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**RECREATING MAJORITIES:  
THE USE OF NATIONALITY AND LANGUAGE IN THE FIRST  
POST-SOVIET CENSUSES**

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## Abstract

In the last few years, post-Soviet states have been conducting their first censuses since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The focus of this report is on how people are categorized on post-Soviet censuses according to a certain number of *identity* criteria, and the use that politicians make of these census categories and results. Census questions that inquire directly about the cultural profile of a respondent, along the lines of race, ethnicity, language, or religion, use *political* categories. Despite being almost invariably presented as objective and “scientific,” these categories are based on subjective assessments, making them vulnerable to political contestations.

Far from being meaningless, however, such census identity categories can be supremely important in the politics of a multicultural state. The questions about nationality and language in the post-Soviet censuses remain as politicized as they were in the Soviet censuses. With fifteen states now in charge of their own census apparatus, instead of one, the political strategies behind the formulation of these categories have evolved. This report will examine how the “ethnic politics” of post-Soviet census are playing out.

## Introduction

In the last few years, post-Soviet states have been conducting their first censuses since the collapse of the Soviet Union. After a twenty year gap, caused by the disruption of the war, Soviet censuses were held during the last year of a decade (except in 1970, when the census was delayed by a year), with the last one taking place in 1989, during the heyday of perestroika.<sup>1</sup> Only three states (Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan) succeeded in respecting the ten year interval by having their censuses in 1999, while the three Baltic states and Kyrgyzstan administered theirs in 2000 or early 2001. After repeated delays, the two most populous states, Ukraine and Russia, have finally confirmed the dates of their own census, set for December 2001 and October 2002, respectively. This report, based on the collaborative work of a team of seven scholars, will focus on the censuses of the three Slavic states (Russia, Ukraine, Belarus), as well as of Kazakhstan, Estonia, and Latvia.<sup>2</sup> All six states have in common a large, and politically significant, Russian population, and an even greater proportion of people speaking Russian as a first language.

Censuses are made to count people. This simple idea can be difficult to accomplish in practice, since many people would rather avoid being counted, distrusting how the state may use census information. Many areas can also be extremely difficult to canvass, due to their remote location or public insecurity. The problem affects both weak states, with little resources to cast a comprehensive net, and developed states, which act as a magnet for immigration and whose democratic norms may facilitate "hiding" from authorities. The United States, tellingly, has been grappling with an undercount of its African-American and Hispanic minorities for over a decade. Among the former Soviet states, Russia has, by far, attracted the most migrants, both in absolute and relative terms. Several million of them (from Ukraine, Belarus, the Caucasus, Central Asia) remain unaccounted for in yearly statistics and are

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<sup>1</sup> Soviet censuses were held in 1926, 1937, 1939, 1959, 1970, 1979, and 1989. The 1937 census results drew the ire of Stalin since they showed a decrease in the Soviet population. Census officials were murdered and the results were not published until the 1990s. Results from the 1939 census were doctored and sparsely disseminated before the 1990s.

<sup>2</sup> The seven scholars are Dominique Arel (Watson Institute, Brown University), Bhavna Dave (SOAS, University of London), Alexandra Goujon (Institut d'Etudes Politiques, Paris), Brian Silver (Michigan State University), Sven

unlikely to be counted in the census. Many of them may, in fact, end up being counted in their country of origin, creating a potential overcount. Moreover, a heightened fear of criminality makes many people reluctant to let a stranger in their house, a disposition particularly common among nouveaux riches.

During a test census in October 2000 in Russia, eight percent of respondents refused to answer altogether.

The focus of this report, however, is not on the exercise of counting the population *per se*, but on how people are categorized on the census according to a certain number of *identity* criteria, and the use that politicians make of these census categories and results. All states inquire about the citizenship of their respondents (states generally count residents, not merely citizens), a *civic* category based on the objective fact of citizenship to a given state or, in certain cases, of statelessness. While the citizenship policy of a given state is inherently subjective, the result of political considerations, the *fact* of citizenship is easily quantifiable, based on official documents. Some states also inquire about the country of origin of their residents, a question that has been a hallmark of the French census and has appeared on the American census a century ago. Like citizenship, country of origin is an objective category, easy to compute. The category, however, can be widely misleading as to the cultural identity of the foreign-born. Most "Russians" in early twentieth-century American censuses were in fact Jews, Poles, Lithuanians and other ethnic minorities of the Russian Empire.

Census questions that inquire directly about the cultural profile of a respondent, along the lines of race, ethnicity, language, or religion, make use of *political* categories. Despite being almost invariably presented by state officials and, more often than not, by grass-roots organizations and pressure groups as objective and "scientific," these categories are based on subjective assessments – by the census agent, respondent, or both – thereby making them vulnerable to political contestations. A constant litany of census politics is that people were not counted *as they should have been counted*. An article of faith among Ukrainian nationalists is that millions of Ukrainians were counted as Russians by the Russian

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Gunnar Simonsen (Peace Research Institute of Oslo), Peter Sinnott (Columbia University), Valery Stepanov (Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Moscow).

Imperial and Soviet censuses. This presupposes that there is an objective way of distinguishing between “Russians” and “Ukrainians,” which, in fact, is not the case.

This is not to say that identity categories on the census are meaningless. On the contrary, they can be supremely important in the politics of a multicultural state. The point is that these census identity categories – in their elaboration, use on census day, and interpretation of their results – must be seen as part of a political process, and not simply as aspects of a technical exercise designed to gather objective data. In this light, the questions about nationality and language in the post-Soviet censuses remain as politicized as they were in the Soviet censuses. With fifteen states now in charge of their own census apparatus, instead of one, the political strategies behind the formulation of these categories have evolved. This report will examine how the “ethnic politics” of post-Soviet census are playing out.

