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## CONTROVERSIES ON RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION REGARDING THE 2021 CENSUS IN MACEDONIA

*Summary:* After a number of controversies and delays, in September 2021, a census of the population, households and dwellings was conducted in Macedonia. Nineteen years after the last census, contrary to expectations, the long-awaited new data caused numerous reactions regarding their accuracy. Despite the highlighting by the State Statistical Office, the competent national institution for conducting the census, that it had been carried out in accordance with all international standards, there was no adequate justification for the data obtained on religious affiliation, which caused the greatest confusion. At the same time, the biggest controversy was caused by 13.4% of the population being designated as Christians without specifying their denomination. Also, additional controversies, regarding religious affiliation, were caused by the presentation of 132,260 citizens as "persons for whom the data were taken from administrative sources", while it was not stated to which religion these persons belonged. All this, in the public, imposed the question of the relevance of the data obtained, as well as the relevance of the methodology that was applied during the census.

In order to give a clear overview of the essence of the remarks and the possible consequences of the census data on religious affiliation, this paper presents the views of the representatives of the religious communities in Macedonia. In doing so, interviews were conducted with the representatives of religious communities, after which a thematic analysis of the responses obtained from the semi-structured interviews was applied. After the analysis, inadequate formulation of the question about religious affiliation was indicated as the main reason for the confusion regarding the registered category "Christians". The need was also pointed out of specifying the question, that is, the sub-question about faith, or affiliation to a religious community, in order to obtain accurate data. In addition, the possible risks for religious communities in Macedonian society due to the lack of accurate data on religious affiliation were explained.

**Key words:** census, methodology, religion, religious communities, religious affiliation

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## КОНТРОВЕРЗЕ О ВЕРСКОЈ ПРИПАДНОСТИ У ВЕЗИ СА ПОПИСОМ СТАНОВНИШТВА У МАКЕДОНИЈИ 2021.

**Резиме:** Након низа контроверзи и одлагања, у септембру 2021. године у Македонији је обављен Попис становништва, домаћинства и станова. Деветнаест година изазвали су бројне реакције у погледу њихове тачности. И поред тога што је Државни завод за статистику, надлежна национална институција за спровођење пописа, истакао да је Попис спроведен у складу са свим међународним стандардима, за добијене податке о верској припадности није било адекватног оправдања, што је изазвало највећу забуну. Истовремено, највећу контроверзу изазвало је што је 13,4% становништва означено као „хришћани“, али без прецизно наведене конфесије. Такође, додатне контроверзе, у погледу верске припадности, изазвало је представљање 132.260 грађана као „лица за које су подаци преузети из административних извора“, док није наведена религијска припадност тих особа. Све ово је, у јавности, наметнуло питање релевантности добијених података, као и релевантности методологије која је примењена приликом Пописа.

У циљу јаснијег сагледавања суштине примедби и могућих последица пописних података о верској припадности, у овом раду су изнети ставови представника верских заједница у Македонији. Обављени су интервјуи са представницима верских заједница, а затим је примењена тематска анализа одговора добијених из полуструктурираних интервјуа. Након анализе, неадекватна формулација питања о верској припадности назначена је као главни разлог забуне у вези са регистрованом категоријом „хришћани“. Указано је и на потребу прецизирања питања, односно потпитања о вери, односно припадности верској заједници, како би се добили тачни подаци. Поред тога, објашњени су могући ризици за верске заједнице у македонском друштву због недостатка тачних података о верској припадности.

**Кључне речи:** попис становништва, методологија, религија, верске заједнице, верска припадност

### Introduction

The human capital of a country is an essential constituent of its development potential and well-being. Hence, the need to ensure an accurate and reliable assessment of this capital is clearly recognized, which is also the main goal of the census of the population and households. The data obtained from census of the population and households are necessary in further creation of the economic, development, local, educational, investment, agricultural and other policies of a country. Also, data from national censuses provide insight into a number of vulnerable population groups, such as the poor, the elderly, people with developmental disabilities, and migrants. The importance of census data can also be seen in the fact that in order to monitor 107 out of 231 SDG indicators, data on the population of a specific country are required<sup>4</sup>.

4 United Nations Population Fund, '2020 Census Round', *United Nations Population Fund* [website], 2022, <[www.unfpa.org/census#readmore-expand](http://www.unfpa.org/census#readmore-expand)>, accessed 15 March 2023

According to the United Nations, the population census is defined as: “the operation that produces at regular intervals the official counting (or benchmark) of the population in the territory of a country and in its smallest geographical sub-territories together with information on a selected number of demographic and social characteristics of the total population”<sup>5</sup>. In addition to, or within the framework of the population census, a household census is usually conducted too, which represents: “the operation that produces at regular intervals the official counting (or benchmark) of all housing stock in the territory of a country and in its smallest geographical sub-territories together with information on a selected number of characteristics of housing”<sup>6</sup>. The census should be carried out at regular time intervals, to enable adequate comparison of data. According to the recommendations of the UN Population Fund, the census should be carried out at least every ten years.

