Mapping Ethnic Identities in East-Central Europe: The Results of the Census 2011

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Introduction

Any form of minority research is based on the empirical basis of censuses. These were carried out in Central and Eastern Europe in the years 1990/91 and 2001/02 and were used for a new orientation towards shaping policies on minorities. However, the results only partially reflected the actual demographic situation. Although criteria such as nationality, language or cultural identity were applied, many people did not use these options in the survey. Therefore, the estimated numbers of minorities provided by NGOs were much larger than the official data collected. The EU-wide census of 2011 seems to underline this trend.

The paper deals with censuses in East-Central Europe in a comparative perspective. It examines the question of how nationality is conceptualized and categorized. Likewise, the practice in the different countries is compared: What kind of questions regarding ethnicity are in the questionnaires? How are national and ethnic groups interviewed? What about the obligation and willingness to provide information to issues involving nationality and mother tongue?

The final results of the 2011 census were concluded in spring 2013. These new data sets provide a long-term view of the demographic trends in the post-socialist area. The paper gives special attention to two minority groups: the Hungarian minorities in the Carpathian basin and the Roma. Especially the first case is based on considerable political dispute, as the relations between Hungarians and the majority population in Slovakia and Romania in the past two decades have been the subject of bilateral issues. The figures of the census will affect both the internal policies on minorities and the external national politics (nemzetpolitika) of Hungary. Since the early 1990s, the number of Hungarians in Slovakia and Romania is gradually decreasing. Hungary, for its part, sometimes resorts to unilateral action to promote its own minorities abroad, such as the “Status Law” of 2001.

The results of the EU-wide census 2011 are interpreted in light of the research perspective of the “triadic nexus” (Rogers Brubaker). In the sense of this approach, the three elements of Brubaker’s triadic nexus (national minorities, nationalizing states, external national “homelands”) are not to be regarded as finished entities but as dynamic, interconnected concepts. These three forms of nationalism intertwine and interact. In addition there is a fourth dimension, which can be described as Europeanization or EU-ization. The influence of the European Union on the minority policies in the Central and Eastern European countries can be seen as an indicator of a “quadratic nexus” which emphasizes the role of international organizations.
Censuses in the European Union

The EU Regulation 763/2008 of 9 July 2008 obliged Member States of the European Union to collect data according to a fixed catalogue of features for the 2011 census. The goal of the project was that the results should be comparable across the EU. It was up to the Member States on how the data should be collected. For definitions of the administrative units, the systems *Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics* (NUTS) and *Local Administrative Unit* (LAU) were used. Moreover, there was a distinction between derived and non-derived topics in the list of topics at the population and dwelling section. At NUTS 3 and LAU 2 personal data such as location, gender, age, marital status and nationality were collected, from which knowledge about the whole population, households and nuclear families was derived. At the national level and at the NUTS 1 and NUTS 2 levels, information on education and employment was added (but not ethnicity or religion).

In the states of East Central Europe, ethnicity is traditionally requested in the census forms. However, the design of the questionnaires is very different. With reference to Koller’s methodology,¹ the census forms of the case studies in Hungary, Slovakia and Romania were examined for the following features:

1. Importance of ethnicity by the placement of the subject;
2. Relations of ethnicity to other topics;
3. Number of issues related to ethnicity;
4. Mandatory information on confession and ethnicity;
5. Terminology in the questionnaires regarding ethnic origin;

In 2011, the European Commission published methodically detailed explanations for censuses with the aim to reach a larger value of the results. Steps to improve comparability of data sets have been made previously (1980, 1990 and 2001). Recent developments on the EU side (enlargement, Treaty of Lisbon) gave impetus to raise more detailed and comparable data at European level.

Interestingly, there was very few and mostly indirect information on the subject of ethnicity. The position of the European Union is characterized by the policy of non-discrimination in questions of ethnicity. This attitude is shown by two principles in the Explanatory Notes: Firstly, the EU follows the principle of no transmission of confidential information due to data protection. Second, the EU Regulation on censuses (Regulation No 519/2010) allows Member States, in some cases, to make decisions about the specifications of the topics or specific sub-categories (European Commission, 2011).

