



NATO Foundation  
*Defense College*

## Balkans June 2016

### **Three years later Bosnia Herzegovina publishes the census**

The relation between demography and politics is always crucial, but this is particularly true in the Balkans where demographic change has immediate impact on the balance of power in the region. The Dayton Agreement, signed in November 1995 after more than four years of war, established the birth of the actual Bosnia and Herzegovina made up of two autonomous entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska. The fragile equilibrium created by the Dayton Agreement relies on a complex experiment of institutional architecture in which the power is highly decentralized among the three major ethnic groups.

This political and institutional system in the last 20 years proved to be extremely weak, especially with regards to the capacity of the different entities to cooperate in order to exercise the (few) central government's powers. The Dayton Agreement, whose main goal was to overcome the past, provided a new constitution, that reflected the actual ethnic and demographic situation. At that time, the last reliable data capture was the census held in 1991 in the then whole Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The population of Bosnia and Herzegovina was composed by the 44% of Muslim-Bosnian (Bosniak), 31% of Serbs, 17% of Croats and the remaining 8% was identified as Yugoslav or "other".

Given the ethnic cleansings, the deportations, the population transfers, the resettlements and the high number of refugees of the war period, for the new Bosnia-Herzegovina a new national census was necessary, but at the same time became quickly a political issue. The fact that the results of a collection of demographic data could influence the fragile institutional configuration of the country delayed the beginning of the census until 2013.

The census started in autumn 2013 but, despite international support, it appeared to be extremely disorganized. The questionnaires were poorly distributed, inaccurately collected and recorded, especially in the peripheral areas of the country. In addition to the poor processing, the political parties raised criticisms related to the queries because the sections 24, 25 and 26 of the questionnaire asked to declare the ethnical, religious and linguistic characteristics of the interviewed.

The census was quickly transformed into a political campaign, in which all the political, ethnical and religious leaders asked their people to be fully committed. The politicization of the census continued until the decision of the national statistics agency to process the questionnaires, but at that moment the Serb

member of the inter-ethnic presidency declared: "Unless we return to compromise as a method of agreement and decision-making, I fear the mechanism for making Bosnia function in general will be brought into question".

After three years of delay, the results of the census have just been published in June, because the European Union was urging Bosnia to share the outcome of the census by the 1st of July 2016, stressing that it was needed to move towards EU integration. The first remarkable data is that the total population of Bosnia-Herzegovina is strongly declining (about 20% down in 25 years). As stated in the results, the total population of Bosnia-Herzegovina is of 3,53 million, with 2.219.220 of the total living in the Croat-Bosniac Federation (88% of the Muslim-Bosnians and 91% of the Bosnian Croats), 1.228.423 in the Republika Srpska (92% of the Bosnian Serbs), and 83.516 in the district of Brčko. According to these numbers, actually the Muslim Bosnian community represents the 50,11% of the population, the Serbs the 30,78% and the Croats the 15,43%, the remaining 2,73% of the population is categorised as "others".

The results of the census highlight that the Muslim Bosnian are now the majority of the population of the country, and the Serb Bosnian minority fears that this change could influence the power-sharing government structure put in place by the Dayton Agreement. For this reason, the authorities of Republika Srpska immediately rejected the census results and affirmed that they would not accept any modification in the country power-sharing due to the newly released data. They have also raised numerous criticisms on the methodology and the elaboration of the data.

In the end, the results of the first post-war census in Bosnia-Herzegovina will probably (as expected) lead to new tensions. Given the history of Bosnia-Herzegovina, is inevitable that the political life of this country is strictly connected to the demographic trend. However, the root of the problem continues to be the weak and unstable political system established with the Dayton Agreement, which undoubtedly urges to be reformed.