### **Keeping nationality on post-Soviet censuses**

All Soviet censuses had a question regarding the “nationality” of respondents. “Nationality,” in this context, refers to what Western scholars would call “ethnicity,” i.e. the sense of belonging to a community of presumed descent based on the subjectively-determined saliency of cultural markers such as language, religion, and customs. From the early part of the nineteenth century, when the idea was popularized by German philosophers, “nationality” has acquired this ethnic connotation in Central and Eastern Europe, and eventually Eurasia, with the term “ethnic” seldom, if ever, used in the public discourse of those states. Western states (that is, west of Germany and in the New World), meanwhile, have used “nationality” to refer to citizenship. The concept of “(ethnic) nationality” has therefore been absent from Western censuses and is peculiar to those originating from Eastern Europe.<sup>3</sup>

Since “nationalities” have been part of the political landscape in Eastern Europe, including the lands of the former Imperial Russia and Soviet Union, for nearly two centuries, it might come as no surprise that all post-Soviet states, including the six under study here, have decided to keep a nationality

question on their censuses. The political reality of nationalities, however, does not necessarily translate into a *direct* question on ethnic nationality on the census. In fact, all the censuses from Eastern Europe prior to the First World War, including Imperial Russia's first and sole census of 1897, used language as a proxy to determine nationality. The German Romantic philosophers – Herder, Fichte and the like – had reduced nationality to language, a conception which was widely embraced by ethnographers, nationalist entrepreneurs and, eventually, census officials throughout the East.

Language assimilation, however, is a regular feature of the modern state. In a multilingual setting, people respond to a set of incentives (language of prestige, of mobility, of schools) which may result in an intra- or inter-generational change in the language that one uses primarily in private life. This is where politics enters. In nationalist politics, whenever language acts as a marker of identity, language assimilation is never accepted as a “fact.” It is rather presented as an illegitimate process, violating the true identity of the assimilated speakers. From this perspective, counting nationalities strictly by language in pre-First World War censuses throughout Eastern Europe, in a context of significant assimilation to *Russian, German, or Hungarian*, was denounced by nationalities activists as *fraudulent*. Once the aggrieved nationalities took control of their states (and census bureaus) after the war, as in Czechoslovakia and Poland, “nationality” began to be counted separately from language (Arel 2002).

The Soviet Union did the same. This was surprising, since representatives of the dominant nationalities (Russians) were still in power, contrary to the successor states of the defunct Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Soviet Bolsheviks believed (oh, so mistakenly!) that a full acceptance of nationalist demands, which included a recognition of the “illegitimate” assimilation to the Russian language and the establishment of national territories for all nationalities, would depoliticize the national question (and therefore nip separatism in the bud). The questions of nationality and language were thus decoupled on the first Soviet census of 1926, and in all subsequent ones. This had the effect of

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<sup>5</sup> Several New World states, as in the US and Canada, do have a census question on “ethnic origins,” but this question is meant to elicit ethnic pride, and has little connection to political benefits. In these countries, the politicized category is that of “race” or “visible minority.”

“congealing” nationalities, of making people think of their nationality in terms of the nationalities of their parents and grandparents, irrespective of their own linguistic “identity.”

Put differently, while nationality was defined by language (the German conception, accepted by all nationalist movements in Eastern Europe), the language of an individual was not accepted on the Soviet census as indicative of nationality. What counted was the presumed language of one’s ancestors. A third-generation Ukrainian in Kazakhstan, who knew no language other than Russian, was still counted as a Ukrainian, even though the Ukrainian language is an indisputable core of a Ukrainian national identity. While the “fear of extinction” resonated loudly in nationalist proclamations of the perestroika era, assimilation – while real in language trends in urban areas (outside of the Baltics and the South Caucasus) – was actually reflected very little in Soviet census statistics.

The post-Soviet states could thus have, theoretically, explored the question of doing away with a direct question on nationality on the census, while maintaining one on language. This would have put them in accordance to the census practice of a number of Western multinational states, like Canada and Spain, where national identity is derived from census language data. This is not to say that post-Soviet states are breaking any international standard. While international organizations, such as the UN and Eurostat, have devised standards for every other category on the census form (standards which post-Soviet states are attempting to follow scrupulously in order to be eligible for the funding they so desperately need to conduct their censuses), there are no standards for ethnic nationality (or, for that matter, for race, language, or religion). There are no standards partly because some states (such as France) reject the recognition of nationalities or national minorities on philosophical grounds, and partly because the definition of what constitutes a nationality, as discussed above, is so inherently political.

### **Nationality and territory**

While there are no standards on whether ethnic nationality should be asked on the census and, if so, how it should be asked, a clear standard has evolved in the past decade regarding the labeling of national identities. National identity, according to this standard, is a matter of *self-definition* and cannot



be imposed by the state. This had led the European Union to declare the use of ethnic or religious categories on identity cards as incompatible with human rights. The right to self-declare a national identity implies that it is up to individuals to mention their nationality in a given public setting, a freedom obviously in contradiction with the mandatory indication of nationality on personal documents (Arel 2001a).

In terms of census policy, this new standard can be interpreted to mean that the respondents' nationality is determined by respondents themselves, and not the census-taker. Asking respondents about their nationality is not seen as a violation of their rights since, contrary to identity documents, the census forms are legally confidential, meant to be examined by census officials only, for the purpose of constructing aggregate, as opposed to individual, profiles. This self-reporting, in principle, has been the practice of all Soviet censuses and all six post-Soviet censuses under review have kept the same instructions.

One should note, however, that the (post-)Soviet census practice of self-declaration has clear limits. First, people are not given the option of declining to offer a national identity. Second, the option of defining oneself in hyphenated terms, that is, of declaring more than a single national identity, is also not available. The child of parents from different nationalities must choose one of the two identities, and not both.<sup>4</sup> Third, and by far the most politically consequential of all restrictions, not all national categories volunteered by respondents are recognized as valid by census-takers.

