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2021

# FIRST PERIODICAL REPORT

**MEDIA MONITORING  
POPULATION CENSUS 2021**



**НВО ИИФОЦЕНТАР**

## **CONTENT**

1. SUMMARY	1
2. INTRODUCTION	2
3. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY OF THE MONITORING	3
4. KEY FINDINGS OF THE MONITORING	4
4.1. Volume of Coverage	5
4.2. Thematic Distribution of Articles	6
4.3 Sources of Information	8
4.4. Key Narratives in the Coverage	9
ABBREVIATIONS	12

## 1. SUMMARY

The Population Census, which should have been conducted in the period April 1 - 21, 2021, was postponed to September 2021. On April 2, the Parliament adopted the changes to the relevant legislation that allowed for the postponement of the Census, changes that resulted from the political agreement of the leaders of the two biggest political parties – SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE. According to representatives of political parties, the main reason for the postponement of the Census was the deteriorating health crisis caused by the Covid19 pandemic and the need to secure sufficient time for vaccines rollout and immunisation of the population. The growing incidence of positive Covid19 cases in the country, in the period of preparatory activities for the Census, brought to the fore the key question - will the actual census-taking, and to what extent, be safe from point of view of public health, that is the health of the citizens and the census-takers.

It was evident during the preparatory activities for the Census 2021 that the whole process will be significantly politicized, with added strong influence of the ethnic aspects on the Census. One of the key points of politicization and ethnicization of the Census was the enumeration of the diaspora. The census of the citizens that live abroad started on March 1, and as it proceeded, it was gradually given ever stronger ethnic overtones in the public discourse and in the media coverage. The ethnicization was manifested both in the reactions of different political entities and in the media coverage of the process.

In the reporting period, citizens were able to receive all the relevant information on the Census. The information, however, was frequently buried under multiple layers of political reactions and interpretations. The media coverage was dominated by political and partisan messages and opinions, with information on the preparatory activities and the actual census-taking were pushed to the background. The biased and partisan stance of some media was manifested in the constant growth of the volume of political and partisan reactions and opinions on the Census, which served as confirmation of suspicions that their motivation was to influence the citizens in favour of the interests of one or the other side of the political (party) divide. The political messages were commonly presented with minimal or no journalistic treatment or critical approach.

The information and the positions presented by the State Statistical Office (SSO), as the lead institution in the implementation of the Census, accounted for less than a quarter of the total number of articles dedicated to the Census in the media covered by this analysis. Some of the media, especially those that served as carriers and amplifiers of the opposition's messages that the Census should be postponed, ignored or marginalized the information released by the SSO, while the media that regularly presented the information and expert opinions provided by the SSO often did it because they support or are inclined towards the Government. The public broadcasting service put greater emphasis of the coverage on its

flagship channel MRT1 on the political reactions and events than on the reporting of preparations of the Census and other related activities.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

This monitoring programme, implemented by the NGO Infocentre, is focused on the coverage of the 2021 Census – which should have been completed in the period from April 5 to April 21, 2021, with actual enumeration starting on March 1, with the self-enumeration of incarcerated persons and the diaspora – by the broadcast and online news media in the Republic of North Macedonia. The leaders of the two biggest political parties in the Parliament, SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE, reached an agreement on March 29, 2021, and announced, just three days before the scheduled official start of the Census, that it will be postponed for September 2021. After a two-day debate, the Parliament adopted the changes and amendments to the Law on the Census on April 2, with 95 votes "for" and 12 votes "against". The changes to the Law stipulate that the Census shall start on September 5 and will be concluded on September 30, 2021.

The politicisation of the Census was evident in the early stages, when the parties represented in the Parliament failed to reach a consensus to conduct the statistical operation, with the Parliament adopting the Law on the Census on January 21, 2021, with 62 votes of the majority and without support of the opposition. In February and March of this year, the opposition party VMRO-DPMNE organized a petition-signing action to gather support to annul the Law. The political party "The Left" (Levica) and the national bloc "I won't open the door", led by Janko Bacev, also opposed the Law and announced an initiative to boycott the Census. The key objections against the Census focused on the alleged preparations to commit census fraud, the health risks brought about a census during a pandemic and the manner of enumeration of citizens that live abroad.