In Macedonia, the previous census of the population, households and apartments (hereinafter “census”) was carried out in 2002. After 19 years, in the period from September 5 to 30, 2021, a census was conducted, with which, according to the State Statistical Office (SSO), as the competent authority for its implementation, the complete coverage of the population and households was made. At the same time, it was emphasized that the census was prepared and carried out according to the international standards and methodology provided for this operation, which, according to the director of the SSO, provides a guarantee that the census will show the real numbers<sup>7</sup>. However, even before the beginning of the census, there were numerous reactions from the opposition parties, as well as from individual initiatives of citizens’ associations. In doing so, the usual reactions of the opposition referred to the period of implementation of the census, which was initially planned to be realized in the period from April 1 to 21, 2021, and the additional risk to the health of the citizens due to the conditions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. But in addition to such reactions, in relation to which a compromise was reached for the census to be postponed, by the national bloc called “Не отворам врата” (“I’m not opening the door”), which united political parties, societies and associations from Macedonia and Macedonians from abroad, numerous remarks and reactions followed due to the census. In addition to the issue of the risk to citizens’ health, their remarks also concerned the methodology applied in preparing and conducting the census<sup>8</sup>. At the same time, a call was made by this national block to boycott the census.

5 UNECE, Conference of European Statisticians Recommendations for the 2020 Censuses of Population and Housing, New York and Geneva 2015, <[https://unece.org/DAM/stats/publications/2015/ECECES41\\_EN.pdf](https://unece.org/DAM/stats/publications/2015/ECECES41_EN.pdf)>, accessed 17 March 2023

6 Ibid

7 ‘Герасимовски: Пописот е успешен, опфатено е целото население’, *Deutsche Welle*, 1 October 2021, <<https://www.dw.com/mk/попис-македонија-население-жители-домаќинства-симовски/a-59374090>>, accessed 25 December 2023

8 Единствена Македонија, ‘Национален Блок „Не отворам врата“: Не признаваме корумпиран и криминален попис’, *Edinstvena Makedonija* [website], 30 March 2022, <<https://www.edinstvenamakedonija.mk/description.php?id=3116>>, accessed 25 December 2023

### Reactions Regarding the Data on Religious Affiliation

A couple of months after the census was conducted, on March 30, 2022, the State Statistical Office announced the official results. And not unlike the situation at the beginning of the census, the announcement of the results was followed by numerous reactions from political parties and civil associations. Among these reactions, the most prevalent and covered by the media were the reactions related to the results concerning religious affiliation. These reactions were prompted by the fact that 242,579 citizens had been registered as Christians, in addition to the already recorded categories of Orthodox, Catholics, Protestants, Evangelicals and Evangelical-Methodists. Additionally, such reactions were prompted by the surprisingly small number of atheists, that is 355 citizens, in contrast to the significantly increased number of 8,764 Evangelical Protestant Christians (for comparison, 6,746 citizens declared themselves Catholic, while the number of Protestants according to the 2002 census was 520)<sup>9</sup>. Regarding this situation, the SSO issued a public announcement and apologized for the technical error made during the processing of data on religious affiliation, claiming that the data had been permuted between the categories of “Not a believer (atheist)” and “Evangelical Protestant Christian”<sup>10</sup>.

In the initial display of the census results on the SSO website, the religious affiliation “Christians” was not listed<sup>11</sup>. After the publication of the detailed results of the census, the reactions in the public regarding the registered religious affiliation of “Christians” arose from the confusion to which church, religious community, or religious group those citizens who identified themselves as “Christians” belonged to<sup>12</sup>. The confusion was additionally enhanced by the ambiguities surrounding the column in which “persons for whom data were taken from administrative sources” were recorded. For these 132,260 citizens, i.e. 7.2% of the resident population in the Republic of North Macedonia, despite the fact that they were represented in the overview of religious affiliations, no explanation was offered concerning their particular religious affiliation.