As we will analyze at some depth below, Soviet censuses all used a closed list of recognized nationalities and detailed instructions as to how unrecognized categories were to be recoded into official ones. For instance, "Cossacks" were to be counted as Russians if they were claiming Russian as mother tongue, or Ukrainians if they were claiming Ukrainian, but not as "Cossacks," since the term was not recognized as a nationality. While it is not clear to what extent the recoding took place on the spot, when census-takers were recording the answers given by respondents, or when census forms were processed

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<sup>4</sup> Valery Tishkov, director of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology in Moscow, has campaigned for the inclusion of hybrid national categories on the Russian census. See Tishkov 2000.

afterwards, the practice of recoding is undisputed. A "dictionary of nationalities," listing all recognized and unrecognized categories, was prepared and updated prior to each census. All states in this study have kept the practice, for the simple but fundamental reason that nationality, in the post-Soviet context, continues to be linked to territorial power.

The claim of ethnic self-determination, called the "principle of nationalities" in the nineteenth century, is based on the notion that nationalities (ethnic nations) have the right to exercise sovereignty on their alleged "homeland." In nationalist discourse, this right is itself based on what Donald L. Horowitz has called the claim of "prior settlement": nationalities have the (natural) right to rule over their homeland because they allegedly settled there first (Horowitz 1985).

One could, of course, emphasize the mythical nature of these claims, a theme much investigated in recent scholarly literature, but the more germane point here is that the Soviet Union, and Soviet census policy, essentially co-opted this nationalist discourse. In the early 1920s, the Bolsheviks decided to "solve" the nationalities question by recognizing "all" nationalities and giving them "sovereignty" over a territory, however small, named after themselves. After a wave of repression in the 1930s against so-called "diaspora" nationalities, i.e., nationalities whose "homeland" is located outside the boundaries of the Soviet Union (Poles, Germans, Greeks, Koreans etc.), national autonomous areas were limited to nationalities deemed "indigenous" to the Soviet Union.

From the beginning, thus, Soviet authorities linked the status of a recognized nationality to territorial sovereignty. The expectation was that the "nationalization" of territory would satiate national demands and make them wither away. Instead, a sense of unfulfilled ownership set in. In the post-Soviet era, the crucial linkage between nationality and territory has remained intact. Estonia, Latvia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan all legitimate their state independence on the grounds that their state constitutes the homeland of the "titular" nation, namely, the ethnic nationality after which the state is named. While, in some cases, legal documents blur the distinction between the ethnic and the civic nation as agents of self-determination, that is, as the group in the name of whom independence is proclaimed, other

instruments of nation-building, such as public speeches and school textbooks, unambiguously emphasize the ethnic element.

In Ukraine, for instance, the Constitution rather tortuously indicates that the right of self-determination was exercised "by the Ukrainian nation" (with small U in the Ukrainian-language text, giving the expression an ethnic connotation) as well as "all the Ukrainian people" (with capital U in the original, and a more inclusive meaning). The Declaration of Independence, on the other hand, suggests that Kievan Rus' was a Ukrainian state and state-sponsored textbooks intimate that the Rus' inhabitants are the ancestors of ethnic Ukrainians. In other words, Ukraine has a historic right to independence because ethnic Ukrainians settled there first (Arel 2001b). In Kazakhstan, the Constitution defines state territory as "the ancestral land of the Kazakhs" (Dave with Sinnott 2001). All other post-Soviet states maintain the same discourse although Russia, having the distinction of being the only one built as a federation of ethnically-defined units, has dozens, if not hundreds, of claimants to the right of territorial supremacy.

The claim of ethnic ownership entails a need to produce ethnic majorities. This is arguably the main reason why post-Soviet states have kept a nationality category on their census. National elites understand very well the power of official statistics. Even though the claim of prior settlement is conceptually distinct from contemporary demographics, the ability to construct statistical majorities is a critical tool to strengthen a state's hold on territories.

The case of Kazakhstan illustrates that point strikingly. Between the censuses of 1926 and 1959, the proportion of ethnic Kazakhs in Kazakhstan shrank by almost half, from 58.5 percent to 30 percent. This severe decrease was caused by the collectivization-induced famine of the early 1930s, which cost the lives of over a million nomadic Kazakhs; the deportation to Kazakhstan of hundreds of thousands of diaspora nationalities after 1937 (primarily Germans); and the mass settlement of Slavs in the so-called Virgin Lands of Northern Kazakhstan in the 1950s. At the last Soviet census, in 1989, the proportion of ethnic Kazakhs had grown to 39.7 percent, still far from a majority.

In preparing for their first independent census, in 1999, it became imperative for Kazakh officials to produce a titular majority. The task was greatly facilitated by the mass migration of Slavs, mainly to Russia, and of ethnic Germans, to Germany. Census results from 1999 indicate that the combined population of "Europeans" (Slavs and Germans) declined by nearly three million since 1989, while the number of Kazakhs grew by almost 1.5 million. Officially, the ethnic Kazakhs were now said to constitute 53.4 percent of the entire population, a huge increase from 1989 (Dave with Sinnott 2001).

While there is little doubt that the ethnic Kazakh population is close to the 50 percent mark, demographers have questioned the veracity of the official figure of 53.4 percent, arguing that the Russian-speaking population in the northern oblasts was probably undercounted while Kazakhs were overcounted. According to the Kazakhstani Russian demographer Aleksandr Alekseenko, an unusually high disparity exists between official 1999 results and yearly population statistics published by the Kazakh state in the second half of the 1990s. The census, claimed Alekseenko, counted 824,000 fewer people than estimated by population statistics in early 1999, a decrease of 5.3 percent. Curiously, the decline did not affect ethnic Kazakhs, with the census registering 288,000 more of them than expected. Had census results matched population statistics, the proportion of ethnic Kazakhs would have been below 50 percent (at 48.7 percent) (Dave with Sinnott 2001).