The Census of Population, Households and Dwellings is defined as a "statistical operation which at regular intervals officially counts the population of the country, along with the defined demographic, social and economic characteristics of the total population<sup>1</sup>". The Census as a statistical process is the most important source of data on the population, households and dwelling on the whole territory of the country and is necessary for planning of country's development decision-making and management at all levels of the society.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/>

### **3. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY OF THE MONITORING**

The main objective of the monitoring is to observe the manner in which the media report on the Census and the influence of their reporting on the levels of information available to the citizens and their participation in the process. Through a regular monitoring of the media coverage, the programme aims to determine if the citizens have access to quality and comprehensive information on the Census and the influence that institutions and political entities in the country have on the Census.

The secondary objectives of the monitoring are: to determine if the media provide professional and impartial coverage of the Census; if they publish and disseminate misinformation and manipulative contents; also, whether the complementary coverage – columns, commentary, analysis and other similar types of content – have influence on the Census and the tone of the media coverage of the statistical operation.

The media selected to be covered by the monitoring cover a wide spectrum of editorial policies and approaches, i.e. there are outlets with pro-government, pro-opposition and critical and neutral-balanced editorial policies that reach the audiences through the two biggest information platforms - television and online media. The monitoring covered the articles and news stories on the Census published and aired over the week-days (Monday to Friday), the days in which the frequency of publication of news and information is the greatest. In extraordinary cases and events of special importance, the monitoring also includes contents published over the weekends.

The monitoring covers the nine following media outlets:

Broadcast media: The main evening newscasts of the public broadcasting service MRT1 and the commercial national terrestrial broadcasters Sitel TV, Telma TV, Alfa TV and Alsat-M TV (its main newscast in Macedonian).

b) Online news media: Kurir.mk, Frontline.mk, Plusinfo.mk and 360stepeni.mk.

The monitoring, in addition to the quantitative and qualitative analyses, relied on the method of content analysis that provided us with additional quantitative and qualitative indicators on the Census coverage by the selected media outlets. The analysis also included statistical analysis of the selected material with the aim to secure cross-referenced data and to confirm or amend the findings of the monitoring.

#### **4. KEY FINDINGS OF THE MONITORING**

In the week days of the first monitoring period, March 15 – April 2, the monitored media published a total of 451 articles on the Census.

The news websites, as expected, dedicated a much higher volume of coverage compared to the main newscasts of the public service broadcaster and the national commercial TV broadcasters, with 75.4% and 24.6%, respectively.

Among the broadcasters, the largest number of news stories was aired by Alfa TV (6.9% of the total number of analysed articles), followed by Sitel TV (5.8%), MRT1 (4.6%), AlsatM TV (4.2%) and Telma TV (3.1%).

As far as the online media are concerned, it was Frontline.mk that led the way (23.3% of the total number of analysed articles), followed by Kurir.mk (21.5%) and Plusinfo.mk (21.3%), while 360stepeni.mk participated with only 9.3% of the total coverage.

The coverage of the Census was dominated by reactions of political parties and their representatives which accounted for a high share of 60.5% of the total number of articles, while articles dedicated to actual census activities accounted for just 22.2% of the total coverage.

In terms of representation of political parties' reactions in the broadcast news, the highest percentage of the total coverage was registered in the main newscast of the public broadcasting service MRT1 - 85.7% and Sitel TV - 84.6%, while Alfa TV also placed significant emphasis and focus on reactions by political parties and their representatives which amounted to 58.1% of its coverage.

Among the online media, the highest percentage of political and party reactions in the coverage was registered with Plusinfo.mk and Kurir.mk, with 68.7 and 67 percent, respectively. Frontline.mk was the only news-site in which the coverage of census activities (40.1%) exceeded the number of articles presenting reactions by political parties and their representatives (32.4%).

The State Statistical Office (SSO), the institution legally charged with the task to prepare and conduct the Census, was present as a principal source of information in just 22% of the total number of analysed content items.