9 Мета.мк, ‘Попис 2021: Будисти и Јеховини сведоци има повеќе од атеисти’, *News Agency “Meta.mk”* [website], 30 March 2022, <<https://meta.mk/popis-2021-budisti-i-jehovini-svedoci-ima-povekje-od-ateisti-infografik/>>, accessed 26 December 2023

10 State Statistical Office, ‘Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in the Republic of North Macedonia, 2021 - first dataset’, *State Statistical Office* [website], 30 March 2022, <<https://www.stat.gov.mk/PrikaziSoopstение.aspx?rbtxt=146>>, accessed 30 January 2023

11 Ibid

12 ‘Кои се „христијаните“ што се појавија во пописот?’, *Нова Македонија*, 31 March 2022, <<https://www.novamakedonija.com.mk/makedonija/koi-se-hristijanite-koi-se-pojavija-vo-popisot/>>, accessed 31 January 2023

Total resident population in the Republic of North Macedonia according to the statement of religious affiliation, by sex, Census 2021.			
	Gender - TOTAL	Male	Female
Religious Affiliation - TOTAL	1836713	911087	925626
Orthodox	847390	416832	430558
Muslims (Islam)	590878	295843	295035
Catholics	6746	2828	3918
Christians	242579	119978	122601
Protestants	1313	638	675
Evangelists	678	334	344
Evangelical - Methodists	889	433	456
Jehovah's Witnesses	1137	523	614
Not a believer (atheist)	8764	5146	3618
Did not plead	1964	1068	896
Others	1221	621	600
Unknown	894	505	389
Persons for whom the data is taken from adm	132260	66338	65922

Source: State Statistical Office 'Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in the Republic of Macedonia 2021 (final data) ([https://makstat.stat.gov.mk/PXWeb/pxweb/en/MakStat/MakStat\\_Popisi\\_Popis2021\\_NaselenieVkupno\\_Naselenie\\_EtnoKulturniKarakteristiki/T1012P21.px/table/tableViewLayout2/?rxid=46ee0f64-2992-4b45-a2d9-cb4e5f7ec5ef](https://makstat.stat.gov.mk/PXWeb/pxweb/en/MakStat/MakStat_Popisi_Popis2021_NaselenieVkupno_Naselenie_EtnoKulturniKarakteristiki/T1012P21.px/table/tableViewLayout2/?rxid=46ee0f64-2992-4b45-a2d9-cb4e5f7ec5ef))

When comparing these results with those from the previous census of 2002, the number of respondents who declared themselves as Orthodox in the 2021 census is lower by about 19%. In addition to the reduced number of the population, this situation was also influenced by the large number of citizens who declared themselves only Christians (13.21%), without specifying which confessional affiliation they belonged to.

Immediately after the publication of the census results, the Synod of the MOC-OA issued its statement and position regarding the listed religious affiliation of "Christians". In doing so, the Synod expressed disagreement with the applied methodology, pointing out that the category of "religious affiliation" did not differentiate between affiliation to a religion (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and others), to a confessional affiliation (Orthodox Christianity, Sunni Islam, Hasidic Judaism, etc.), a Church or religious communities/groups (Macedonian

Orthodox Church, Islamic religious community, Jewish community, etc.)<sup>13</sup>. Hence, the Synod of the MOC-OA considered the presented results of the census, specifically in the section dealing with religious affiliation, to be irrelevant, because they did not reflect the real state concerning religious affiliations in Macedonia. At the same time, they pointed out that the established number of “Christians” which included 13.4% of the population, represented a “serious statistical error”<sup>14</sup>. This announcement of the MOC-OA was followed by the media statement of the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups, highlighting that: “The results of the conducted population census in the section on the religious affiliation of the citizens do not correspond to the real religious map on the ground, and this is conditioned by two factors, namely the percentage of 13.21% declared as Christians, which is a religious affiliation that incorporates religion through the denominations, as well as 7.2% of citizens for whom detailed census information was not entered.”<sup>15</sup> According to the Commission, this kind of presentation of the religious affiliation of the population in the Republic of North Macedonia would create a vague representation of the religious map of the country. They also indicated that, according to the Unified Court Register, there were 42 registered religious entities, which belonged to different religions that the results did not adequately represent. At the end of the statement, the Commission pointed out that it was not consulted by the State Statistical Office, in the phase of defining the methodology for implementation of the census.


Following numerous public reactions, the State Statistical Office issued its announcement in which it stated that the census questionnaire was prepared on the basis of international recommendations and standards for conducting population censuses<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, in relation to the enumerated religious affiliation of “Christians”, the announcement indicated that, based on the Code of Codes for Census Questions, which was applied in realizing the census, a separate code for “Christians” had been assigned based on the appearance of this religious affiliation in earlier censuses. However, it remains unclear what previous censuses did this refer to, considering that no such religious affiliation had been enumerated in the results of the latest census of 2002.