According to unofficial estimates, hundreds of thousands, if not more, of Kazakhs and Slavs from Kazakhstan work in Russia, without having officially immigrated from Kazakhstan. Since these unofficial migrants still possess a residency registration in Kazakhstan, census authorities count them as permanent residents of Kazakhstan, even though they may never return to the country. It could be that census-takers were more predisposed to count absentee Kazakhs than non-Kazakhs "temporarily" abroad. This could have helped tip the proportion of Kazakhs over the magical 50 percent mark. In a sense, the disputed figures remind one of a contested election, in which a few percent may make the difference in achieving a desired result. Comparing the census to an election may be less far-fetched than it seems.

After all, the French thinker Ernest Renan has famously compared the nation to a daily plebiscite. The census is the nation's decennial plebiscite.<sup>3</sup>

The impulse to project ethnic majorities on the census is not limited to the state as a whole. Disputed territories within states are also a prime target. The case of Kazakhstan is, once again, quite instructive. The "European" nationalities (Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Germans, Poles) have historically been concentrated in the northern oblasts, along the Russian border. Census data from 1989 showed that seven of Kazakhstan's sixteen oblasts had huge majorities of Europeans, each of them containing at least two-thirds of the population, and each located in the north.

*This census representation of Kazakhstan as a geographically bifurcated binational state,* however, runs counter to the project of building Kazakhstan as the national state of Kazakhs. In an effort to dilute the proportion of non-Kazakhs in border oblasts, state authorities have engaged in an exercise of ethnic gerrymandering, fusing heavily European-populated districts with primarily ethnic Kazakh areas, which hitherto belonged to oblasts with Kazakh majorities. As a result, while three oblasts, at the time of the 1989 census, had ethnic Russian majorities (apart from other Slavs and Germans), with two of them in excess of sixty percent of the population, only one of the reconstituted oblasts had a Russian majority (and a bare majority of 51.5 percent, at that) using the same 1989 data. By 1999, according to official census data, that lone oblast (called the Northern Kazakhstan oblast) had lost its Russian majority, with the proportion of ethnic Russians having fallen just below the 50 percent mark (49.8 percent) (Sinnott 2001). Kazakh officials can thus claim, based on their 1999 census, that ethnic Kazakhs form the majority in the state and that not a single one of Kazakhstan's oblasts has an ethnic Russian majority. The

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<sup>3</sup> The problem of "temporary migration" is a thorny one for statisticians. With the exception of the Baltics, all non-Russian states have experienced significant outmigration, mainly to Russia. In the South Caucasus, the flows have been so severe that estimates put the numbers of people who left as high as one-third of the labor force. The decision to count citizens living abroad, based on their local registration documents, is not limited to Kazakhstan. In testimony to the Ukrainian parliament, the head of Ukraine's State Committee on Statistics has announced that census officials will be instructed to count people residing abroad at the time of the census. Since residency registration records are extremely deficient (scholars have estimated in the early 1990s that one person out of three does not reside at the address indicated on his *propiska*), it is doubtful how accurate the counting of absentees on census day can be. With the abolition of the exit visa for travelers in the early 1990s, post-Soviet states no longer keep statistics on the number of their citizens travelling abroad, many of whom are in fact staying for extended

political strategy is clear: since Russians are minorities everywhere, irredentist claims by Russia on these territories have no demographic foundations.

The use of the census to obtain desired majorities also involves the manipulation of ethnic categories. The main identity cleavage in Kazakh society is between Kazakhs and "Europeans." These European nationalities are primarily distinguished by language, but with overwhelming assimilation to the Russian language among second- and third-generation Ukrainians, Germans etc., this distinction has long lost its saliency. In daily life, most of them are perceived as "Russians" and would probably conceive of themselves as such if it were not for the Soviet system of passport nationality, which had "congealed" nationalities on paper. Under this system, which has been abolished in the Slavic post-Soviet states but not in Kazakhstan, people were assigned the nationality of their parents in their internal passports. They were socialized into associating the census question on nationality with the nationality inscribed in their passports (even if census nationality was officially based on self-declaration, which could have theoretically diverged from one's official nationality).<sup>6</sup> This had the effect of statistically masking extensive linguistic assimilation, which, in the Kazakh context, was in fact ethnic assimilation. What can possibly distinguish a third-generation Ukrainian from a third-generation Russian in Ust-Kamenogorsk (one of Northern Kazakhstan's main industrial cities)?

In the Soviet Union, the passport/census system entertained the fiction that Soviet republics were the home of "hundreds" of nationalities. In the post-Soviet era, the system is useful to nationalizing states in representing the non-titular population as more fragmented than it really is. Nationality census results in Kazakhstan tend to be officially presented by focusing on the "Kazakh" and "Russian" categories, followed by most other nationalities listed in alphabetical order. By focusing on "Russian," instead of a larger category of "Slavs" or "Europeans," Kazakh census officials are thereby able to statistically diminish the size of the (overwhelmingly Russian-speaking) non-titular group. As indicated above, none

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periods. Arguably, these states, such as Kazakhstan and Ukraine, do not see it in their interest to represent on the census the extent of their real outmigration.

of the reconfigured oblasts registered a Russian majority in the 1999 census. Yet, if one were to include other groups that have assimilated to Russian in all but name, four oblasts would have shown Russian-speaking/European majorities.

The same strategy has characterized post-Soviet Baltic states. The politically salient ethnic cleavage in Estonia and Latvia is indisputably linguistic. The acquisition of citizenship and career opportunities in the public sector have been made contingent upon knowledge of the titular language, in each case, the sole state language of the country. Despite this critical role of language, census statistics in Estonia and Latvia continue to separate “Russians,” from “Ukrainians” and “Belorussians” in census and other official statistics, since it has the effect of reducing the size of a fairly large Russian-speaking minority.

#### **Who gets on the list**

Soviet census officials, as we have seen, used a closed list of nationalities. Terms that did not appear on the list were recoded into acceptable ones. In Latvia, for instance, a “Latgalian” (*latgaliets*) was counted as a “Latvian.” In Tajikistan, where national consciousness is weak, no less than forty unrecognized names were recoded as “Tajiks.”<sup>7</sup> Arguments for the maintenance of a closed list can be made from a number of different levels. One is statistical. Recording every conceivable answer in an open-ended question on nationality could prove costly, with the need to publish (assuming results on nationality were published) charts showing characteristics of each different nationality. The 1989 Soviet census list of nationalities had 128 entries, slightly more than the previous three postwar censuses, but the number of unrecognized answers reached 823.

A more complex argument, however, is ethnographic. Soviet ethnographers have long worked under the assumption that people may be mistaken in declaring their nationality on the census. They may

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<sup>7</sup> I once asked a Russia-oriented young man in Crimea what his passport nationality was. It was Ukrainian. I asked him what nationality he would declare for himself during the forthcoming Ukrainian census. He answered laconically Ukrainian, puzzled that there could be any other answer.

volunteer a regional identity, or a "subethnic" identity that is a component of a larger "ethnic" nationality, as documented by the work of ethnographers themselves. A person, thus, could call himself a Latgalian, on the grounds that it is the name of the language he speaks at home. Yet, since ethnographers have determined that Latgalian is a dialect of the Latvian language, the Latgalian, from a census perspective, is *truly* a Latvian.

Historical scholarship on the 1920s and 1930s, particularly regarding Central Asia, the Volga, and Siberia, is full of stories about how Soviet ethnographers and census officials "built" nationalities by assigning official categories and recoding unacceptable ones in areas where people were not accustomed to thinking in nationality terms. This practice, however, raises a fundamental question: if ethnography, like its close cousin anthropology, is the social scientific investigation of how people behave and how they conceive of themselves culturally, then on what basis can external observers assign them an identity label that differs from their own? One basis could be an eminently practical, or economical, one. A group may be so small as to make its representation in official statistics pointless. In the late 1920s, when the Soviet Union granted national autonomies at the smallest conceivable territorial unit (collective farm), Soviet authorities ruled that granting autonomy to several small groups would be economically too onerous. Consequently, about fifty of them disappeared from the list which had been prepared for the 1926 census (which contained 175 nationalities) (Hirsch 1997). (The list was further cut down to 99 nationalities for the 1939 census, but the number was increased again to the 120s in 1959; there were minor alterations through 1989.)

The decision to include or exclude groups from the official list is not only made on the basis of expediency. Political considerations inevitably intrude. One could say that a constant among people identifying with an ethnonational group is an inability to admit that people who are deemed to belong to the same ethnic nationality may think of themselves as belonging to a separate ethnic nationality of their own. If states, as a rule, refuse to consider the legitimacy of secessionist claims, ethnonations (or more

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<sup>1</sup> A list of unrecognized names recoded into the seventeen most populous recognized nationalities for the 1989 Soviet census can be found in Tishkov 1997: 16-19.



specifically individuals claiming to speak in the name of an ethnonation) refuse, as a rule, to recognize the legitimacy of “identity secessionist” claims by groups (or more specifically individuals claiming to speak in the name of an unrecognized ethnonation). The rejection of counter-identity claims can be most passionate, precisely because these claims are linked to territory. In determining whether an ethnonym should be included on the list of census nationalities, officials invariably invoke the legitimacy of “objective science.” Quite often, however, the deeper motivation involves a fear of new territorial claims.

The examples abound, and the phenomenon has acquired greater political urgency in the democratizing atmosphere of post-Soviet societies. In Ukraine, for instance, arguably the most politically sensitive unrecognized group are the Rusyns (*русини*). The Rusyns are a Slavic-speaking population of Orthodox religion or ritual, living in the Carpathian region and straddling four states: Ukraine, Slovakia, Yugoslavia (Serbia) and Poland (where they are known as Lemkos). Most of these areas belonged to Hungary prior to the First World War. In the interwar period, the largest area, Subcarpathian Rus', had a certain degree of autonomy within the new Czechoslovak state, before being annexed by the Soviet Union in 1945 and becoming an oblast of the Soviet Ukrainian state.

During the Czechoslovak interlude, where these issues could be politically debated for the first time, the inhabitants of the Carpathian region were divided as to whether they constitute a separate nationality, or a part of the Russian or Ukrainian ethnonation. After the postwar annexation, the Soviet Union ruled that the Rusyns were a subethnic category of the Ukrainian nationality, terminating all debates by fiat. With Ukrainian independence, however, the question has been reopened.

The official position of the post-Soviet Ukrainian government has remained identical to the Stalinist postwar decree: *the Rusyns are not a nationality*. In a document prepared for the Council of Europe, Ukraine's nationality department (known as the State Committee of Ukraine on Nationality and Migration) asserted that “all truly scientific, historical and ethnographic research attest to the fact that the indigenous Slavic population of Transcarpathia, besides certain peculiarities in culture, language, and customs, belong to the Ukrainian people” (Arel 2001b). The claim was reiterated by Ukraine's chief census official in reply to a question, during a parliamentary session in July 2001, on the non-recognition

of Rusyns as a nationality: the list, he said, was prepared by the Academy of Sciences, in concert with all interested institutions. The official census list of nationalities (*perelik osnovnykh natsional'nostei*) for the 2001 Ukrainian census essentially reproduces the old Soviet list, even citing as its main source a 1988 Soviet encyclopedia!

What are the scientific arguments advanced to deny that the Rusyns constitute a nationality? They are: that the Rusyns speak a dialect of Ukrainian; that they have historically identified with the Ukrainians; and that pretensions that they form a separate nationality are the work of outside agitators. Yet who decides what constitutes a dialect and what constitutes a language?

Historical evidence indicates that these decisions are made by state bodies, ultimately following political criteria. Post-communist Slovakia and Poland have decided to recognize Rusyns (Lemkos) as a nationality. Their decisions were hardly based on new "scientific" findings, but on a consideration that the demands by Rusyn movements for recognition were not politically threatening, due to the small number of putative Rusyns in these states. In Ukraine, the crux of the matter is that no one knows how many Slavic inhabitants of Zakarpattia would identify as Rusyns if they were given the opportunity in an official setting, such as the census.