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**Hungary**

Table 1: Demographic Situation in Hungary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1990(^2)</th>
<th>2001(^3)</th>
<th>2011(^4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total population</td>
<td>10,374,823</td>
<td>10,198,315</td>
<td>9,937,628</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nationality</strong></td>
<td><strong>Mother tongue</strong></td>
<td><strong>Nationality</strong></td>
<td><strong>Mother tongue</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungarians</td>
<td>10,142,072 (97.8%)</td>
<td>10,222,529 (98.5%)</td>
<td>9,546,374 (93.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roma</td>
<td>142,683 (1.4%)</td>
<td>48,072 (0.46%)</td>
<td>48,685 (0.48%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germans</td>
<td>30,824 (0.3%)</td>
<td>37,511 (0.36%)</td>
<td>33,792 (0.33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovaks</td>
<td>10,459 (0.1%)</td>
<td>12,745 (0.1%)</td>
<td>17,693 (0.17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croats</td>
<td>13,570 (0.1%)</td>
<td>17,577 (0.17%)</td>
<td>15,620 (0.15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romanians</td>
<td>10,740 (0.1%)</td>
<td>8,730</td>
<td>7,995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukrainians</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>5,070</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serbs</td>
<td>2,905</td>
<td>2,953</td>
<td>3,816</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenes</td>
<td>1,930</td>
<td>2,627</td>
<td>3,040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poles</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>3,788</td>
<td>2,962</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greeks</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1,640</td>
<td>2,509</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgarians</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1,370</td>
<td>1,358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruthenians</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>674</td>
<td>1,098</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armenians</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>620</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The demographic situation in Hungary reflects some tendencies, which have been ongoing since the political changes in 1989: While the total population is only slightly shrinking (from 10,374,823 in 1990 to 9,937,628 in 2011), the number of people who declare themselves ethnic Hungarians decreased significantly. This is also due to the fact that many respondents would not tick the box “nationality” in the latest census in 2011.\(^5\) The Roma population increased from 142,683 in 1990 to 308,957 in 2011. This number is still way under the estimates of international organizations and NGOs (see table 4). Nevertheless there seems to be a new readiness from Roma minority members to identify themselves with their ethnic group. This could also be concluded for the Germans, whose number raised from 30,824 in 1990 to 131,951 in 2011. Likewise, the Slovaks, Croats and Romanians increasingly tend to declare their nationality in the population census.

In the census questionnaires, the subject of ethnicity came up in in the second part, but never at the end. This means ethnicity is not the most important issue but also not marginal. The Hungarian

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\(^2\) Hungary 1\(^{st}\) Report, 1999:10. At the censuses criteria like nationality, mother tongue and cultural identity were applied. However, a lot of persons belonging to minorities did not make use of this option. In the year 1990 the number of Roma was estimated between 400,000- 600,000, the Germans between 200,000- 220,000, Slovaks between 100,000- 110,000, Croats between 80,000- 90,000 and Romanians on 25,000; cp. Hungary 1\(^{st}\) Report, 1999:11.

\(^3\) Hungary 3\(^{rd}\) Report, 2009:5.


\(^5\) The strong deviation of the results in this category compared to 2001 reflects the fact that in 2011 altogether 1,455,883 respondents did not (wish to) answer, compared to 570,537 in 2001. This is also to be observed – to a lesser extent - for the category “mother tongue”, see Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 2013:67.
questionnaire presented the topic of citizenship in the first part and the issue of ethnicity much later in the second part. Nevertheless, the subject is placed in a separate block, introduced by the note: “Answering the following questions is not compulsory!”, pointing to the voluntary nature of giving information on ethnicity and religion.

Regarding censuses in the 20th Century, many demographers came to the conclusion that the census results based on self-identification differ very widely from the actual situation, as the subjective feeling of belonging correlates to a particular ethnic group and their explanation or assumption is not always in line. This was rarely a consequence of errors in statistical data collection, but rather a result of external, social and political causes. By territorial and political changes after the end of the First World War, a significant part of the population believed that the declaration of ethnicity does not fall into the same category as the obligation to provide information about other personal data - such as age or family status – and that the statements of this kind often can have negative consequences, like deportation or population exchange. This led to a dilemma that the members of an ethnic group often were not ready to declare their ethnic origin. The direct result was that certain ethnic groups were under-represented when the census data was published. The statistics ethnic groups are therefore often considered to be inaccurate, because census data of ethnic and national minorities in general is lower than the expected numbers – and often only a fraction of the actual number (Hoóz, 2000).

In all Hungarian census forms, questions on ethnicity are followed by questions on the religion. This indicates a very close relationship between ethnicity and religion, as both characterize community cohesion of a nation, a national or ethnic group or a (religious) minority. Past censuses support the strong correlation of ethnic, linguistic and religious characteristics.