13 Svet arhijerejski sinod na MOC-OA, Announcement, *Macedonian Orthodox Church - Archdiocese of Ohrid* [website], 01 April 2022, <<http://www.mpc.org.mk/vest.asp?id=7595>>, accessed 10 February 2023

14 Ibid

15 Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups, ‘Press Release’, *Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups* [website], 31.03.2022, <<https://www.kovz.gov.mk/ns-newsarticle-izjava-za-mediumite.nspk>>, accessed 15 February 2023

16 ‘ДСЗ: Верските заедници беа запознаени со прашалникот за пописот, беше објавен јавно’, *Нова Македонија*, 01.04.2022, <<https://www.novamakedonija.com.mk/makedonija/dsz-verskite-zaednici-bea-zapoznaeni-so-prashalnikot-za-popisot-beshe-objaven-javno/>>, accessed 20 February 2023

 Tabel a 4. Vkupno nasel eni e na Republ i ka Makedoni ja spored i zjasnuvaweto za veroi spovedta, po pol  
Table 4. Total population of the Republic of Macedonia according to declaration by religion, by sex

	Veroi spoved Religion						
	vkupno Total	pravosl avni Orthodox	musl i -mani (isl am) Moslems (Islamic)	kato- lici Catholics	protes- tanti Protes- tants	osta- nati Other	
<b>Republ i ka Makedoni ja</b>	<b>2022547</b>	<b>1310184</b>	<b>674015</b>	<b>7008</b>	<b>520</b>	<b>30820</b>	<b>Republic of Macedonia</b>
ma` i	1015377	654630	341441	3156	241	15909	male
` eni	1007170	655554	332574	3852	279	14911	female
<b>Skopje</b>	<b>467257</b>	<b>343197</b>	<b>109954</b>	<b>2457</b>	<b>216</b>	<b>11433</b>	<b>Skopje</b>
ma` i	229485	166504	55839	1037	96	6009	male
` eni	237772	176693	54115	1420	120	5424	female
<b>Gazi Baba</b>	<b>72222</b>	<b>54242</b>	<b>15968</b>	<b>248</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>1750</b>	<b>Gazi Baba</b>
ma` i	36177	26995	8176	105	8	893	male
` eni	36045	27247	7792	143	6	857	female
<b>Bula-ani</b>	<b>1104</b>	<b>1104</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>Bula-ani</b>
ma` i	582	582	-	-	-	-	male
` eni	522	522	-	-	-	-	female
<b>Idrizovo</b>	<b>1589</b>	<b>691</b>	<b>892</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>Idrizovo</b>
ma` i	821	342	473	1	-	5	male
` eni	768	349	419	-	-	-	female

Source: State Statistical Office 'Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in the Republic of Macedonia 2002 (final data) (<https://www.stat.gov.mk/Publikacii/knigaX.pdf>)

In the SSO announcement, it was also stated that the religious communities in the Republic of North Macedonia had been familiar with the preparations for the Census, before its practical realization. At the same time, it was stated that during the preparation of the Census, under the auspices of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, a meeting had been held, which was attended by the director and deputy director of the SSO, the heads of all religious communities in the Republic of North Macedonia, as well as the director of the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Religious Groups, and the director of the Agency for Emigration. However, despite the fact that only the heads of the three largest religious communities in the country attended this meeting, it remains unclear whether, in addition to the requested support for the self-enumeration process of the Macedonian diaspora, which was the main topic of this meeting, the participants also discussed the applied methodology, that is, the formulation of the question about religious affiliation<sup>17</sup>.

17 State Statistical Office, 'Religious communities with strong support for the process of self-enumeration of the Macedonian diaspora', *State Statistical Office* [website], 3 May 2021, <<https://popis2021.stat.gov.mk/Наслови/Верските-заедници-со-силна-поддршка-за-процесот-на-самопопишување-на-македонската-дијаспора/>>, accessed 10 March 2023

## Methodological Approach

In terms of research methodology, this research is defined as a qualitative study. The method which used for collecting empirical data in this paper was on-line individual interview. The applied research design was cross-sectional<sup>18</sup>, since the collection of empirical evidence was performed in a precisely determined time interval (between June 10 and July 20, 2022). The collected empirical evidence makes the creation of “relevant notion in depth” of the perception and explanation of the changes by the researched population possible.<sup>19</sup>

It is important to underline that the semi-structured interview was focused on perceptions of the respondents concerning the question in 2021 Census about religion. The interview comprised 10 questions that referred to the data on religious affiliation from the 2021 Census, the consultation of religious communities regarding the question of religious affiliation, the impact of the formulation of the religious affiliation question on the data obtained, as well as possible consequences of the obtained data for their religious communities.

The sample for this research has been purposive stratified and composed of a total of 15 respondents, of which one female and 14 males. All respondents in the sample had completed at least higher education (one had PhD in Pedagogical Sciences; seven PhD in Theology; two had master`s degrees, four had completed higher theological education and one had graduated in economics).