The low rate of use of SSO as source of information is a clear indicator of an editorial approach that, on one hand, marginalizes the official information on the Census and, on the other, places greater emphasis on the political and party influence and implications on the enumeration process.

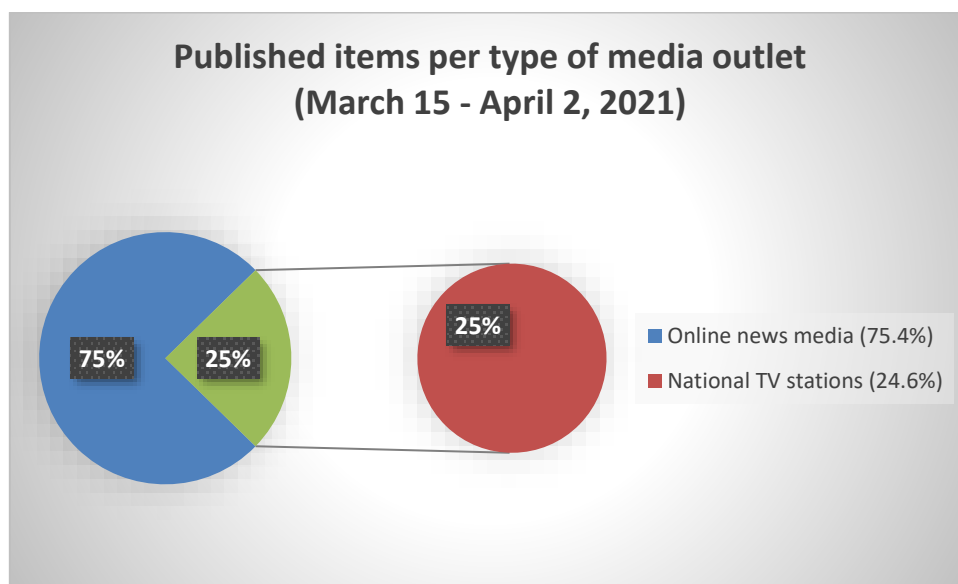
Frontline.mk among the news-sites and Telma among TV broadcasters were the media that most frequently used SSO as a source of information in their coverage.

Gradually, two key contradictory narratives developed: The Census is safe for the census-takers and the citizens, position held by the government and the institutions directly involved in the Census, and (b) the Census presents a serious healthcare risk, position held by the opposition and a number of civic initiatives to boycott the Census.

Some of the pro-opposition media covered by this monitoring developed the narrative that “Albanian politicians were much more actively motivating the ethnic Albanians in the diaspora to join the online self-enumeration, compared to the ethnic Macedonians in the Government”.

#### 4.1. Volume of Coverage

In the week-days of the first monitoring period, March 15 – April 2, 2021, a total of 451 content units were aired and published (30.1 per day, on average), i.e. 111 TV news stories (7.4 per day) and 340 online articles (22.5 per day).