Taking into account the analysed questionnaires, there are mainly three types of questions:

A. Direct questions about the ethnicity of the respondent, commitment to membership of a particular ethnic group;
B. Direct questions on mother tongue;
C. Specific questions on ethnicity.

Direct questions seem to be clear at first glance. But to respond to a direct question on ethnicity in Central and Eastern Europe is not always an easy task. Responses reflect subjective feelings, hopes and fears, which may be independent of country and native language of the respondent.

In contrast, responses to the mother tongue (transferred from the parent language) can be considered as a relatively objective criterion. This is an indirect method of definition of ethnicity as it is about the origin and the context in which that language is learned – at least in the case of a predominant language in the population. But if bi- or multilingualism in society are more common, the importance of the mother tongue in the determination of ethnicity decreases. For example, the specification of the language is not an immutable determinant in a bilingual population. Many minority rights are associated with the use of the mother tongue. The right to mother-tongue education, the right to use the minority language in newspapers, television, etc. only applies to those who consider a particular language as their mother tongue. It is possible to define mother tongue
based on objective criteria: it is not a matter of choice for the individual, since it is transmitted from parents and learned as a child.

Native language is often not the only language that is used by a respondent from an ethnic minority, as they are usually bilingual. This is why questionnaires include other languages to get a better understanding of the situation of the ethnic group in a country. Thus, the Hungarian questionnaire contains some more specific questions about ethnicity. In the text it says in question 36: “What is your mother tongue?” (A maximum of two answers to be ticked). Question 37 then asks: “Which language do you usually speak with the family members or friends?” (A maximum of two answers to be ticked). In addition to the languages of recognized minorities such as Bulgarian, Gypsy (Roma), Greek, Croatian, Polish, German, Armenian, Romanian, Ruthenian, Serbian, Slovak, Slovenian and Ukrainian. Further languages are added to the list including, Arabic, Chinese, Russian and Vietnamese, i.e. languages spoken by the largest migrant groups in Hungary.

The notion of ethnicity in the questionnaire is based on the official use of language, not the term “minority”, but literally “nationality” (nemzetiség). At the 2001 census, the question was: “Which of these nationalities do you feel you belong to?” (Here were a maximum of 3 to tick or to fill in a text box). At the 2011 census, however, it was asked: “What nationality do you feel you belong to?” (Question 34) and “Do you think you belong to any other nationality in addition to what you marked above?” (Question 35). As selection options, Hungarian as well as all recognized ethnic minorities are listed, but also Arabic, Chinese, Russian and Vietnamese. This means for the Hungarian citizens that they should commit to a major ethnic identity. The data obtained here are to be the basis for the recalculation of state affirmative action. The question is how this information is interpreted or what specific measures are derived from it: Will the state’s promotion of minorities in the future be calculated based on question 34 or 35? Is somebody who has ticked Question 34 “Hungarian” and 35 “Roma” (or any other way), in the future be entitled to choose his minority self-government?

Finally, there remains one last criterion: the language of the questionnaire. Providing the census forms in many languages can encourage people belonging to minorities to fill in the questionnaire. First, directly by linguistic clarity. Second, indirectly through a concession of the state towards its minorities. In Hungary, questionnaires were provided in all state-recognized minority languages.
The demographic situation in Slovakia shows major differences to Hungary: While the total population is relatively stable in numbers, there is a significant decrease of minority populations such as Hungarians (567,296 in 1991, 458,467 in 2011), Bohemians and Germans. On the other hand, there is slight increase of the Roma population from 75,802 in 1991 to 105,738 in 2011 – which does not reflect the real numbers, however.

The Slovakian questionnaire asks for information on nationality (národnosť) and mother tongue (materinský jazyk). In the 2001 census, only 6 options were available for either question.

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6 At the 1991 census “Roma” was an ethnic option for the first time in Slovakia. However, apparently only reluctant use of this option was made – just the same at the 2001 census. The actual number of Roma is probably many times higher and is estimated by the Slovak government in 2001 to 380,000; cf. Slovakia 2nd Report, 2005:60.

7 The Russian minority was officially recognized in 2003.

8 The Slovak Constitution distinguishes between national minorities and ethnic groups. A commentary on the 1997 Constitution states that the legal system of the Slovak Republic makes no definition of those terms. The application of two terms contains neither a rating nor does it imply future legislative solutions or different rights for each minority.
Furthermore, there was a place to fill in, if the nationality or mother tongue was not Slovakian, Hungarian, Czech, Roma, Russian or Ukrainian. In the 2011 form, other options were available, such as German, Polish, Croat or Bulgarian. In contrast to the Hungarian version of 2011, respondents are supposed to tick only one option. Another difference to the 2001 form, the 2011 questionnaire asks for most frequently used language in public and at home.