The respondents reported that they belonged to the following religious collectivities: Macedonian Orthodox Church – Archdiocese of Ohrid; Catholic Church; Islam Religious Community; United Methodist Church; Jewish community; Evangelical Church in Macedonia; Christian Church of the Voice of God; Evangelical Protestant Church Christian community TRINITAS; Evangelical Cathedral Church in Macedonia; Protestant. The respondents performed different positions or functions within the religious community that they belonged to: an elder in a religious community; President – Pastor; Pastor; Priest; Professor.

Interviews in the sample were completed electronically. All interviewees were guaranteed anonymity, as well as adequate protection of the information provided and, of course, their storage, processing, and interpretation, i.e. presentation. In order to protect the anonymity of the interviewees, all interviews were numbered, and all quotes provided with the number of the interviewee (in brackets).

The applied method of qualitative data analysis was thematic analysis of the responses collected by means of the semi-structured interviews. In fact, “thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes)

18 A. Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, Oxford University Press, 2012, p.59

19 W.L. Newman, *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, Pearson New International Edition, Seventh Edition, Pearson Education Limited, 2014, p.44.



within collected empirical data”<sup>20</sup>. Thematic analysis of the dataset was directed on the generation of data themes. The approach applied to the data was inductive, as we generated the codes, categories, and themes from the interviews. Based on the thematic analysis of the data, the following themes were defined: Confusion over the category of “Christians”; Inadequate formulation of the question about religious affiliation; Stating a question (sub-question) about confessional affiliation or religious community; and Lack of accurate presentation of the situation with religious affiliation.

The thematic analysis of the dataset shows that concerning some topics (categories), a saturation, or greater degree of repetition occurred, while in others it was not the case, which is followed when the answers are highlighted.

### Data Analysis

#### *Confusion over the category of “Christians”*

The confusion occurred due to the respondents’ responses regarding their views on religious affiliation data from the 2021 Census. Despite the fact that none of the questions in the interview referred to the category of “Christians”, which occurred in the results of the Census, almost all respondents emphasized their confusion regarding the occurrence of this category of believers. However, this position of the respondents is not a surprise, if one takes into account that after the publication of the results of the Census, the reactions of the religious communities, to the greatest extent, related precisely to the occurrence of the category “Christians” in the results. Such indignation on the part of the respondents was clearly reflected in their attitude regarding the data on religious affiliation: “A non-existent religious category is being created, better said, undefined” (9); “I am confused by the category of Christian, and then Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant are also mentioned. These are all Christians. Why this pointless differentiation? Christian, ok, then which branch of Christianity. The same would be unreasonable for the Islamic religious community, if all other subcategories were listed on the census.” (3); “It is not completely clear to which religion and religious community belonged the believers listed as Christians” (6). At the same time, some of the respondents indicated that the interviewers were not well versed in the technique and options for registering religious affiliation: “If the options include all the present Christian denominations (Orthodox, Catholic...), then it is wrong to have the general term “Christian” as an option. In this case, confessions and religions are mixed. It causes confusion - because people think that the general religious faith should be stated, not the specific faith...” (2); “...the interviewers were not trained enough to provide additional explanations” (11).

20 V. Braun and V. Clarke, ‘Using thematic analysis in psychology’, *Qualitative Research in Psychology* [online journal] no.3, 2006, < <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>>, accessed 27 March 2023

Also, some of the respondents, precisely because of this category was being listed, questioned the accuracy of the data regarding religious affiliation. In doing so, some of the respondents indicated that within the category of “Christians”, the answers of citizens belonging to the Orthodox religious community had been included in the largest percentage: “A statistical error occurred involving 242,579 respondents, or 13.4% of the total number of the enumerated citizens belonging to the Christian religion” (2); “During the census, a category of Christians, which is not defined, appeared, taking up no less than 13 percent and I think that this number had largely occurred on account of the Orthodox” (14); “A substantial mistake was made by registering a part of the population as Christians, without specifying their confessional affiliation. It is my personal conviction that this portion of the population consists of Orthodox Christians” (10).

### *Inadequate Formulation of the Question about Religious Affiliation*

This theme is differentiated from the opinion of the respondents regarding the reason for the appearance of the category “Christians” in the Census results. In doing so, almost all the respondents pointed out that the way in which the question of religious affiliation had been formulated had a key influence on the citizens’ responses: “The answer depends on the question. An imprecise question cannot lead to a precise answer, which in statistical calculations is of exceptional importance. The excuse that it is supposedly the most democratic way, which excludes any influence in the declaration, is untenable, and it is not present in the most democratic countries. An imprecise question leads to different answers that speak about the same affiliation in a different way, so the answer can refer to religion, religious affiliation or a religious community.” (7); “If the question had been asked in a way that could specifically target religious affiliation, faith, and affiliation to a particular Church or religious community, this kind of mistake would certainly have been avoided.”(2); “A distinction should be made between an ‘open-ended question’ and an ‘incorrectly formulated question.’ The ‘open form’ cannot be an apology for imprecise and vaguely defined questions.”(1); “The improperly formulated question, which is in a way a trick question, so that a large number of Catholics are registered as Christians or otherwise.”(10).

Also, a large part of the respondents indicated that, in addition to the wording of the question concerning religious affiliation, the confusing form of open-ended question with the options of religious affiliation being previously listed, had had a great impact on the citizens’ answers. According to the respondents, the possibility of self-declaration was not immediately pointed out by the interviewers, and it was not clearly stated among the options offered in the registration form: “The form was not open at all so that everyone could register at their own will. The self-declaration option was hidden under “other”, with many of the enumerators

not knowing how to reach it, forcing people to choose one of the options already offered. The open form offering the option of being a Christian or a member of some specific registered Christian religious community was confusing, when there was just one category for Muslims and one for Jews.” (15). Additionally, and within this topic, part of the respondents again pointed out the insufficient training of enumerators regarding the question of religious affiliation: “I have knowledge that even members of the clergy of the MOC managed to be registered as Orthodox, and not merely Christians, after a long persuasion with the enumerators.”(5); “Furthermore, during the census it was discovered that only after the ‘other’ option was selected, a new field would open that would allow entries, but without spaces or hyphens. Unfortunately, many enumerators did not know about this option and many times we explained over the phone how to reach that option, which in many cases did not have a positive outcome.” (15)

The negative impact of the formulation of the question on the census results, that is, the limited possibility of an appropriate declaration, was particularly emphasized by the respondents who belonged to the Evangelical-Protestant religious communities. According to them, the Census was discriminatory for the believers who belonged to these religious communities, especially due to the lack of opportunity for their free expression: “The question of religious affiliation was not in an open form when it came to evangelical Protestant Christians and did not allow for an open declaration among evangelical Protestant Christians, determining in advance, and discriminatingly so, a choice between ‘Protestants’, ‘Evangelicals’ and ‘Christians’.” (9); “I will not agree that the question concerning religious affiliation was in an open form, especially for persons who belong to Evangelical-Protestant churches. I really don’t understand where such a statement came from, by the people who are doing this research. How could the question be considered open-ended when the offered alternatives were limited: ‘Protestants’, ‘Evangelicals’ and ‘Christians’.” (8).

### ***Formulating the Question (Sub-question) about Confessional Affiliation or Religious Community***

In addition to expressing their position regarding the impact of the formulation of the question about religious affiliation, almost all the respondents offered alternative solutions for the formulation of this question. At the same time, the respondents emphasized that, in addition to the question of religious affiliation, another question should have followed, concerning the affiliation with a religious community or confessional affiliation, with certain respondents suggesting that the registered religious communities and religious groups in Macedonia should have been listed: “Belonging to a religion, without an option for confessional affiliation, is formally correct, but it does not provide complete statistical information.

Therefore, the questionnaire should have contained special questions about religious affiliation, confessional affiliation and belonging to a certain Church or religious community.”(11); “Everyone without exception should have been asked a clear question concerning religious affiliation, followed by a clear question concerning confessional affiliation, and finally, concerning their belonging to a particular religious community.”(10); “In addition to the religious affiliation, it should have also included a question about denomination. For instance: 1. Christian; 2. Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant; and those with the Protestant affiliation should have been given the opportunity to indicate their particular community or group.” (8); “Constitutional religious communities should have been listed, with others being included in the option: others” (3). Among some of the respondents, the prevailing view was that no answers should be offered to the question of religious affiliation, which was indicated to be in the “open form”: “It would be best if there were no predefined categories (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, etc.). Everyone to be listed as they declare, as he declares to be enrolled.... As things were being set up, our members who lived out of the country did not have the possibility of choosing and individual declaration. I have an example with my son who was studying in Germany during the Census and failed to declare himself Protestant in the online Census.” (9).

According to the respondents, with the aforementioned different formulations of the question concerning religious affiliation, confusion among citizens would have been avoided and precise data obtained: “The most precise and simplest is for the question to refer to belonging to a religious community, according to the register of religious communities and religious groups. Another option is to leave the question as it was in the previous census, where a sub-question on belonging to a specific confessional affiliation was mandatory. Once again, this is not suggesting an answer or ‘closing the question’, but rather setting up clear definitions and frameworks for accurately and unambiguously answering the question posed.” (1).

The respondents supported this position by pointing out to the essential differences, but also the inevitable correlation between the concepts of religion, confession/denomination and religious community, hence the need to offer a specific questions in order to provide accurate data for the population of Macedonia:” Religious affiliation is almost always associated with a religious community, with few exceptions. If the census question is formulated in such a way, there will be a complete insight into how many members each religious community has, as well as into religious affiliation.” (4); “If the question of religious affiliation is “open”, it does not mean that it should not be clearly indicated whether it is a question of “religious”, “confessional/denominational” affiliation or belonging to a specific religious community, these are three separate things and their clear definition in no way calls into question the freedom of the census respondents...” (1).

Among the answers from which this theme was formed, the answers of the respondents regarding their participation or consultation during the process of preparing the census form were also noticeable. At the same time, all respondents stated that neither they, nor any representative from their religious community had been consulted by the SSO during the process of drafting the form:” What I know is that there was some kind of a meeting in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the issue of the census in the diaspora, and this was due to the request of the institutions to the religious communities, as influential and organized entities in the diaspora, to influence the Macedonian population there to participate in the census, that is, to respond to the call for Census. Apart from this, as far as I am aware, there was no consultation with religious communities. If there was, then the announcement of the Synod, ten days after the Census began, with an appeal to the Orthodox to ask to be listed as “Orthodox Christians” would not have been necessary.” (12); “I was not consulted, but I initiated insight and consultations several months before the census. The EPI’s suggestions were verbally accepted but never implemented in the final census forms.” (9); “But after the Evangelical-Protestant initiative last year, especially after the postponement of the census, we were constantly in contact with the contact person from the Statistical Office regarding the census option of Evangelical-Protestant Christian, and we were assured that it would certainly be listed, they presumably made the request and only the software company needed to fix it.” (8).

### ***Lack of Accurate Presentation of the Situation with Religious Affiliation***

The attitudes and considerations based on which this theme was formed were represented in the answers of all respondents. In the analysis of the answers, the respondents were united by the position that the data on religious affiliation did not provide a realistic representation of the number of believers, that is, they gave a partially accurate representation of the number of believers:” The data do not realistically represent the number of believers. I don’t think that in our country any church/denomination agrees with the census results.” (7); “Obtaining an inaccurate representation of the demographic situation in the country in the domain in question.” (11). A part of the respondents refer again to the confusing category of “Christians”, pointing out that this was the main reason for the lack of accurate representation of the number of believers: “The representation is partially accurate because it is not entirely clear to which denomination and religious community the believers listed as Christians belong.” (2); “Simply, one does not get a clear picture concerning the section on religious affiliation and confessional affiliations. A non-existent religious category was created, or better said, an undefined one.” (4).

Regarding this attitude, the respondents stated that the data obtained in this way, in addition to not being useful to any of the religious communities, nor to the state institutions, additionally put the rights of some of the religious communities at risk: "The data is too imprecise, with too many omissions and deficiencies and it is obvious that it does not reflect the real religious picture in the country. That would simply mean the result is wrong. No one can seriously use the data today because it cannot be considered reliable and is unusable, as it is." (6); "Based on these data, the state is enabled to create policies in the interest of the citizens. Under these conditions, the state can create policies that refer to church and religious communities, or believers in general, based on inadequate data for this group of citizens." (13); "Since in Macedonia, rights are linked to numbers, the census confirms those numbers. This is how it turned out that some churches, religious communities, or religious groups do not have confirmed believers in the census at all, or they had very few, which could be used against them in the future, from not granting them rights to revocation of registration." (15).

### *Possible Consequences of the Inaccurate Presentation of the Religious Affiliation of the Population in Macedonia*

The answers upon which this theme was formed, among the largest number of respondents, represented a complement to the positions and thoughts from which the previous topic was formed. However, despite such structure of the answers, highlighting possible consequences of the results on the religious structure of the population was clearly noticeable: "Various religious groups will manipulate the data if it is not accurate. The rights of certain groups can be denied if their number is unrealistically represented." (14); "It gives a wrong picture of the religious affiliation of the population in Macedonia, and therefore the census cannot serve as an instrument that would make it possible to correct certain policies potentially beneficial for the entire society." (3); "Tomorrow, someone might refer to these results and demand rights, demand registration of some kind of religious community, demand building of temples, etc." (12).

A particular concern about the possible consequences of the data on religious affiliation was evident among the respondents who belonged to the Orthodox religious community. Their concern stemmed from the significant decrease in the number of citizens who belonged to this religious community, which, according to them, was a consequence of the recording of the category of "Christians" in the Census: "It is possible that the data from the last census will be misused and shown as a decrease in the number of Orthodox Christians from the previous census, which, of course, in my opinion, is due to inappropriate data." (5); "An unrealistic representation of the number of certain confessions and denominations, and thus the openness to manipulate them in the social and political sense." (1).

Considering the remarks and irregularities that were highlighted in the previous topics, the reactions of the respondents who belonged to the Evangelical-Protestant religious communities regarding the consequences of the census data were quite expected: "The consequences for the EPH are not only possible, but already being suffered. First, we have been deprived of the right guaranteed by many world conventions, charters and the Macedonian Constitution. Second, as a consequence of the discriminatory census, we all face two outcomes: a. the EPH does not have a census-determined number according to which our mid-term and long-term strategic planning, development and cooperation will be built; b. the EPH, due to the ridiculous final numbers of the 2021 census, cannot be represented in the bodies such as the Interreligious Council of Macedonia." (6); "Since we did not receive relevant information about the actual number of those who declared themselves as EP Christians, we were deprived of the right to be represented in state institutions, etc. For example, our initiative for the government to declare October 31 as the Day of Reformation in the RNM and as a public holiday for everyone belonging to the Evangelical-Protestant denomination was not accepted simply because we were "few". Really? In any case, there are more of us than the Roman Catholics in the NM, or the Jewish religious community. But right, the census (didn't) showed that." (9).

### ***Conclusion***

The long-awaited population census in Macedonia has been accompanied with controversies during the preparations, implementation, and especially after the publication of the results. Moreover, the data concerning religious affiliation from this census caused negative reactions, confusion and mistrust among the majority of religious communities in Macedonia. This situation was evident during the process of conducting the census, and culminated after the census results were announced. The reactions were to a large extent prompted by the registration of the religious affiliation of "Christians", which included 13.21% of the population, as well as the recorded 7.2% of the "persons for whom the data was taken from administrative sources" for whom it was not stated which religion they belonged to. The reactions of the religious communities were also supported by the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups, pointing out that the results of the census on religious affiliation did not correspond to the real situation in the population and stating that the Commission had not been consulted during the preparation of the census form.

From the analysis of the empirical material, the following concluding observations were formed:

In the answers of the respondents, regarding their position on the data on religious affiliation from the 2021 Census of Population, the confusion and resentment caused by the registration of the category of “Christian” in the census results was clearly highlighted. It was the registration of this category, according to the majority of the respondents that called into question the accuracy and relevance of data on the religious affiliation of the population. This position is followed by the opinion of the respondents that the appearance of the category “Christians” was a consequence of the inappropriate, that is, the insufficiently precise formulation of the question concerning religious affiliation. At the same time, there was a significant representation of the answers indicating the ambiguities and misunderstandings that arose due to the form of an open question, with options (choices) of religious affiliation being previously stated, among which not all religious communities were represented. According to the respondents, the possibility and method of self-declaration were not clearly presented by the interviewers, and this option was not easily available among the options (answers) offered in the census form. In addition, the respondents pointed to the insufficient training of the enumerators regarding the question of religious affiliation as a factor that had negatively affected the entire process. Such ambiguities have had a particularly negative impact on the opportunity for the members of the Evangelical-Protestant religious communities to declare themselves.

When pointing out the negative impact of the formulation of the question concerning religious affiliation, almost all the answers indicated alternative solutions for the formulation of this question. In doing so, the respondents pointed out that in order to avoid confusion during the declaration of citizens and to obtain precise data, in addition to the question of religious affiliation, a question of belonging to a religious community or religion should follow. In addition, from the presented answers, it can be seen that none of the respondents, nor any representative of their religious community, was consulted by the State Statistical Office during the process of preparing the census form.

Based on the processed answers, we can state that all the respondents consider that the census data on religious affiliation did not give a realistic picture of the number of believers, that is, a partially accurate picture of the number of believers. At the same time, the respondents indicate that, in addition to the fact that such data are not applicable to religious communities, nor to state institutions, they represent a potential risk for the rights of some of the religious communities. According to the given answers, it can be noted that the opinion about the accuracy of the data on religious affiliation is accompanied by a large representation of the answers in which the possible consequences of such results



are emphasized. This concern was especially emphasized among the respondents from the Orthodox religious community, as well as the respondents belonging to the Evangelical-Protestant religious communities.

Finally, the analysis points to the conclusion that the inappropriate formulation of the question on religious affiliation resulted in the recording of the category “Christians”, which caused confusion among religious communities in Macedonia. Hence, such data, according to the religious communities, give a wrong picture of the religious affiliation of the population in Macedonia, and carry a risk for most of them. In that sense, in order to avoid such situations, in the future, religious communities should be consulted when preparing the census form.

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