

Case study:

Citizenship, integration and the census in south Serbia

Learning from peacebuilding in Kosovo and Serbia

Introduction

This case study analyses support given by Peaceful Change initiative to an alliance of local organisations in the south of Serbia who conducted an intervention which aimed to enhance the participation of the country's Albanian minority in the national census of 2022. The case study seeks to contextualise this intervention within a larger vision for peacebuilding in Kosovo and Serbia, describes the specific areas in which it sought to achieve change, and analyses the post-census social and political conditions in order to draw conclusions concerning its broader impact on relations among individuals, institutions and communities. The case study presents the learning elicited by the local alliance with regard to key factors for the future success of such exercises. In addition, where possible, the study seeks to draw lessons for similar interventions in the region, and specifically for the future census in Kosovo, originally planned for 2023. Learning from the initiative emphasises the following conclusions:

- In areas that have been conflict-affected, marginalised or subject to absenteeism in exercises of civic or political participation, any shortcoming in the organisation of such processes can be viewed as a deliberate attempt at marginalisation or discrimination. Specific efforts should be made to ensure the availability and clarity of information, proactive outreach, and targeted efforts at inclusion.
- Organisations with first-hand experience of working to include minorities and marginalised groups in exercises of civic and political participation are an invaluable source of learning and should be drawn in to inform the planning of similar exercises.
- Political leadership was a critical factor in avoiding the threat of absenteeism. Good-faith gestures from political figures, and the engagement of international stakeholders, can each play a crucial role in contributing to an environment of trust.
- Civil society organisations can play a key role in enabling the engagement of marginalised and minority groups, especially when they have prior connections with this part of the population.
- By taking part in an exercise such as a census, minority communities are demonstrating a sense of civic engagement and local belonging that should be promoted by institutions and the majority community as a whole.

Peacebuilding challenges in the south of Serbia

The Albanian minority in Serbia resides in three municipalities in the south - Preševo, Bujanovac (Serbia's Pčinja District) and Medveđa (Jablanica District); in Albanian: Preshevë, Bujanoc and Medvegja - which are situated in some of the poorest areas of the country. Tension with the central government dates back at least to the time of the break-up of Yugoslavia. Shortly after the armed conflict inside Kosovo, a military resistance arose among the Albanian minority. Direct armed conflict was formally ended in 2001, with an agreement that included a policing arrangement that would be representative of the

ethnic make-up of the region. However, periodic acts of violence continued for years afterwards. In 2012 a monument to fighters resisting Serbia was erected in the centre of Preševo. Its forced removal by the government of Serbia drew attention once more to the potential for conflict in the region and stimulated greater international efforts toward conflict resolution. In 2013 the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) mediated between Albanian representatives and the Government of Serbia for the preparation of a Seven-Point Plan to improve the welfare of the Albanian population.

Seven-Point Plan for the Municipalities of Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa

The Seven-Point Plan is an official Government of Serbia document that outlines a series of steps that the government of accepts to discuss with a view to improving the welfare of the Albanian population in the named areas. The seven areas of the plan are:

- representation and integration in state institutions
- economic recovery
- official use of language
- cript and national symbols
- decentralisation in the judiciary
- education, culture and media
- healthcare and social protection
- security and confidence-building measures.

Talks on the issues highlighted by the Plan have been intermittent and have led to the development of short-, medium- and long-term commitments by the Government of Serbia, which are in different stages of implementation. The Seven-Point Plan does not enjoy high visibility and is little known in Serbia, even in the communities named as its beneficiaries.

Despite constituting a very small proportion of the population, the rights of the Albanian minority are a recurring theme in Serbia's international relations owing to their close connection to the protracted conflict with Kosovo. The broad guarantees for minority rights written into the constitution of Kosovo, the frequent attention brought to the hardships faced by the Serb community in Kosovo, and the centrality of the issue of creating an association of Serb-majority municipalities (ASM), which is expected to

strengthen again the rights of the Serb minority, feeds into repeated calls from both civil society and political leadership among Serbia's Albanians for cross-border reciprocity regarding minority rights. While this is not viewed as a realistic prospect, its repeated resurfacing, including among civic and political voices inside Kosovo, means it can act as a bump in the road towards achieving important milestones for progress in Kosovo-Serbia normalisation, including the creation of an ASM.