Romania

Table 3: Demographic Situation in Romania

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1992</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total population</td>
<td>22.810.035</td>
<td>21.680.974</td>
<td>20.121.641</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romanians</td>
<td>20.408.542 (89.5 %)</td>
<td>19.409.400 (89.5 %)</td>
<td>16.792.868 (83.5 %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungarians</td>
<td>1.624.959 (7.1 %)</td>
<td>1.434.377 (6.60 %)</td>
<td>1.227.623 (6.50 %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roma</td>
<td>401.087 (1.75 %)</td>
<td>535.250 (2.46 %)</td>
<td>621.573 (3.29 %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukrainians</td>
<td>65.472 (0.28 %)</td>
<td>61.091 (0.28 %)</td>
<td>50.920 (0.27 %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germans</td>
<td>119.462 (0.52 %)</td>
<td>60.088 (0.28 %)</td>
<td>36.042 (0.19 %)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Romania, the demographic development since the early 1990s is quite dramatic: The total population decreased from 22.810.035 in 1992 to 20.121.641 in 2011. The collected number of ethnic Romanians shrank to only 16.792.868 in 2011. At the same time, the number of persons belonging to the Hungarian minority dropped from 1.624.959 in 1992 to 1.227.623 in 2011. Likewise, the Germans in 2011 were only on third of their population in 1992 (119.462), due to a massive emigration to Germany after the fall of the Iron Curtain. The number of Roma increased steadily to 621.573 in 2011.

In Romania, forms used to be provided only in Romanian language and regarding the question of nationality, only Romanian was defined as a response option, all other ethnicities had to be filled in separately. The same applied to the question of the mother tongue. In 2011, the possible answers were then fully open. The form of 2011 asks in question 23: “What ethnic group does the person consider he/she belongs to?” Question 24 then asks: “What is the person’s mother tongue?” In comparison to the Hungarian and Slovak questionnaires, one has to fill in a box with an abbreviation of the ethnicity or language, which has to be looked up in an appendix. Also, it is only possible to fill in one answer, multiple answers about ethnic identity or native language are not allowed.

In Romania, unlike the 1992 census, the data collection was not carried out by a central office but by the local authorities and the data was available for demographic inquiries. The recent census also introduced an innovation that the questionnaires were distributed not only in Romanian but also in the Hungarian language.

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Roma

An estimated population of 9-12 million Roma live in Europe, with over half a million in at least five EU countries respectively (Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia and Spain). With the accession of 10 CEECs in 2004 and 2007, the Roma became the largest ethnic minority in the EU. The absence of a kin state and the socio-economic discrimination in many countries makes them one of the most vulnerable ethnic minority groups in Europe. It is disputed, however, if the Roma share a collective identity. While some scholars argue that Roma have never been a cohesive transnational minority, others put forward that interests of Roma are determined by their common identity as an oppressed, persecuted and marginalized group (McGarry, 2010: 158). The ‘construction’ of an ethnic group identity among Roma in Europe is complicated as they are widely dispersed without any universally accepted organization or leaders representing their interests.

The example of the Roma shows that they tend to conform in other nationalities despite their origin from the Roma minority, as the following table shows on the examples for Romania, Hungary and Slovakia. The reasons for this are manifold: On the one hand Roma deny the commitment to their ethnic origin often because of fear of discrimination and marginalization by the majority society. That’s why they refrain to subordinate under a Roma category – which often correlated with a social stigma.\(^{10}\) In addition, attention should be pointed to the fact that Roma often have no identity papers and therefore are not registered by the statistical authority. These “stateless” Roma in a sense then also do not appear in the census data.