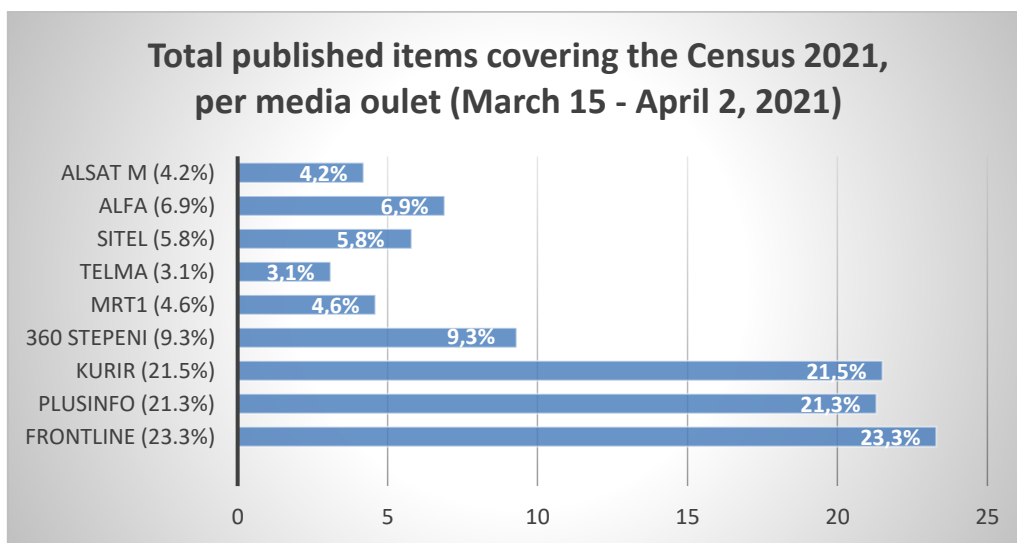


Graph 1

Due to the specific way online platforms function, it was expected that the news sites would publish much greater numbers of articles compared to the main newscasts of TV broadcasters. The actual ratio was 3 to 1 in favour of news-sites, with 75.4% of the analysed articles published by the online media, and the remaining 24.6% of the articles were aired in the main newscasts of the national commercial TV networks and the public broadcasting service. In general, the journalistic treatment of information is much more prominent with television broadcasters, while the format of the online coverage is often reduced to brief telegraphic articles. Quite often, the online media rely on publishing several similar or even

identical articles (usually with only minor updates) on a given topic or event with the main goal to attract as many visitors to their respective web-sites as possible.

Among the broadcasters, the largest number of news stories was broadcast by Alfa TV (6.9% of the total number of analysed articles), followed by Sitel TV (5.8%), MRT1 (4.6%), AlsatM TV (4.2%) and Telma TV (3.1%). As far as online media are concerned, it was Frontline.mk that led the way (23.3% of the total number of analysed articles), followed by Kurir.mk (21.5%) and Plusinfo.mk (21.3%), while 360stepeni.mk participated with only 9.3% of the total coverage.



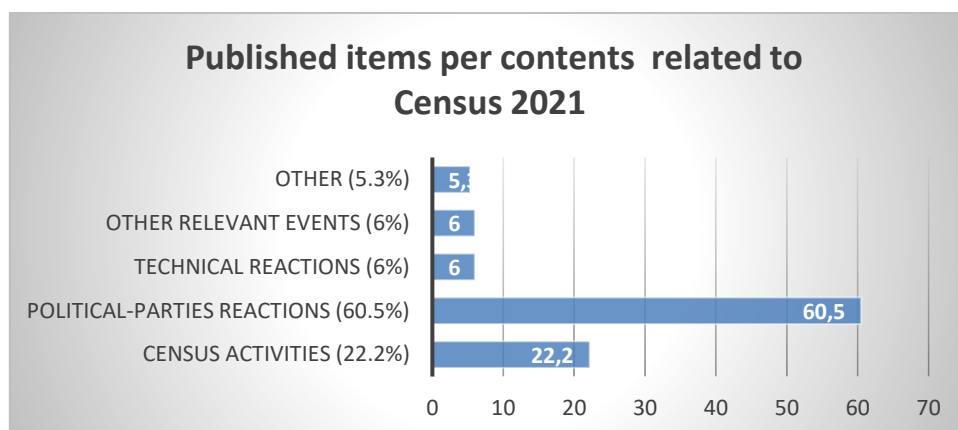
Graph 2

A correlation of the number of articles and their contents leads to the conclusion that the high number of articles published by the given media outlet is motivated by its respective editorial approach and the aim to exert strong influence on the citizens and the public. Frontline.mk news-site, for instance, aimed to provide unreserved support to the campaigns that called for greater participation of citizens in the Census, as well as the institutions charged with its implementation, while Kurir.mk and Plusinfo.mk demonstrated strong inclination to support the views and efforts of the opposition to stop or postponed the Census.

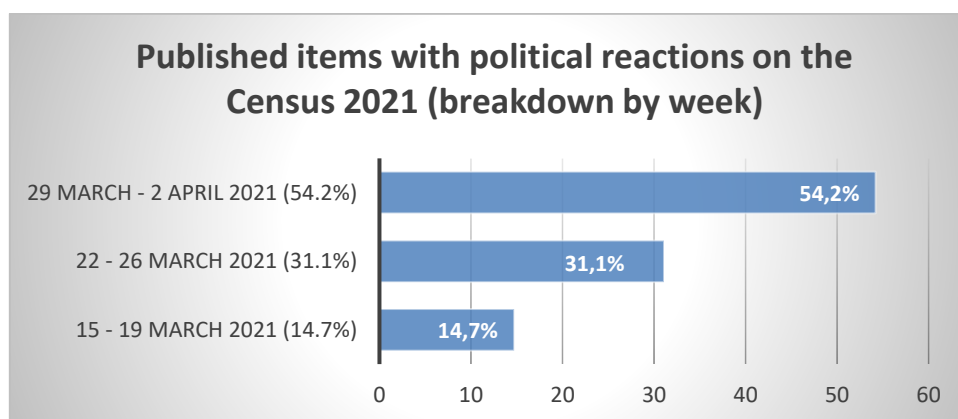
#### 4.2. Thematic Distribution of Articles

The coverage of the Census was dominated by reactions of political parties and their representatives which accounted for high 60.5% of the total number of articles, while articles dedicated to actual census activities accounted for just 22.2% of the total coverage (see Graph 3). The figures listed above confirm the explicit politicisation of the Census in the media which progressed with every passing week, only to culminate in the days after the leaders' meeting

(March 29 – April 2), when the Parliament was expected to vote in the changes to the Law and postpone the Census for September 2021 (see Graph 4).



Graph 3



Graph 4

In terms of representation of political parties' reactions in broadcasters' reporting on the Census, the highest percentage of the total coverage was registered in the main newscast of the public broadcasting service MRT1 - 85.7% and Sitel TV - 84.6%, with Alfa TV also placing significant emphasis and focus on reactions by political parties and their representatives which amounted to 58.1% of its coverage.

Regarding the coverage provided by the public broadcasting service, it should be noted that census activities were subject of 38% of the coverage in the main newscasts of MRT1, while the practical and technical aspects of the Census were subject of just 4.6% of the total number of aired stories. The State Statistical Office (SSO) was listed as source of information in just 19% of the articles, and not a single article listed the author of the report.

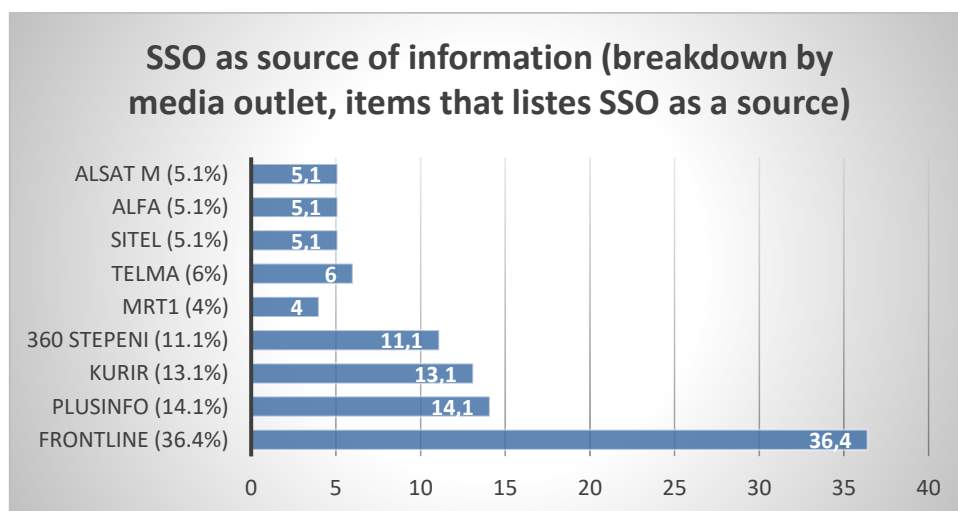
Alfa TV, on the other hand, was the only media outlet in which we registered no articles covering census activities during the monitoring period, its coverage being restricted to political and party reactions, accompanied by commentaries and editorials.

Among the online media, the highest percentage of political and party reactions in the coverage was registered with Plusinfo.mk and Kurir.mk, with 68.7 and 67 percent, respectively. Frontline.mk was the only news-site in which the coverage of census activities (40.1%) exceeded the number of articles presenting reactions by political parties and their representatives (32.4%). The categories "other relevant events" (6%) and "other" (5%) were dominated by information on the pandemic and the debate in the Parliament that discussed whether the Census will indeed be conducted or not. As far as other types of content are concerned, analyses and opinion pieces (editorials, commentary, and regular columns) accounted for 16.4% of all analysed articles. Misinformation was registered in 2% of the articles.

### 4.3 Sources of Information

The State Statistical Office, the institution legally charged with the task to prepare and conduct the Census, was present as a principal source of information in just 22% of the total number of analysed content items. 36.4% of all articles that list SSO as principal source were published by Frontline.mk. Plusinfo.mk lists SSO as a source in 14.1% of its coverage, Kurir.mk in 13.1% and 360stepeni.mk in 11.1% of its articles covering the Census. They are followed by the TV broadcasters: Telma with 6%, Sitel, AlsatM and Alfa with 5.1% each, and MRT1 with 4% of the articles.

Frontline.mk among the news-sites and Telma among TV broadcasters are the media that most frequently used SSO as a source of information in their coverage. Frontline.mk lists SSO as source of information in one third of the articles covering the Census, while on Telma TV, SSO is present as a source in 42.8% of the articles.



Graph 5

The use of the indicator "SSO as source of information" is commonly in correlation with the reliance on political parties and their representatives as sources of information – the indicator "reactions of political parties and representatives". The media that use SSO as source less are

more inclined to transmit information/reactions provided by political parties and politicians. The low rate of use of SSO as source of information is a clear indicator of the editorial approach that, on one hand, marginalizes the official information on the Census and, on the other, places greater emphasis on the political and party influence and implications on the enumeration process.

#### **4.4. Key Narratives in the Coverage**

##### **4.4.1. The COVID19 Pandemic and the Census as a Health Hazard**

The increase of numbers of positive Covid19 cases in the country in the period of preparation of the Census brought to the fore the key question - will the field census activities and collection of data, and to what extent, be safe from point of view of public health, that is the health of the citizens and the census-takers.

Gradually, two key contradictory narratives developed during the monitored period: The Census is safe for the census-takers and the citizens, position held by the government and the institutions directly involved in the Census, and (b) the Census presents a serious healthcare risk, position held by the opposition and a number of civic initiatives to boycott the Census.

The Census coverage on MRT1 was relatively balanced regarding the two narratives, and it focused on the activities of the political actors, both in government<sup>2</sup> and in opposition<sup>3</sup>, predominantly through reporting on their press-conferences and other public statements and appearances. The monitoring did register several cases of greater emphasis on the messages of the opposition, usually in the ticker tape headlines scrolling across the screen during the Dnevnik<sup>4</sup> (the main evening newscast of the public service broadcaster). MRT1 regularly covered the activities of the political parties and civil organisations that announced boycott campaigns. Sitel TV covered this topic in a similar fashion, with regular reports on the statements by major political actors, including the SSO and the Commission on Infective Diseases (CID). In two cases, the broadcaster used its regular segment "Topic of the day" in the main evening newscast (Dnevnik 1) to ask the interviewed persons questions on the implementation of the Census<sup>5</sup> and the possible impact of the COVID19 pandemic. The coverage of Telma TV and 360stepeni.mk used similar, relatively balanced approach, while

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<sup>2</sup>See in „СДСМ: Пописот ќе биде безбеден за граѓаните“ (SDSM: The Census will be safe for the citizens), 17.03.2021.

<sup>3</sup>See in „ВМРО-ДПМНЕ: Да се одложи пописот во септември“ (VMRO-DPMNE: Census should be postponed for September), 15.03.2021, „ВМРО-ДПМНЕ: Вакцини нема а власта турка попис“ (VMRO-DPMNE: There are no vaccines and the Government is pushing forward with the Census), 19.03.2021 (the article carries a statement by Vlado Misajlovski from VMRO-DPMNE, given at a town-hall meeting with citizens, in which he talks about VMRO-DPMNE's initiative to postpone the Census).

<sup>4</sup>See in „ВМРО-ДПМНЕ: Попис во вакви услови ќе предизвика нов бран на Корона“ (VMRO-DPMNE: A census in this circumstances will create a new wave of Corona), 15.03.2021

<sup>5</sup>See „Тема на денот со Александар Николовски, потпретседател на ВМРО-ДПМНЕ“ (Topic of the day with Aleksandar Nikolovski, Vice-President of VMRO-DPMNE), 17.03.2021, „Србија го одложи пописот, Македонија не отстапува“ (Serbia postponed its population census, Macedonia won't back out), 22.03.2021.

Alfa TV<sup>6</sup>, Kurir.mk and Plusinfo.mk focused primarily on the presentation of the views and positions of the opposition on the risks that the Census brought to the table. The coverage on Alfa TV and Kurir.mk news-site was dominated by articles carrying strong messages promoting the idea that the Census should be postponed, usually presented in statements by representatives of the opposition parties. Kurir.mk's coverage was dominated by reactions and comments of political parties on the Census<sup>7</sup>, with frequent presence of speculations (for instance, if held, the Census will result in 2.400 new coronavirus deaths<sup>8</sup>). The articles published by the news-site reserved precedence to the issue of safety of the Census, or the lack thereof ("Zaev and Filipce don't give a damn about the health of the citizens<sup>9</sup>"). The coverage provided by AlsatM relied on an editorial approach with strong inclination to support the holding of the Census as scheduled, with balanced, informative reports that also carried a more analytical treatment of statements and information issued by SSO. In general, the positions of the political parties and their reactions, in a large majority of articles dedicated to the Census coverage, were not subjected to journalistic treatment and were published uncritically. One exception was the coverage of the 360stepeni.mk news-site, which often used the headlines to signal to its readers that they should receive the presented information with caution.

#### **4.4.2. Self-Enumeration of the Diaspora – the Ethnic Dimensions**

The second key topic that influenced the development of the dominant media narratives was the Census of the diaspora, which started on March 1. All monitored media regularly reported the updates on the online self-enumeration of the diaspora. However, as the process of self-enumeration proceeded, a strong ethnic dimension was attached to that issue. Some of the pro-opposition media covered by this monitoring developed the narrative that "Albanian politicians were much more actively involved in efforts to motivate the ethnic Albanians in the diaspora to join the online self-enumeration, compared to the ethnic Macedonians in the Government".

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<sup>6</sup>Articles and leads to the TV news use phrases such as "government uses any method available to push through with the Census" or "uses threats". „Затворски и парични казни – пописот ќе се спроведува на сила“ (Prison and fines – the Census will be conducted by force), 23.03.2021.

<sup>7</sup> „Стоилковски: Попис во вакви услови ќе предизвика нов бран на корона, пописот мора да се одложи за септември, а во меѓувреме потребна е имунизација на граѓаните“ (Stoilkovski: Census in these circumstances will cause a new wave of Corona, the Census needs to be postponed for September and in the meantime, we should inoculate the citizens), 15.03.2021.

<sup>8</sup>„ВМРО-ДПМНЕ: Полициски час, кризна состојба, ама Заев одлучил ќе истера попис дури и да починат 2400 лица“ (VMRO-DPMNE: Curfew, state of emergency, but Zaev decided to push forward with the census even if 2400 people may die), 22.03.2021.

<sup>9</sup> Kurir.mk, 22.03.2021.

That narrative was commonly used by Alfa TV<sup>10</sup>, and occasionally by other media outlets<sup>11</sup>, attaching to the Census prominent ethnic connotations and meanings. Kurir.mk covered this subject matter in different ways, for example, by presenting statements of OMD (from "Obedineta makedonska dijaspora" - United Macedonian Diaspora) criticising the "politicisation of the Census"<sup>12</sup> or statements by the opposition (VMRO-DPMNE: Zaev transformed the Census into a PR-tool for DUI<sup>13</sup>). Plusinfo.mk published several analysis pieces that focused on the topic of Albanian politicians being more successful in the lobbying in the diaspora than Zoran Zaev and SDSM ("The Government encourages the 'ministers of census' to push forward the party<sup>14</sup> and ethnic agenda"<sup>15</sup>). These media outlets often carried contents and posts originally published on the social network profiles of critics of the government.

#### 4.4.3. Census is a Statistical Operation, Should Not be Politicised

In terms of media supportive of the Census, there was notable presence of the narrative that the "Census is a statistical operation of public interest that shouldn't be politicised". This narrative was most present in the coverage of the news-site Frontline.mk, commonly through reliance on SSO<sup>16</sup> as a source of information, reported statements from the campaign caravan of CIVIL NGO, or statements of representatives of the institutions<sup>17</sup>. This key narrative was

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<sup>10</sup>„После Косово Груби во дводневна посета на Албанија - таму ќе бара поддршка за пописот на дијаспората“ (After Kosovo, Grubi pays a two-day visit to Albania – he will seek support for the census of the diaspora there), 22.03.2021, „Во која држава и за чија Влада работи првиот вице-премиер Артан Груби“ (In what country and for which Government does the first vice-prime minister Artan Grubi works), 23.03.2021.

<sup>11</sup>Plusinfo.mk, 22.03.2021, „Со Груби и Османи пописот на дијаспората се претвори во гласна политичка кампања за мобилизирање Албанци“ (With Grubi and Osmani the census of the diaspora is turning into a dirty political campaign to mobilize Albanians), the article is illustrated with the Albanian flag.

<sup>12</sup>The article with the quoted statement states “Although the number of enumerated members of the diaspora will not be added into the number of residents of Macedonia, the census of the emigration is increasingly politicized, especially by Albanian politicians and diplomats, who present it as an important statistical operations on which the constitutional rights of their ethnic community depend. The organizations and communities of Macedonians in the diaspora have joined more actively, over the past several days, in the efforts to call the emigration to take part in the Census. The United Macedonian Diaspora (OMD) calls on the Macedonians in Macedonia not to boycott the Census, Meto Koloski from OMD wrote on Facebook”, Kurir.mk, 22.03.2021.

<sup>13</sup>Kurir.mk, 22.03.2021, <https://kurir.mk/?p=486351>

<sup>14</sup>The article states: “Ministers Bujar Osmani and Artan Grubi run around the region and in Europe in a strong campaign for enumeration of the Albanian diaspora. While they deny that they call only for Albanian emigration to get enumerated, the fact remains that there is no information that they met with the Macedonian diaspora, and the visits to Switzerland, Prishtina and Tirana we used to appeal for self-enumeration of the Albanian emigres”, <https://plusinfo.mk/?p=351878>

<sup>15</sup>Plusinfo.mk, 22.03.2021, <https://plusinfo.mk/?p=351977>

<sup>16</sup> „Почитувањето на Протоколот ја гарантира безбедноста на пописот, порача ДЗС“ (Adherence to the Protocol guarantees the safety of the Census, SSO says), 24.03.2021 (the article states: “The Census is a statistical operation in the interest of all citizens and is not conducted for the sake of the Government or some political party, and the State Statistical Office guarantees the safety of the process and the adherence to the measures of the Protocol, so that nobody's health will be risked”), <https://frontline.mk/?p=120909>

<sup>17</sup> „The Census is important for the urbanization and future planning activities in all regions in the country. The demographic data, characteristics and parameters play an important role in the planning of the future development of the country and the cities, the infrastructure, traffic flows and development of general and detailed spatial plans, Bocvarski said”, <https://frontline.mk/?p=120993>

present in the Census coverage in the other media outlets, manifested predominantly through reporting of statements of representatives of the SSO.

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

SSO – State Statistical Office

CID – Commission on Infectious Diseases

MH – Ministry of Health

OMD – Obedineta makedonska dijaspora (United Macedonian Diaspora)