Municipality building in Preševo
Credit: Agon Islami

While the Serbian political system makes no provisions for guaranteed representation of the Albanian minority, an Albanian has been an elected member of the national assembly in every session since 2006. In the 2020-2022 parliamentary session, in a context interpreted as near state capture by the ruling party, the representative from the Albanian minority was viewed as one of the most important opposition voices inside Serbia's political institutions. The same deputy was re-elected in the parliamentary elections of 2023. While the turnout of Albanians in elections in this part of the country was significantly higher than in 2022, this was insufficient to secure more than one parliamentary seat for the Albanian minority.

As one of the recognised national minorities, the Albanian community elects members to an Albanian National Council, which may exercise rights in the areas of culture, education, and informational and official use of languages. The Council is funded from the budget of the Republic of Serbia, independent of the budget of the local self-government unit. Both the budget and the number of members are informed by census data. Consequently, in 2014, the number of members dropped from 29 to 15 after large parts of the Albanian community boycotted the national

census in 2011. In 2019 the government of Albania took a decision to support Albanians beyond its borders and to fund the Albanian National Council in Serbia. Since that time, the government of Kosovo, too, started providing funding to the Albanian community, and this has caused more controversy on account of Serbia's refusal to recognise Kosovo. A high-profile example is the banning of a screening of a film in Bujanovac that had been supported financially by the Government of Kosovo.¹

In 2000, and in response to the crisis in south Serbia, the government established the Coordination Body for the Municipalities of Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa to give additional attention to the politics, security and economy of the region, with a remit to improve living standards and the protection of rights. Its activities prioritise education, social issues, economic development and strengthening civil society. While the majority of its local employees are ethnic Albanians, it has been criticised for not appointing Albanians in strategic and leadership positions.

[1 Balkan Insight, 17 August 2023, "Ethnic Albanian producer slates Serbian ban on his films as censorship"](#)

Despite these mechanisms, however, the region - and the Albanian population in particular - continue to experience different forms of marginalisation. Of major concern is the practice of ‘passivization of addresses’, whereby the government essentially cancels the residence of persons not found to be living at their listed address. Without proof of residence, one cannot secure access to entitlements such as pensions or benefits. The practice has a tangible impact on daily life, yet those whose residency has been passivized are often not informed and are unaware about appeal mechanisms.² Education is badly served by government policy as Albanian schoolchildren studied for almost 20 years from lesson summaries or from illegal textbooks that deviate from the national curriculum. The inconsistencies caused by this practice pose a serious disadvantage to the Albanian community. This also presents difficulties for teachers who prepare notes from textbooks in the Serbian language, which they translate into Albanian and then dictate to learners during class. While the

situation was finally addressed for primary school students in 2022, secondary school students started the 2023 school year without textbooks in the Albanian language. University-level education in the Albanian language is only available at the department of the Subotica Faculty of Economics in Bujanovac, which is why a large number of Albanians from Bujanovac, Presevo and Medveđa study in Kosovo, North Macedonia or Albania. A lack of progress on cross-border reciprocity between Serbia and Kosovo means that education certificates issued by the Government of Kosovo are not recognised. The recognition of diplomas was noted as key to the integration of Albanians. This issue was part of the Seven-Point Plan and the Washington Agreement (2020), as well as the initiative on the so-called “Mini Schengen” initiated under the EU’s Berlin Process. Non-recognition of diplomas prevents employment in the state administration, health service and judiciary, and represents another reason why young Albanians leave for Western European countries.