Table 4: Roma in Europe

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total country population</th>
<th>Official number</th>
<th>Minimum estimate</th>
<th>Maximum estimate</th>
<th>Average estimate</th>
<th>% of total population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>European countries</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>20.121.641 (last census)</td>
<td>621.573 (last census)</td>
<td>1.200.000</td>
<td>2.500.000</td>
<td>1.850.000</td>
<td>9,19 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>9.937.628</td>
<td>308.957</td>
<td>400.000</td>
<td>1.000.000</td>
<td>700.000</td>
<td>7,04 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovak Republic</td>
<td>5.397.036</td>
<td>105.738</td>
<td>400.000</td>
<td>600.000</td>
<td>500.000</td>
<td>9,26 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total in Europe</strong></td>
<td>824.827.713 (2009)</td>
<td></td>
<td>6.395.100</td>
<td>16.118.700</td>
<td>11.256.900</td>
<td>1,36 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>European Union area</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Council of Europe area</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


\(^{10}\) Roma are not politically or socially united due to their linguistic and communal diversity: there are countless Roma subgroups like the Boyash, Lovari or Sinti.
Brubaker revisited

Brubaker developed his theory of triadic nexus since 1993 in a series of essays, combines them and presented his research approach in his work from 1996, “Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the national question in the New Europe”. The starting point is the examination of the opinion in Europe would start after the Cold War, a “post-nationalist era”. Brubaker on the other hand, sees more of a resurgence of the nation state and the national idea in the first half of the 1990s. For Bubaker the year 1992 is symbolic of the expected overcome (transcendence) of the nation-state. However, the institutionalized supranationalisation in Western Europe was overcome by the realities, e.g. the outbreak of the war in the former Yugoslavia. The national question in the new states of Central and Eastern Europe have not been solved, but appear similar as in the early 20th Century (reframing of nationalism).

Brubaker identifies the three interacting elements of the triadic nexus as follows: The “nationalizing” state claims the role of a core or titular nation, defined by ethnic and cultural characteristics of the majority population, which sees itself as the legitimate “owner of the state”. The second element of the triadic nexus are national minorities. A national minority is not simply a group which is determined by ethnic criteria, but a dynamic political entity that is characterized by a number of features: (1) the public claim to membership of another nation as the state of residence, (2) the demand for state recognition of ethnic otherness, (3) the assertion of certain collective rights in regard to their own political and cultural nationality. The third element is the “external national homeland”, which is engaged in the rule for “their” ethnic minorities and support the demand for collective rights.

In Brubaker conception, the three elements of triadic nexus should not be regarded as complete entities, but as a dynamic, interconnected concepts, these three forms of nationalism intertwine and interact. In his opening chapter ‘Rethinking nationhood’, Brubaker challenges the long-standing view of nations as real entities, as substantial, enduring collectivities. The problem with this “substantialist treatment of nations”, he argues, is that it adopts categories of practice as categories of analysis. The reality of the group, he notes has been called into question by a number of developments in social theory: the flourishing of network theor and of theories of rational action with their relentless methodological individualism; the shift away from structuralism towards a variety of more “constructivist” theoretical stances; and “an emergent postmodernist theoretical sensibility which emphasises the fragmentary, the ephemeral and the erosion of fixed forms and clear boundaries” (Brubaker, 1997: 13).

Brubaker’s own analysis treats nation “not as substance but as institutionalised form; not as collectivity but as practical category; not as entity but as contingent event” (Brubaker, 1997: 16). Thus, “nationhood is pervasively institutionalised in the practice of states and the state system. It is a world in which nation is widely, if unevenly available and resonant as a category of social vision and division. It is a world in which nationness may suddenly, and powerfully ‘happen’. But none of this implies a world of nations – of substantial, enduring collectivities” (Brubaker, 1997: 21). Rather than asking the question “what is a nation?”, we should instead ask “how is nationhood as a political and cultural form institutionalised within and among states? How does nation work as practical category, as classificatory scheme, as cognitive frame? What makes the nation-evoking, nation-invoking efforts of political entrepreneurs more or less likely to succeed?” (Brubaker, 1997: 16).
This approach is very useful when looking at the census results of 2011. The data shows how volatile the concept of nations and national minorities has become, they are indeed subject to change over time. The most striking case is Hungary. While the current FIDESZ-government is drawing from identity politics inside and outside Hungary’s borders, there is an increasing number of Hungarians unwilling to give information on their nationality which is reflected in the census results. Another significant case are the Roma: While certainly attributes are attached to them from mainstream society, the identification among themselves remains embryonic. According to estimates, only roughly one in four Roma is willing to associate with a Roma ethnicity in the census questionnaires.

The census results can be taken as an indicator for demographic developments. However, one has to handle the data cautiously. The sheer numbers have limited explanatory power. Rather, one has to take into consideration the whole processing of census data according to certain criteria. Our analysis of the importance of ethnicity by the placement of the subject, the style and the terminology in the questionnaires regarding ethnic origin has shed some light on discrepancies in the social construction of ethnic attributions and self-attributions in East Central Europe.

**Literature**


Online resources:


