
4.4. Main Narratives in Published Articles	9
5. ABBREVIATIONS	13

1. SUMMARY

The Population Census, which should have been conducted from April 1 to April 21, 2021, was postponed for September 2021. On April 2, the Parliament adopted the changes to the legislation to regulate the postponement of the Census, changes that resulted from the political agreement of the two biggest political parties represented in the Parliament – SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE. According to representatives of the two parties, the main reason for the postponement of the Census was to be found in the health crisis caused by the 3rd wave of the Covid19 pandemic and the need to secure sufficient time for vaccines rollout.

During the period of preparation, as the 1st Periodical Report found, the expectations that the Census will be politicised and under influence of ethnic factors, especially the registration of the diaspora, were confirmed. The registration of the diaspora started on March 1 and shall conclude on September 30, 2021. The ethnicisation of the Census was predominantly manifest in the reporting on the registration of the diaspora and the different political reactions to that process.

The 1st Periodical Report found that the citizens were able to receive all the relevant information on the Census. The information, however, was frequently buried under multiple layers of political reactions and interpretations.

The Census of Population, Households and Dwellings started at 8 a.m. on September 5, and will end at 8p.m. on September 30. By the time of preparation of this report, the State Statistical Office claimed that the Census proceeded at the planned rate. Up to and including September 17, more than 190.000 members of the diaspora self-registered, and the census-takers in the country registered 800,008 persons, 249,500 households and 336,109 dwellings.

From the start of the Census, the volume of coverage of the census-taking process increased, while the number of political reactions and statements dropped significantly. They maintained continuity, however, especially in terms of established narratives that introduce a political and ethnic dimension to this important statistical operation.

2. INTRODUCTION

The subject of this monitoring is the coverage of the Census of population, households and dwellings in the Republic of North Macedonia by the broadcast and online media.

The Census of Population, Households and Dwellings is defined as a "statistical operation which at regular intervals officially counts the population of the country, along with the defined demographic, social and economic characteristics of the total population¹". The census as a statistical process is the most important source of data on the population, households and dwellings on the whole territory of the country and is necessary for planning of country's development decision-making and management at all levels of the society.

3. MONITORING METHODOLOGY

The main objective of the monitoring is to observe the manner in which the media report on the Census and the influence of their reporting on the levels of information available to the citizens and their participation in the process. Through a regular monitoring of media coverage, it aims to determine if the citizens have access to quality and comprehensive information on the Census and the influence that institutions and political entities in the country have on the Census.

Additional objectives of the monitoring are to determine if the media provide professional and impartial coverage of the Census, if they publish and disseminate misinformation and manipulative contents; also, whether the complementary coverage – columns, commentary, analysis and other similar types of content – have influence on the Census and the tone of the media coverage of the statistical operation.

The media selected to be covered by the monitoring cover a wide spectrum of editorial policies and approaches, i.e. there are outlets with pro-government, pro-opposition and critical and neutral-balanced editorial policies that reach the audiences through the two biggest information platforms - television and online media. The monitoring reports cover articles and news stories on the Census published and aired over the week-days (Monday to Friday), and in extraordinary situations of events of exceptional importance, the monitoring also includes media contents published or aired over the weekends.

¹ Source: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/>

The monitoring covers the following media outlets:

Broadcast media: The main daily newscasts of the public broadcasting service MRT1 and the commercial national terrestrial broadcasters Sitel TV, Telma TV, Alfa TV and Alsat-M TV (its main newscast in Macedonian).

b) Online news media: Kurir.mk, Frontline.mk, Plusinfo.mk and 360Stepeni.mk.

The monitoring, in addition to the quantitative and qualitative analyses, relied on the method of content analysis that provided us with additional quantitative and qualitative indicators on the Census coverage by the selected media outlets. The analysis also included statistical analysis of the selected material with the aim to secure cross-referenced data and to confirm or amend the findings of the monitoring.

4. KEY FINDINGS OF THE MONITORING

During the 2nd monitoring period, September 5-17², the monitored media published a total of 174 items, articles and news stories. That is a 61.5% drop of total media coverage compared to the 1st monitoring period, March 15 – April 2, 2021.

- Among the broadcasters, the largest number of news stories was broadcast by MRT1 (7.5% of the total number of analysed articles), followed by Alsat M TV (5.8%), Sitel (4%) and Telma TV (4%). As far as online media are concerned, it was Frontline.mk that led the way (27.6%), followed by Kurir.mk (20.7%), Plusinfo.mk (13.2%), and 360stepeni.mk (12.6% of the total coverage).

- Unlike the 1st Periodical Report in which the coverage was dominated by reactions of political parties and their representatives which accounted for 60.5% of the total number of articles, during this reporting period they accounted for just 17.6% of the total coverage.

- The media mostly reported on the census process and the most important information coming from the field. A high proportion (66.8%) of the total volume of analysed contents covered census-taking activities.

- The SSO appeared as source of information in 77% of the articles. In comparison, in the 1st Monitoring Report, the SSO appeared as source of information in just 22% of the articles.

- By media, it was Frontline.mk that relied the most on SSO as source of information (26% of all articles cite SSO as source), followed by Kurir.mk (18.5%) and Plusinfo.mk (13.3%).

² The monitoring does not cover the weekends. One exception was Sunday, September 5, the day of the official start of the Census 2021

- The reliance on SSO as the main source of information resulted in a predominantly technical reporting, with notable absence of proper contextualisation and analyses of the data provided by the institution. That approach by the media influenced the quality of information available to the citizens.
- The media published, on daily bases, the information and assurances of the state institutions and their representatives that the Census proceeds safely and successfully, in spite of the hacker attacks and technical problems experienced by the SSO, the announcements of possible boycott and the new wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The media critical of the government gradually shaped their counter-narratives to the messages presented by the government. They focused primarily on the health hazards, the alleged lack of preparation and expert capacities of the institutions to conduct the Census. The aim of those narratives is to frame the conduct of the Census in the predominant opposition rhetoric of „incompetent government³“.
- In some media, the reporting on the Census was given ethnic dimension and overtones. The narratives that the political parties of the Albanians are more actively campaigning for registration of the diaspora were reflected on the census-taking in the country. Those narratives were accompanied, for instance, with messages “of violations of the health protocols in the census in the areas with majority Albanian population”.
- In the pro-opposition media, the monitoring registered articles that noted the possibility for the Census to face mass boycott by the citizens, but also subtle messages that, if such an event should transpire, the citizens won't be sanctioned in spite of the fact that the participation in the Census is a legal obligation.
- The information on the alleged boycott gained in intensity in the second week of the Census and was increasingly disseminated as a part of the opposition's narrative.

³ “A turbulent Census, Mickoski believes that the Government is not able to conduct a successful Census”, Plusinfo.mk, September 16, 2021

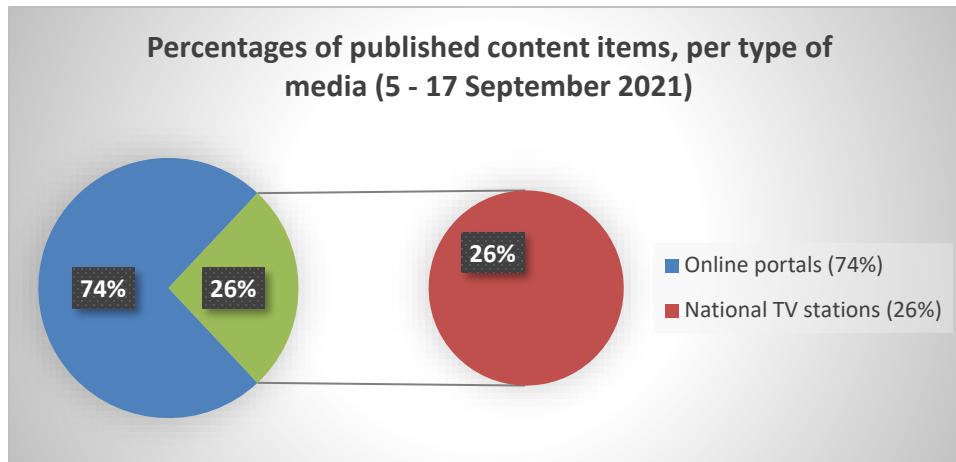
4.1. Volume of Coverage

In the week-days of the second monitoring period, September 5 – 17, 2021, a total of 174 content units were aired and published (15.8 per day, on average), i.e. 45 TV news stories (4.1 per day) and 129 online articles (11.7 per day).

All figures for the 2nd monitoring period are significantly lower compared to the pre-census period covered by the 1st Periodical Report.

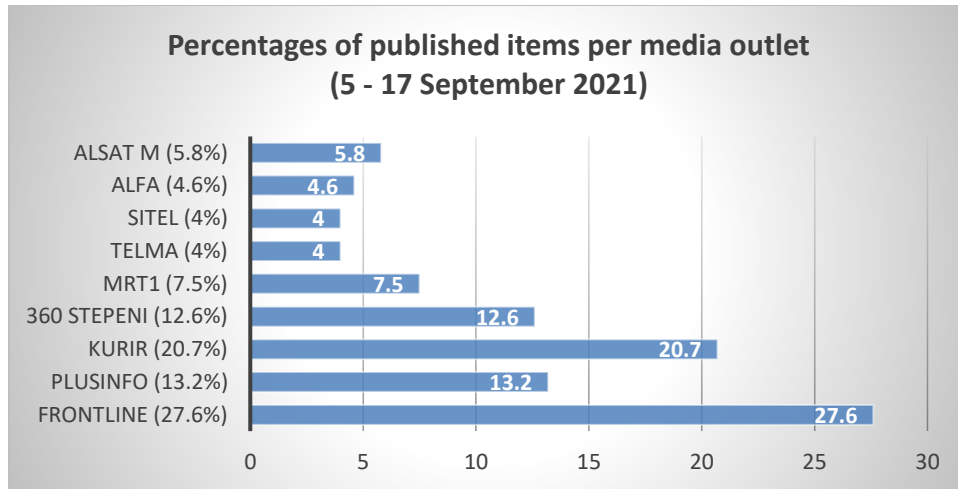
	1st Monitoring Period March 15 – April 2, 2021	2nd Monitoring Period September 5-17, 2021	Total
Total number of published items	451	174	625
TV Reports	111	45	156
Online articles	340	129	469

Table 1: Breakdown of published content items in the two monitoring periods, by type of media



Graph 1: Percentages of published content items, per type of media

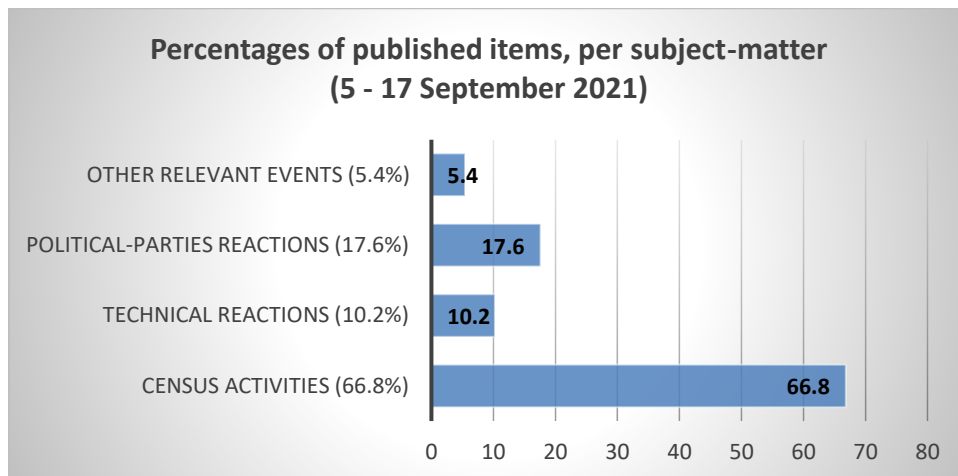
Among the broadcasters, the largest number of news stories was broadcast by MRT1 (7.5% of the total number of analysed articles), followed by Alsat M TV (5.8%), Sitel (4%) and Telma TV (4%). As far as online media are concerned, it was Frontline.mk that led the way (27.6%), followed by Kurir.mk (20.7%), Plusinfo.mk (13.2%), and 360stepeni.mk (12.6% of the total coverage).



Graph 2: Percentages of published content items, per media outlet

4.2. Thematic Distribution of Articles

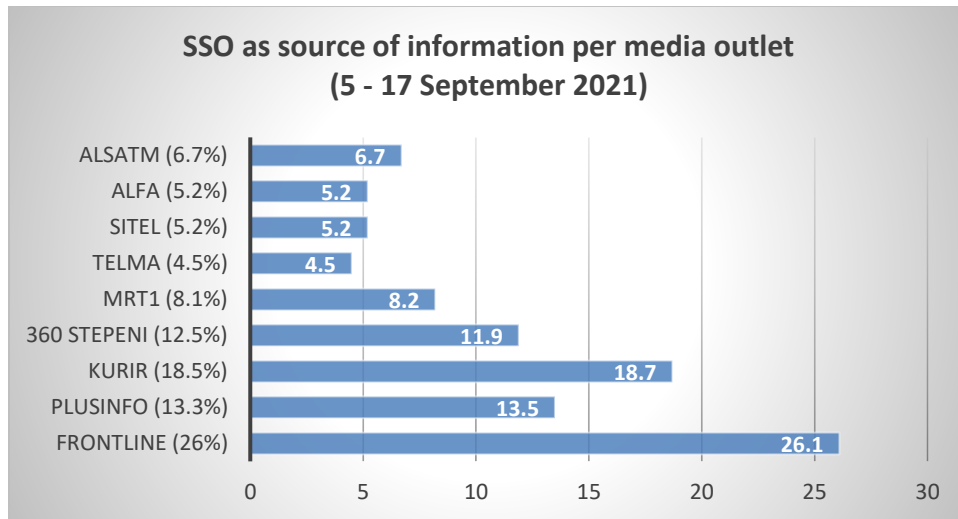
Unlike the 1st Periodical Report in which the coverage was dominated by reactions of political parties and their representatives which accounted for 60.5% of the total number of articles, during this reporting period it was the information on the actual field census-taking dominated the coverage. Full 66.8% of the total number of analysed items referred to the census process and the most important information coming from the field. Ten percent of the items covered information of technical and expert nature of the census-taking. The political and party reactions participation in the coverage dropped to 17.6% of all articles.



Graph 3: Percentages of published content items, per subject-matter

4.3 Sources of Information

The State Statistical Office (SSO) was listed as source of information in 77% of the articles (a total of 134 articles). In the spring segment of the Census, the SSO appeared as source of information in just 22% of the articles. By individual media outlet, Frontline.mk relied the most on the State Statistical Office as source of information (26% of all articles cite SSO as source), followed by Kurir.mk (18.5%) and Plusinfo.mk (13.3%).



Graph 4: Citing SSO as source of information

4.4. Main Narratives in Published Articles

The start of the Census has caused a major change in the manner of reporting on this important statistical operation. The media mainly focused on coverage of census-taking activities, while presence of political and party reactions was visibly reduced, although certain narratives persisted. During this stage, as expected, it was the information provided by the SSO that dominated the coverage. The online media continued the practice to publish articles relying on a single source and without any additional journalistic treatment or critical approach to the presented information. The information provided by SSO resulted in a predominantly technical reporting, with notable absence of proper contextualisation and analyses of the data provided by the institution. That approach influenced the quality of information available to the citizens.

In the first two weeks of the Census, there were three distinct narratives present in the media:

Is the Census proceeding successfully or not?

“The Census proceeds forward without serious problems and at the planned registration rate, in spite of certain technical difficulties and interruptions at the start of the process”, was the leading narrative and position of the institutions charged with its implementation. That position was frequently carried by the media and was present in almost all articles that used SSO or the Ministry of Justice as a source.

The presence of such messages about the successful conduct of the Census aimed, above all, to minimise the possibility for a boycott by some citizens. The SSO pointed out, almost daily, that census-takers, with few exceptions, don’t see refusal of citizens to be registered⁴.

At the same time, this narrative served the purpose as institutional response and assurance to the citizens that the Census proceeds forward successfully, in spite of the initial technical problems with the application used by the census-takers⁵. SSO informed the public that, in the first two weeks of the Census, the online resources of the institution were under intense hacker attacks, but that the Census continues on successfully and that the collected data was safe.

In view of the fact that the Census takes place in the midst of a new wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the statements issued by SSO and the Ministry of Justice emphasized that the registration is safe, that it follows prescribed protocols and that there was no danger of further spread of the coronavirus⁶.

*“On the eve of the Census, the competent authorities issued assurances that everything was ready for the registration of population, households and dwellings... Having in mind that it is conducted in a pandemic, they also emphasize that **the process will be completed safely, with adherence to the health protocols, and that there was no danger of further spread of the virus.**”* (360 Stepeni, September 5, 2021).

This dominant narrative was approached by the media critical of the Government with their own “counter-narratives” that attacked the positions and the credibility of the statements issued by state institutions and their representatives, especially those of the SSO⁷ and the Minister of Justice.

⁴ The Census started successfully this morning, in the first several hours, the census-takers didn’t see any boycott or technical problem, while the Director of the State Statistical Office (SSO) Apostol Simovski expects that he will be able to say the same on September 30, the day on which the statistical operation concludes, 360Stepeni, September 5, 2021.

⁵ "The census on the second day was interrupted, Simovski: Probably the internet has fallen", Alfa TV, September 6, 2021.

⁶ "Maricic: The census will be safe, it is an obligation to the state and the citizens.", 360Stepeni, September 5, 2021.

⁷ "MACEDONIAN TELECOM DENIES SIMOVSKI: There are no problems with the Internet during the day", Kurir.mk, September 6, 2021.

“The Statistics Office apologizes after the unfortunate statement: It wasn’t the internet connection to blame, it was our application that didn’t work”, Kurir.mk⁸, September 6, 2021.

“CENSUS INCIDENTS START - Some people refuse to be registered, the state will send in ‘negotiators’”, Plusinfo.mk⁹, September 5, 2021.

The media in this group focused on the question if the institutions will be able to respond to the constant challenges and emphasized that the Census and its conduct was a serious test for the government:

“The Population Census started on the ground - will it be safe and successful?”, Alfa TV, September 5, 2021.

A series of articles implied that the pandemic statistics were cause of great concern and that it could cause a “failure of the whole process”.

b) Ethnicisation of the Census, Directly or Through Mediating Narratives

In some media, the reporting on the Census was given ethnic dimension and overtones. It was especially evident in the reporting on the self-registration of the diaspora. The narratives that the political parties of the Albanians are more actively campaigning for registration of the diaspora were reflected on the census-taking in the country.

Those narratives were accompanied by messages “about violations of the health protocols in the census in the areas with majority Albanian population”. Criticism related to failures to adhere to the health protocols was usually carried by the pro-opposition media, and it notably absent from the pro-government or politically neutral media:

“The situation with the epidemic in Tetovo remains serious – without strict adherence to the protocols, the Census presents an additional risk to further spread the virus” (Alfa TV, September 5, 2021¹⁰).

The registration of the citizens that declare themselves as ethnic Bulgarians¹¹ was also a part of that process for ethnicisation of the Census: *“Just over 70 citizens have declared themselves to be of Bulgarian ethnicity in the Census, one diplomat demands revocation of Bulgarian passports”* (Frontline.mk, September 15, 2021).

⁸ Source: <https://kurir.mk/makedonija/vesti/statistika-se-izvini-po-nesrekjno-dadenata-izjava-ne-e-internetot-tuku-nashata-aplikacija-ne-raboteshe/>

⁹ Source: <https://plusinfo.mk/pochnaa-incidentite-so-popisot-nekoi-lu-e-odbivaat-da-se-popishat-drzhavata-e-im-pra-a-pregovarachi/>

¹⁰ Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=53nwPJpDJ_o

¹¹ „Dzambaski’s new provocation: In North Macedonia they are doing everything to enroll as few Bulgarians as possible”, Frontline.mk, September 17, 2021.

“Bulgarian Member of the European Parliament Angel Dzambaski continues to view the situation in Macedonia through an ultranationalist lense. This time, he claims that Bulgarians were oppressed in the Census conducted in our country – the registration in Macedonia started with reprisals against those who decided to register as Bulgarians. Instead of presenting ultimatums to Bulgaria, the European Union should charge Macedonia to respect human rights – Dzambaski wrote on Twitter and tagged Prime Minister Zoran Zaev” (Plusinfo.mk, September 7, 2021).

At the very start of the Census, some state officials, for instance, President Stevo Pendarovski, appealed for de-politicisation of the Census. Pendarovski pointed out that he didn't expect for political tensions to undermine the Census:

“I don't expect that someone would use the political tensions to undermine the Census results, but the situation earlier was not like this, President Stevo Pendarovski says in an interview for Radio Free Europe on the start of the Census today, but also on the possibility for the narrative that this was a count of Macedonians and Albanians to undermine the operation” (Kurir.mk, September 5, 2021).

c) Opposition's narrative of a “mass boycott” of the Census

In some media, especially those with a pro-opposition stance, the monitoring registered articles that noted the possibility for the Census to face mass boycott by the citizens, but also subtle messages that, if such an event should transpire, the citizens won't be sanctioned in spite of the fact that the participation in the Census is a legal obligation.

At the very start of the Census, for instance, Alfa TV announced:

“The intensifying campaigns to not open the door to census-takers may present the biggest problem. If you choose to do that, you won't be sanctioned. However, you will have to endure, as announced by the Director of the Statistical Office Apostol Simovski, the persistent census-takers who were prepared to knock on your door 1,000 times”.

The information on the alleged boycott gained in intensity in the second week of the Census and was increasingly disseminated as a part of the opposition's narrative. During this period, the news often emphasized the statements and social media posts of “The Left” (Levica) political party and its leader, prominent advocates of a boycott of the Census 2021, as well as the national bloc “I won't open the door”, led by Janko Bacev.

ABBREVIATIONS

SSO – State Statistical Office

CID – Commission on Infectious Diseases

MH – Ministry of Health

MH – Ministry of Justice

OMD – Obedineta makedonska dijaspora (United Macedonian Diaspora)