Context of 2022 census

The Albanian community in south Serbia boycotted the last census (in 2011), in part owing to disagreements about the language in which the census forms had been drafted and the language skills of the data collectors. There were also disputes about how members of the diaspora would be registered during the census. There was a sense that a boycott would help draw attention to various unresolved issues pertaining to education, language and symbols, as well as general economic neglect. The result of the boycott was that fewer than 6,000 Albanians were counted, which then had further consequences for Government of Serbia decision making with regard to resource distribution and the representation of Albanians in public institutions.

Ahead of the 2022 census, broad consensus was achieved among political and civic actors to ensure a full count. On 25 July 2022, ethnic Albanian political and institutional representatives signed a joint declaration to participate. The declaration followed a series of consultations with the OSCE Mission to Serbia and Serbia’s Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue. The declared procedures for the upcoming census (planned for 1-30 October 2022) addressed concerns previously identified as significant to minority populations; for instance, a citizen could register his or her whole family without them being present. Importantly, census forms were also to be printed in the Albanian language.

[2 Youth Initiative for Human Rights \(2023\), *Passivization of addresses of Albanians in the Preševo Valley as Discriminatory Practice*](#)

Averting a boycott in 2022 was also linked to a renewed sense of purpose regarding implementation of the Seven-Point Plan for the integration of the Albanian community, with the OSCE Mission to Serbia playing a more assertive role. This is in addition to the fact that there were

profound concerns about the impact a boycott would have on municipal allocations to Preševo, Medveđa, and Bujanovac from the central level. Local officials also noted that the community received encouragement from Pristina for Albanians to ‘stand up and be counted’.

Support to civil society to address challenges

The plans to conduct censuses in Kosovo and Serbia were known well ahead of time. Before the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, it was estimated that the two censuses might take place at similar times. Discussions within an Advisory Group (see boxed text) convened by Peaceful Change initiative suggested that the

censuses could provide an opportunity to build practices of cooperation between civil society in the two countries around issues addressing the integration of minorities. As in Serbia, the last census in Kosovo saw a minority community boycott.

The Advisory Group for the Amplifying local voices for equitable development project

Under the three-year project **Amplifying Voices for Equitable Development**, Peaceful Change initiative convened regular meetings of an Advisory Group, made up of representatives from civil society, journalism and academia, in order to (1) provide regular reflections on the overall progress of the activities, which encompassed a wide range of fields and specialisations, and (2) look at how the activities might have a more strategic impact on the overall context of Kosovo-Serbia relations through, for example, new opportunities for cooperation, exchange and learning, or broader advocacy on themes touched upon by the project.

During early meetings of the Advisory Group, it was assessed that there would be a possibility that census exercises would be held in Kosovo and Serbia at around the same time and that these might set the scene for meaningful and practical cooperation between civil society groups. Joint analysis of the contexts surrounding projected censuses and the impact that shortcomings in previous censuses in both countries had had on relations between communities, countries and institutions set the parameters for the present initiative.

Printed Materials
Credit: Agon Islami



A screen capture from a video recorded for the campaign of Imam Vesim Avdiu, Imam of the Mosque in Veliki Trnovec, Bujanovac. Credit: Agon Islami

The improvement of procedures notwithstanding, significant concerns about the conduct of the census remained. In particular, activists from the Albanian community were concerned that a population that had previously allowed the census to bypass them may not be motivated to ensure that they were counted and, furthermore, that they were unaware of the impact that undercounting might have on their future welfare. It was feared that information concerning how to be sure to be counted might not reach certain people - especially in more isolated communities. In the event, a government information campaign concerning the census was not particularly far-reaching and left a gap that needed to be filled. Of particular concern was the reliance of the government campaign on radio, which underserves the Albanian-speaking community. There was also concern about the number of enumerators being deployed to the region and their competency in the Albanian language.

The campaign to fill the information gap was conducted by an alliance of civic organisations and individual activists from the Albanian community. A consortium convened by the Centre for Democracy and Education - Lugina (recipient of funding for the initiative) included the non-governmental organisations Beyond (Bujanovac), The Future (Bujanovac), and Budi Aktivan 16 (Preševo). The alliance engaged well-known civic activists such as Lirona Zuka and Agim Kadriu, as well as local media outlets RTV Presheva, TV Info Puls Vranje, Portal FOLonline, and Wikiliks. Furthermore, the initiative received high-profile support from the Albanian National Minority Council, as well as Albanian politicians, academics and other notable professionals in Serbia, many of whom were involved in the publicity material developed for the campaign and helped to promote it directly through their media and social media presence.

A diverse range of products, tools and activities were employed as part of the campaign:

- Three video clips, prepared for broadcast on local television
- An interactive online platform, which allowed communities to access information about the census and get answers to their questions
- A Viber group to act as a supplementary channel to respond to questions and distribute information about the census
- Billboards and printed materials to provide information about the census
- In-person visits to particularly isolated communities.

Crucially, the central management of the campaign also acted as an interlocutor between

the state Statistics Office and the general population. Early-stage interaction with the Pčinja District staff of the Statistics Office was established in order to collect accurate information that could be delivered to the population - and, later, this contact was further utilised in order to address queries that arose during the process (for example through the interactive communication channels of the web portal or the Viber group). Partnership with state services was an essential component of a credible information campaign, but also highlighted some of the limitations of the state agencies themselves. While officials were keen to help with information, they did not appear to be prepared to engage to a degree that would put them on the front line of queries from the public. Officials refused to allow the contact details of their services to be used in the information campaign.



Billboard in village Turija, Bujanovac, encouraging people to register together with their families.
Credit: Agon Islami

The online campaign overall registered 400,000 impressions. The online portal registered more than 40,000 visits. Some 200-300 queries were answered through the Viber group. Trips to isolated communities included 220 door-to-door visits.

“Registration is a process in which we have decided to participate. Not only economic and development policy will depend on registration, but also the level of rights we will have in the next ten years. In order to improve economic policy, improve our rights, you and your family should register.”



Shaip Kamberi
member of the Serbian National Assembly

“This is a historic moment to register every Albanian. In these improved conditions everyone has a responsibility regardless of social status, regardless of where they live and how they live, we have to register everyone to have an exact number on which representation depends, and the direction of institutions also depends. To strengthen the Albanians, to strengthen the institutions.”



Ragmi Mustafi
president of the Albanian National Council

“Despite various estimates, Albanians are still the majority and this necessarily requires our reconfirmation that we are in greater numbers. Then say yes to registration and prove that you are Albanian.”



Enver Ramadani
speaker of the Bujanoc/Bujanovac Municipal Assembly

Other technical problems could not be addressed. Progress had apparently been made in the provision of language support, but this was extremely limited. There is lingering discontent over the counting of persons in Medveđa, where it was felt that the state service was not responsive to the concerns that were raised by members of the initiative, and the lack of outreach to the Albanian community in Medveđa was evident to the campaign team, which reported:

“The only announcements in the Albanian language about the registration process were from the Luginalajm portal (posters, flyers), while Radio Medveđa, as the only media, did not offer a single minute of programming in the Albanian language and did not broadcast a single call for registration of the Albanians there.”



Post-hoc project report

Social impact of the census

The census counted some 61,000 ethnic Albanians in Serbia. A further 37,000 were counted as citizens of Serbia but resident abroad (and therefore would not feature as part of the calculation for the allocation of government resources). The campaign was judged by the implementing partnership as a success and there are signs of impact for the Albanian community. Apart from the difference the numbers will make to local budget allocations, two persons from the Albanian community have been assigned to committees in the Ministry of Education and it is understood that more Albanians will be employed in the state health service. A budget increase has also been allocated for the Albanian National Minority Council. There are signs, too, that the Coordination Body is working in a way that brings it closer to the Albanian communities, with the head of the office more visible in visits to the region. When aggression was directed against members of the Albanian community on 2 October, following a rise in tensions owing to events in Kosovo, the Coordination Body intervened on behalf of the community.

The counting exercise, however, did not defuse the political tensions surrounding relations between Albanians and the Serbian state, and while the information campaign demonstrated several aspects of a constructive partnership between civil society and state agencies, political tension often worked in the opposite direction. Rhetoric from Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić while the counting was still ongoing appeared already to undermine whatever results might come from counting in Albanian areas. He stated that even after the census the exact number of Albanians in Serbia would not be known, because “many Albanian families report family members who have moved away and no longer live there”.³ The statement received a response from Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti, highlighting the international dimension of the census exercise and



In-person visit to isolated community with civic activist Lirona Zuka, village Sjarina, Medveđa
Credit: Agon Islami

its close association with the protracted political conflict over Kosovo.

Grievances also arose over the way in which counting was conducted in the municipality of Medveđa, where activists reported that the Albanian population was significantly undercounted, with specific accountability placed on local officials. Particularly poor deployment of Albanian-speaking enumerators was observed here. The resulting count registered Albanians at 14.22% of the municipality’s population, which puts them below the 15% threshold required by the Republic of Serbia’s Law on Official Use of Language and Script to support bilingualism at the level of local self-government unit. Post-census, monitoring of the situation in southern Serbia still identifies the non-cooperative stance of the local authorities as a grievance of the Albanian community.⁴

These shortcomings notwithstanding, the coordinated and dedicated efforts by the Albanian community highlight a determination to claim their rights as citizens of Serbia and emphasise their commitment to integration over and above any separation from the state of Serbia.

³ [Bujanovacke website, 26 October 2023, “Vucic: Albanci na popisu prijavljuju ljude koji godinama ne zive u Srbiji”](#)

⁴ [Youth Initiative for Human Rights \(2023\), *Passivization of addresses of Albanians in the Preševo Valley as Discriminatory Practice*, p.17](#)



Screenshots of social media campaign

Lessons learned

The consortium produced a series of its own observations relevant to Serbian institutions, summarised as seven recommendations:

- 1. Do not politicise the registration process.**
The precise reason for the refusal to engage in a full count in Medveđa municipality is not clear, but can be interpreted as a political attempt to lower the official count of Albanians in the area.
- 2. Ensure that the digital application is well tested and fit for purpose.**
There were recorded cases of the application failing to function, as well as specific issues in registering family members.
- 3. Ensure a professional approach to deploying enumerators in the field.**
There were complaints of insufficient enumerators, poorly prepared enumerators, and a need for late replacements to make up numbers for staff who dropped out (apparently on account of low pay). The payment incentives for enumerators, based on a per-household calculation, were not appropriate for certain areas - and did not incentivise the census to reach remote areas.
- 4. Commit to an information campaign that includes local languages.**
The only informational support for Albanians in the target areas was a set of brochures from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia. This was a serious oversight, considering previous boycotts of the census by this part of the population.
- 5. Provide phone support for citizens.**
The lack of a phone service meant that citizens turned to municipal administrators for information about being counted, causing additional pressure on the administrations and consequent inefficiencies.
- 6. Set up international oversight for the process.**
The context of Albanian-Serbian relations impacts communities' trust in the process, which was further damaged by statements by political figures. Close international monitoring would have removed areas of doubt.
- 7. Allow family members to register the diaspora, as this strengthens trust.**
A process that allowed persons not presently resident to be counted built trust and did not place additional pressure to return specifically in order to be counted.

Conclusions for peacebuilding

The technicalities related to the conduct of censuses in politically sensitive contexts carry specific implications for policies, practices and behaviours that impact relationships among people, communities and institutions. The case of the census in south Serbia suggests:

- Shortcomings in the technical procedures of conducting a census, such as poor preparation of enumerators, technology failures, unclear guidelines, etc. are likely to be internalised as discrimination in the eyes of marginalised or minority communities, even when they are errors or standards that affect the whole of the population. The proactive allocation of additional resources to reaching marginalised groups can reduce the probability of lasting grievances.
- Where possible, the specific practical lessons gathered by people and organisations who have worked in a live census context should be studied in depth when planning other such exercises in post-conflict or sensitive settings. These lessons should be viewed as a public good that can be shared with peers or retained for future consultation.
- Political leadership was a crucial precondition to create the space in which to act. The precise role of international mediation is not known, but the visibility given to the OSCE was an enabling factor towards building trust in the census as a whole, and gave the political and civic leadership in the Albanian community the space to mobilise people to take part.
- Awareness among the population should not be taken for granted, not only with regard to the detailed practicalities of being enumerated, but even when it comes to the fact of a census taking place. This is especially the case among minorities who have been subject to some form of absenteeism in the past. Delivering relevant, accessible and timely information to these groups should be planned from the beginning.
- Civil society can play a significant role in both the planning and the delivering of information campaigns. Civic activists are generally well positioned to elicit an understanding of the barriers to participation or the availability of information. Civic organisations often contain appropriate skill sets to foster engagement and build trust.
- Constructive partnership with government agencies is important. Action taken by civil society should be enabling for government agencies to improve their work, rather than acting to replace them (though in some cases civic organisations may have to work on their behalf). In the interest of building trust, messaging from civic organisations should look to enhance the credibility of government agencies rather than highlighting their shortcomings.
- Central to the narratives being disseminated in minority or marginalised areas should be messages that convey a sense of why participation is important and of benefit to the community. In the case of south Serbia, participation had the aim of eliciting greater resources from the government which would positively impact the welfare of the community, but equally important might be messages that highlight the bolstering of local identity.
- Taking part in such exercises enhances the sense of civic engagement. Mass participation must be encouraged and celebrated as a demonstration of local belonging, despite countervailing narratives from political actors. Civil society from majority communities can contribute significantly to a minority's sense of integration by working with their willingness to engage, even when this is accompanied by active articulation of dissatisfaction.



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Amplifying local voices for equitable development (ALVED) is a 30-month project funded by the UK government's Conflict, Security and Stability Fund and implemented by a consortium of organisations comprising Peaceful Change initiative, People in Need, Gradjanske Inicijative (Serbia), Peer Educators Network and Aktiv (both Kosovo).

The project aims to promote, explore, develop and implement innovative practices that enable participative decision making that is successful in transcending barriers between different groups in Serbia and Kosovo, and to engage the project's stakeholders in analysing the context in which this work takes place, with a view to taking collaborative and strategic action in order to contribute to a more conducive environment for inclusive democracy to flourish and to have a positive impact on the lives of ordinary people.

The **Center for Democracy and Education - Lugina** is a voluntary, non-governmental, and non-profit organisation, established with the overarching mission of advancing objectives in the spheres of information dissemination, cultural and artistic expression, education, and environmental protection. Beyond its core objectives, the organisation actively engages in promoting gender equality, tolerance, human rights and the rights of national minorities. Since 2013, as part of the Center for Democracy and Education - Lugina, an informative portal in the Albanian language 'Lugina Lajm' has been established. Over the last decade, the 'Lugina Lajm' portal has implemented numerous projects, establishing strong contacts and collaboration with local and national institutions, as well as international organisations.



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Peaceful Change initiative is a peacebuilding organisation striving for a world free from violent conflict. To achieve this, we work with communities and their leaders to confront the drivers of violent conflict. Together, we build the conditions that make sustainable peace possible.

We establish deep knowledge and strong partnerships where we work. This allows us both to do the long-term work of building sustainable peace and to respond rapidly and effectively to crises.

We work only where we know we can make a real difference to people's lives. Many communities we work with have successfully managed high-risk conflicts and avoided violence, even when formal peace processes have failed.