Even the world-leading chronicler of Rusyn history, the Canadian-based Robert Paul Magosci, admits that he does not know if a Rusyn nationality has the potential to develop past a critical mass in Ukrainian Transcarpathia (Magosci 1999: 360). What is clear is that Ukrainian authorities would rather avoid creating the conditions which could favor the rise of a sense of separate "Rusynness," since Rusyns are located in a border oblast which has already campaigned for autonomy in the early 1990s. Giving an official status to Rusyns on the census, and publishing for the first time statistics on the number of Rusyns, could in itself incite a greater number of people to identify with the Rusyn nationality at the next census.

Ukrainian officials, on the other hand, must confront the aforementioned new European standard that nationality is a matter of self-definition, a principle that appears in the 1992 Law on National Minorities. As a compromise, census officials have announced that all answers will be recorded *as is* on

census forms, to be recoded later during data processing. The actual census question, which used to simply contain the word "nationality" (*natsional'nost'*) in Soviet censuses, will now ask about "ethnic background" (*etnichne pokhodzhennia*, in Ukrainian, since census forms will be printed exclusively in Ukrainian), while indicating in parentheses that this refers to "nationality," "*narodnist*" (an untranslatable and vague term, which had the connotation in Soviet times of a group below the status of nationality, without the right to its own territory) or "ethnic group" (*etnichna hrupa*), a Western scientific term otherwise unknown in post-Soviet common parlance. This new formulation, which may have been inspired by a similarly worded question used in a test census in Russia, has the advantage of allowing people to claim the identity of their choice, without treating all answers as acceptable nationalities.

At the time of this writing, four months prior to the December 2001 census, a final decision had not been made as to whether results for "subethnic categories," such as the Rusyns, will be published. After signals were initially sent indicating that these numbers would be available, census officials appear to have backtracked. In the final analysis, the decision will be made according to considerations of state security. Also unclear is the extent which Rusyn organizations will be able to freely campaign to persuade people to identify as Rusyns on the census. At an international seminar in 1999, a Rusyn activist suggested that international observers be sent to Transcarpathia to ensure the fairness of the exercise (Trier 1999).

While this is unlikely to happen, the analogy to an election campaign is an apt one. People can "vote" for an identity, not because identities are purely instrumental, but because identities can be expressed in various ways depending on the social and political context. Many Transcarpathian Slavs may have a dual identity, but they never had the opportunity to declare themselves in hybrid terms, and they will not have one in the 2001 census. They will be faced for the first time with the option of declaring an exclusive Rusyn identity and contending forces will battle to convince them to make the "right" choice.

In Russia, claimants to the status of nationality are far more numerous than anywhere else in the Former Soviet Union. Russia not only dwarfs the other former Soviet republics in size and population, but it is also the only Soviet successor state which, like the Soviet Union, is structured as a federation of

territorial "subjects," several dozen of which are defined according to the nationality principle. Moreover, Russia, likewise unique among post-Soviet states, has passed a law granting material privileges to "indigenous peoples" (in the Western understanding of the term: peoples whose pre-modern lifestyle drastically differs from the "settled" populations).

The prize of territory or other benefits is a powerful incentive for groups to claim nationality status, now that public debate on nationality issues is permissible, after having been frozen for over six decades. Sensitive to such claims, and seemingly freed of the "practical" constraints which had led to a curtailment of the number of recognized nationalities after 1926, census authorities have increased the number of recognized nationalities. The 128 official nationalities of the 1989 census grew to 143 during a mini-census conducted in 1994, and grew further to 176 in a recent draft list of nationalities submitted to the Institute of Ethnography and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences for its review. The institute, while correcting several inaccuracies, presented a new list now containing 198 nationalities, an all-time record. This latest list will, most likely, be accepted by the Russian census authorities (Stepanov 2001).

The great majority of these "new" nationalities are obscure groups (Akkintsy, Lazy, Khvarshintsy, Yazgulemtsy etc.), known to only a narrow circle of specialists, and unlikely to register more than a few hundred or few thousand members. Despite this stunning proliferation of recognized nationalities, it is significant that many much larger groups did not end up on the list and that the question of including them has generated stormy debates.

Three of these groups pertain to the Tatars. There is apparently a strong case to be made that three hitherto "subethnic categories" of the Tatar nationality – the Teptiari, Mishari, and Kriasheny – could be thought of as nationalities. Scholars from the Institute of Ethnology have opted to recognize the Teptiari as a nationality, but not the Mishari and Kriasheny, even though the ethnic distinctions of these two groups vis-à-vis other Tatars are more pronounced than for the Teptiari (Stepanov 2001). Once again, political considerations have weighed in. Two-thirds of the six million Tatars counted in the 1989 Soviet census lived outside of the Tatarstan autonomous republic, many of them potentially Mishari.

Political leaders in Tatarstan routinely refer to their Tatar “diaspora” within the Russian Federation and would be opposed to a shrinkage of their total numbers, especially since some putative Mishari also live within Tatarstan.

The case is even more sensitive with Kriasheny, who exclusively live in Tatarstan, and whose recognition as a separate nationality would necessarily bring down the number of ethnic Tatars within Tatarstan. Such an eventuality is clearly intolerable to Tatarstan elites who are bent on legitimating their power – as in the case of the Kazakh elites – on the demographic majority of the titular nation, a majority that was almost attained in the 1989 census, when 48.5 percent of the Tatarstan population counted were ethnic Tatars. In an official letter to the Russian Duma, ethnographers from the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology called “inexpedient” the recognition of Kriasheny as a separate nationality, while candidly adding that “no one among ethnographers (*etnologov*) has any doubt in the existence of Kriasheny as a particular (*osoboi*) ethnic group” (Stepanov 2001).

Another controversial case involves the Cossacks, far better known than the Tatar-related groups. The Cossacks were militarized frontier settlers with a special “estate” status under Imperial Russia. They were disbanded by the Bolsheviki, many of them were deported in the 1930s, and they were left bereft of any group recognition. They have reappeared since perestroika, fueled by the conflicts in the Northern Caucasus, where many had historically settled, and have enjoyed the unofficial, and at times official, support of local and central authorities. In fact, in a rare development, the Russian presidential administration has directly lobbied the State Committee on Statistics to add “Cossacks” to the list of nationalities.

Russian ethnographers have reacted to this campaign in ways reminiscent of the Ukrainian position toward the Rusyn question. In an official correspondence to the Russian Academy of Sciences, the Institute of Ethnography, under the signature of S. V. Cheshko, argued that there are “no foundations” for considering the Cossacks as a separate people. To do so would “distort statistics on the ethnic composition of the population by reducing the number of Russians.” Yet if ethnicity (ethnic nationality) is basically a sense of presumed common descent, why couldn’t the Cossacks be recognized as a

nationality? Soviet ethnographers were trained to approach nationality as a composite of necessary conditions, one of which being a distinct language. Herderian preconceptions notwithstanding, language does not always act as an identity marker, as the Yugoslav wars have reminded us. Caught in a crossfire, the Russian census authorities have formulated a compromise, according to which Cossacks will be counted as an hyphenated group (Russian Cossacks, or Ukrainian Cossacks, depending on their mother tongue). The results will apparently be made publicly available. According to estimates, anywhere between 50,000 and 2,000,000 people could identify as Russian Cossacks (Stepanov 2001).

### **Language of nationality or individual?**

All censuses in the former Soviet lands, going back to the first Imperial Russian census of 1897, have included a question on native language (*rodnoi yazyk*). Instructions to census-takers, however, never made it clear whether the question should be understood as the first language learned as a child (as it is understood in Germany), or the language one feels most comfortable with at the time of the census (as it is understood in Switzerland). Soviet ethnographers often complained about the imprecision of the concept of *rodnoi yazyk*, but no avail. As sociological surveys revealed in the 1990s, however, many people understood the concept in a third way, namely, as the language of their nationality. In Ukraine and Kazakhstan, in particular, the proportion of "titulars" who speak Russian at home and who, presumably, were raised in that language far exceed the proportion who claimed Russian as a native language in the 1989 census. In Ukraine, over one third of Ukrainian titulars speak Russian at home, while only 12 percent claimed it as a native language. In Kazakhstan, up to one third are estimated to be Russian speakers at home, compared to a minuscule one percent declaring Russian on the census.

The actual sequence of questions on the Soviet census may have played a role. Respondents were first asked about their nationality, immediately followed by a question on native language, which many could have interpreted as basically the same question, i.e., as the language *native to their nationality*, irrespective of their own language history. Among the six post-Soviet states under study, only two (Russia and Belarus) have inverted the sequence on their census form, asking language *before* nationality.

In Belarus, one could have expected that the new sequence would favor a greater proportion of titular Belarusians claiming Russian as a native language. In fact, the opposite happened, as fewer declared Russian (14.4 percent, compared to 19.8 percent in 1989), reversing a steady increase of Belarusian census Russophones throughout the postwar Soviet censuses. The result is all the more surprising, considering that the Belarusian government, since the election of President Lukashenka in 1994, has been quite inimical to the development of the Belarusian language.

The Belarusian census, on the other hand, added a new question, which had never appeared on a Soviet census form: "Which language do you normally speak at home?" The results bore little relationship to the question on native language, as 58.6 percent of ethnic Belarusians declared Russian as their spoken language at home, more than four times the number of native language Belarusian Russophones. This means that while 81.1 percent of the population has declared a Belarusian (ethno) nationality, only one-third speak Belarusian at home, the great majority in the countryside (Goujon 2001).

It is hard to deny that the new question on spoken language provides a more accurate picture of the linguistic situation in Belarus. As we have argued thus far, on the other hand, census categories are generally not devised with an academic, or "scientific" purpose in mind. The relevant question, thus, is why have the Belarusian authorities opted for a question destined to demonstrate the near hegemony of the Russian language in urban Belarus?

In urban areas of Ukraine and Kazakhstan, Russian is as predominant as in Belarus, both publicly and at home, but the Ukrainian and Kazakh governments are not interested in projecting a statistical image of their states indicating linguistic parity (as in Ukraine, since surveys place the number of Russian speakers at home as close to 50 percent), let alone Russian language majority (as in Kazakhstan). These two states are engaged in nation-building projects aimed at minimizing the presence of the Russian language (and of ethnic Russians, as we saw in the case of Kazakhstan) and encouraging Russophones to learn the titular (state) language. In Lukashenka's Belarus, by contrast, the state has been relentlessly promoting the project of "reunification" with Russia, thereby emphasizing the commonality between the Russian and Belarusian populations, in terms of the language they actually speak (as opposed to what

they claim as an identity marker). Contrary to Ukraine and Kazakhstan, Belarus has also made Russian a state language, alongside Belarusian, which means, in practice, that Russian is used most of the time.

In Kazakhstan, the census has dispensed altogether with any question on native language, inquiring instead about knowledge of the "state language" (Kazakh) and, in a supplemental question, of "other languages." Census results on language are then presented according to "native language," with native language simply assumed from one's reported nationality, an assumption which, as we saw before, was shared by respondents in past Soviet censuses in Kazakhstan. Ninety-nine percent of ethnic Kazakhs claimed Kazakh as a native language in 1989; in 1999, all one hundred percent were assigned retrospectively this label!

As it turned out, the question on state language, where respondents were asked to indicate their knowledge of Kazakh in gradation (know, weakly know, do not know, I am studying it), was once again interpreted as a restatement of one's nationality. A whopping ninety percent of ethnic Kazakhs claim to "know" Kazakh, a figure that has no sociolinguistic validity, since a large number of Kazakhs have in fact difficulty speaking or writing in Kazakh. After all, even though virtually all high governmental posts are staffed by ethnic Kazakhs, the government continues to function primarily in Russian. As Bhavna Dave has argued, the politically acceptable knowledge of Kazakh, in current conditions, can be limited to a few words of greeting. At the same time, few among titular Kazakhs would publicly admit to not knowing the language (Dave with Sinnott 2001).

Ukrainian census officials are also making questionable assumptions regarding the extent to which ethnic Ukrainians know Ukrainian, although in a less sweeping manner than in Kazakhstan. The Ukrainian census form will be asking three questions on language, one more than in the past, grouped under the heading "Your language characteristics" (*Vashi movni oznaky*). The first reproduces the Soviet census entry on native language (*ridna mova*, in Ukrainian). The second inquires about the knowledge of Ukrainian. It does so, however, by assuming that all those declaring Ukrainian as a native language have a good command of the language: "If your native language is not Ukrainian, then indicate if you are fluent (*volodieete vil'no*) in Ukrainian, yes or no". Many ethnic Ukrainians from Eastern Ukraine,



particularly in the Donbas region and Crimea, have difficulty speaking Ukrainian freely. They will nonetheless be counted as fluent in the language.

Once again, this sociological inaccuracy is consistent with the political determination of Ukrainian nation-builders to downplay the predominance of Russian in Ukrainian society. One should note that the same inaccurate formulation will appear on the Russian census, with "If your native language is not Russian...", instead of "Ukrainian." The high social status of Russian, however, makes it extremely rare to have someone claim Russian as a mother tongue without mastering it. In other words, assimilation from Russian to another language is a most uncommon occurrence in the Russian Federation. The data for this question will thus have greater validity in Russia than in Ukraine.

Even more questionable in its validity is the question about the knowledge of languages other than the titular language. The Soviet census, since 1970, inquired about the knowledge of Russian as a second language, in line with the Soviet state policy of promoting Russian as the language of "inter-ethnic communication." With the obvious exception of the census in Russia, post-Soviet censuses no longer directly inquire about the knowledge of Russian. The preferred formulation is that of "another" language, without specifically mentioning Russian. That other language could be English, or another non-Russian non-titular language, but the Ukrainian and Belarusian censuses only allow one answer. Even in cases where censuses do allow multiple answers, there is always the possibility that the number of titulars declaring fluency in Russian will be less than those who are in fact fluent, since the pretense that one does not know the "oppressor" language is widespread in areas experiencing tense language politics.

The phenomenon could very well occur in Western Ukraine, where anti-Russian sentiments are more pronounced than elsewhere, but it does not appear to have been a factor in Latvia, since a plausible 76 percent of ethnic Latvians have declared a command of Russian in the 2001 census (Silver 2001). Even in the regimented Soviet Union, there was a precedent for pretending ignorance of Russian on the census. Hence, the 1979 census results in Estonia showed a statistically suspect decline of the knowledge of Russian among ethnic Estonians since 1970. This political statement did not repeat itself in the 2000 census, however, since the sole language question on the census pertained to mother tongue. Because of

this political predisposition, and since questions on “knowledge” or “command” are not clearly defined (Silver 1986), census data about the knowledge of non-titular languages continue to run the risk of misleading us about the actual knowledge of these languages.

## Conclusion

An analysis of census identity categories reveals a remarkable continuity between the censuses of the Soviet “empire” and those of independent Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Estonia and Latvia. The question on ethnic nationality, introduced by the 1926 Soviet census, has been kept everywhere. As before, the question is based on self-declaration and is exclusive, assuming that everyone must necessarily have a single ethnic nationality, one that is recognized by the state (in the name of science). The category of “native language” has also been maintained, even though in Kazakhstan it is now being used as an *ex post facto* device to present census language data. The formulation of questions regarding the knowledge of Russian has been altered, but remained as imprecise as in the Soviet days. One could add that, likewise following Soviet tradition, post-Soviet census avoid asking about the religion or confessional affiliation of respondents, with the exception of Estonia (Silver 2001).<sup>8</sup>

This continuity is largely explained by the linkage between ethnic national and territorial rights, which has acquired even greater political significance than in the past, since the discourse of nationality is now openly used by dozens of successor states and ethnic republics (within Russia) to legitimate their independent or autonomous power, without constraints from Moscow (or with much more nominal constraints, in the case of Russia’s ethnic republics). Post-Soviet states and autonomous republics seek to use the census to “recreate” demographic majorities of titulars on their territory. This has meant continuing to decouple nationality and language, and using the language of lineage (native language) rather than of daily use, to downplay language assimilation and fragment the non-titular minority;

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<sup>8</sup> A single Soviet census, the repressed census of 1937, included a question on religion. The question was added at the insistence of Stalin, to demonstrate the enormous strides accomplished by atheism. The results, however, indicated that a majority (54 percent) still felt a belonging to Orthodoxy and, like the rest of the census, were not published.

denying "new" nationalities a recognition which would have the statistical effect of diminishing the demographic weight the titular nation (Cossacks, Rusyns, Latgalians, Misharis) and its hold on territory; and gerrymandering administrative units to maximize their titular representation (in a sense, a return of the Soviet practice in the 1920s to concentrate titulars on their "own" territory).

Censuses are ambitious undertakings aimed at eliciting basic demographic facts. There is a general tendency to take the census categories for granted, including identity categories. Identities, however, are not sociological phenomena that can be measured with the proper methodology. Nationality and language markers are as "factual" as the claims of (language-based) nationalism themselves. Identity claims are made, with a certain degree of popular resonance (from insignificant to critical), and states manage these claims with a certain degree of political success. The census is a major instrument in the management of these claims, with the claims of elites controlling census operations generally having the upper hand. Post-Soviet elites use the census to legitimate the right of "titular nations" to rule over their "homeland," in perfect continuity with Soviet practice. Yet this broad legitimizing principle is also a structural defect. As long as census recognition is associated with territory, new claimants will come to the fore, with the potential to destabilize states. The seeds of greater discord may very well have been planted by the "nationalisation" of post-Soviet censuses.

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