Nationality and Language
in the New Censuses of the Baltic States

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This study examines how the Baltic States sought to count their populations by nationality, language, and religion in their first censuses since reestablishing their independence in 1991. In the context of regaining national independence, and the rapid changes in their economies since then, the Baltic States are all concerned to take stock of their population characteristics and change over time. One of the most important features of the population in which they are interested is the ethnic composition.

Avoiding or ameliorating ethnic conflict is vitally important to the political stability and growth of democracy in post-Soviet states. Ethnic relations in all the successor states are also subject to broad scrutiny – no less by leaders of communal groups and human rights organizations within the countries than international agencies and foreign governments. Programs of “social integration” have become an especially important focus in countries that are seeking accession to the European Union (EU). Integration involves a rapprochement between members of different ethnic groups and full engagement of minorities into the political and economic life of the country. It also requires both de jure and de facto equality among members of different nationalities.

Monitoring societal integration requires accurate information on the political, social, and economic life and behavior of the population. In the absence of a well-developed population register, censuses are the only authoritative count of the population. Nobody can gauge whether rates of fertility, mortality, education, employment, crime, or voting participation differ by ethnic group unless they have access to reliable data on the number of people in the underlying population by age, sex, and ethnicity.

All the Baltic countries departed substantially from the model of the last Soviet census as well as the then-planned Russian census. Despite their geographical contiguity, shared historical

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1 The critical date of the Latvian census was March 31, 2000; the Estonian census April 1, 2000; and the Lithuanian census April 6, 2001. For convenience, I shall sometimes refer to these collectively as the “year 2000” censuses.
experience of Soviet annexation, and strategic and economic regional cooperation, the three Baltic
countries adopted different approaches toward nationality, language, and religion in their censuses.

**Three Approaches to Choosing Census Content**

In determining the content and methods of their population censuses, countries can follow
three broad approaches: (1) maximize continuity with the past; (2) follow international statistical
standards and recommendations; or (3) respond to the specific characteristics, needs, or politics in
their own country. These same alternatives apply to all state statistical practices, including vital event
registration and other official data collections. Every modern census displays elements of all three
strategies.

The fall of the USSR ended a long-established system for collecting and disseminating
accelerated the transformation of the very social and economic relations and characteristics that
previous statistical data collections had sought to monitor. Furthermore, while by no means did all
cooperation and communication end between the statistical agencies of the NIS countries and
Russia, the post-Soviet countries had sought to establish independent systems of state statistics.
This is especially so for the Baltic countries, which did not join the Commonwealth of Independent
States (CIS) and maintain only limited links with the Russian or the CIS statistical agencies.
However, at the level of personal and professional contacts, statisticians and demographers from the
Baltic countries kept in contact with their counterparts throughout the Newly Independent States.

Therefore, on the whole we should not expect continuity to be a predominant goal in the
design of the Baltic censuses. At the same time, all of the post-Soviet states have shown a strong
interest in monitoring and analyzing population changes during the transition to a market economy.
For this purpose it is important to maintain population indicators that can be compared with Soviet-
era indicators. To do this correctly, the statistical agencies need to take account of the validity of the
“old” or baseline data (Anderson and Silver 1997; Anderson, Katus, and Silver 1994). In short, if they are interested in continuity when introducing changes in definitions or administrative practices, the statistical agencies need to be able to map new indicators onto older ones.

Even before the demise of the Soviet Union, the Baltic countries had undertaken cooperative efforts to develop and share population statistics. These efforts were designed to develop Baltic statistics with an eye to international standards and practices while also paying attention to archiving and adjusting old data so that they could be used to study both the demographic past and change over time. However, according to Estonian demographers who led the initiative to foster Baltic cooperation in this period (including a 1993 training seminar in which I participated at Laulasmaa, near Tallinn), the efforts by Baltic scientists to foster common methodologies and definitions in population and health statistics were stunted by the efforts of computer specialists and bureaucrats to control and profit from the development and administration of the new state statistics. In the process, the concern for continuity over time was often ignored (Katus, Puur, and Sakkeus 1997).

By the mid-1990’s, the redevelopment of statistical practices in the Baltic States began to be strongly influenced by “Europe.” As they began concrete planning for their new censuses, conforming their statistical systems to European and world standards became an extremely important goal. Alone among the countries of the former Soviet Union, in 1998 and 1999 the three Baltic states became candidates for accession to membership in the European Union.

The leaders and staff of the statistical offices in the Baltic countries benefited from training seminar organized by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and the Statistical Office of the European Union (Eurostat). The Baltic countries also engaged in common
planning and exchanges of information leading up to the year 2000 censuses, including a series of
“Baltic Census Seminars,” the first of which was held in Lithuania in June 1995.²

In 1998, the UNECE and Eurostat published a joint set of recommendations for the 2000

censuses of population and housing in the ECE region (UNECE 1998). A working version of this
document had been circulated earlier in a series of training seminars run by the UNECE for
statistical offices of countries in the region. These recommendations covered the purpose,
methodology, indicators, and dissemination of the census. A set of “core” indicators was
recommended for all censuses, while countries might also choose to include “optional” indicators.
Standard definitions were proposed for both the core and some of the optional indicators. It is
presumably to these guidelines that the Latvian document quoted above refers. The standard and
optional indicators proposed by UNECE/Eurostat were not based on Soviet or Russian censuses.

In May 1997, the Statistical Program Committee (SPC) of the European Union had
“approved the drawing up of guidelines for coordinating, harmonising, and synchronising the next
wave of population and housing censuses” (Eurostat 1999: 17). A task force drew up a set of
“Guidelines for the Community Programme of Population and Housing Censuses in 2001” that
were designed to take “maximum account” of the UNECE/Eurostat recommendations and to
develop “as complete a programme as possible of Community tables” from the censuses (Eurostat
1999:17). These recommendations, approved by the SPC in November 1997, were described as a
“gentleman’s agreement, which as such is not legally binding on the Member States. It is a strong
recommendation by the SPC, which member states are expected to follow as far as possible and
reasonable taking into account the individual national circumstances” (Eurostat 1999: 17).

My discussions with Estonian census officials in October 2000 pointed to the importance
Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union, as a standard-setter. The Estonian census

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² “The Baltic Census Seminars” are described on the webpage of the Lithuanian Department of Statistics at
www.std.lt/Census/Kas_naujo/seminarai_e.htm.
instruments were designed to provide data that will fulfill the Eurostat “table program” – standard tabulations that all European countries are to complete based on their year 2000 census round. Consistent with how Eurostat reports other European social and demographic statistics, the table program for the census includes data on population by age, sex, and citizenship, but not by ethnicity, language, or religion (Eurostat 1999).

The importance of the UNECE/Eurostat standard was also made clear to me during a meeting with a Latvian census official in May 2001. At the very beginning of the meeting, this official held up a copy of the 1998 UNECE/Eurostat manual and declared that Latvia’s census was in complete accord with this standard. “This is our main book,” he told me. He went on to say that the Latvian census also included some questions specifically for Latvia that are not in the core questionnaire of the ECE/Eurostat or the Eurostat table program. These included questions on the ethnic composition of the population.

That the UNECE/Eurostat did not recommend the inclusion of questions on nationality (or language or religion) among the core census questions appears to be responsive more to Western European sensibilities than to the cultural or social reality of the countries of former communist countries. In France in recent years a great debate has been raging over the legitimacy of putting racial and ethnic labels on the population when collecting data for surveys or in official statistics. As Henri Leridon notes, in France data on race and ethnicity are considered to be very sensitive, and by law “it is forbidden to stock in computer memory without the consent of the individual any personal data related directly or indirectly to the racial origins, political, philosophical and religious opinions, and trade union membership of individuals” (Leridon 1999: 189).”
The Soviet Census Legacy

After their annexation by the Soviet Union in 1940, the Baltic republics participated in four All-Union Censuses of Population of the USSR. The 1959 census contained questions on “nationality” and “native language.” The 1970, 1979, and 1989 censuses contained, in addition to the nationality and native language questions, a question on “second language.” I have described the questions and their formulations at length elsewhere (Silver 1986); however, I shall address this subject briefly in order to be able to show how the Baltic censuses departed from the Soviet model.

Nationality

During the planning for early Soviet censuses – which predate the annexation of the Baltic States – there was a profound debate over the appropriate fundamental ethnic concept, in particular whether it ought to be one that focused more on the ethnographic character of the population or instead one that also significantly reflected the political character of a population. In the 1926 Soviet census, the Russian concept chosen was that of narodnost’ (“people”), while in all later censuses (1937, 1939, 1959, 1970, 1979, and 1989) the concept chosen was that of natsional’nost’. Thus, in all of the Soviet era censuses in the Baltic States, the concept of nationality (natsional’nost’) was a settled issue.

In Soviet censuses people were asked to name their nationality without reference to official documents (such as their internal passports). For this reason, it was possible for many individuals to have a “census nationality” that differed from their “official nationality” as well as for people to change their census nationality during their lifetime.4

The question on nationality in all the Soviet censuses was just a word – nationality – with a blank space for inscribing the response on the form (e.g., USSR Goskomstat 1987). The

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3 For a helpful overview of the Soviet censuses see Kingkade (1989).
4 With few exceptions, their official nationality as reflected on their internal passports, which they received at age 16, was fixed for life. That census nationality could change despite a fixed passport nationality has been demonstrated on the basis of the Soviet censuses of 1959 and 1970 (Anderson and Silver 1983, 1990).
republic statistical offices then translated the verbatim responses into numeric codes by applying a “Dictionary of Nationalities and Languages.” Persons who responded to the census question by naming a clan, or a regional name, or the name of an ethnic group of some kind could thus have their responses recoded into a different category by the census administration (Silver 1986). No specific names of nationalities (or languages) appeared on any of the census blanks during the Soviet era. As we shall see, the Baltic censuses departed significantly from this practice in the year 2000 censuses.

**Native Language**

All Soviet censuses included a question on “native language” (*rodnoi iazyk* in Russian). The validity of this term as a linguistic concept had long been questioned by Soviet social scientists, even during the last censuses (Silver 1986). Because the question on native language appeared on the census form immediately after the question on nationality, and because some census respondents assumed that their native language ought to be congruent with their nationality, the census data tended to exaggerate this congruence. In addition, because many respondents interpreted the term “native language” as the language of their childhood, they may have designated a language that they did not know well or indeed did not know at all as their “native language.”

As a result, the census data on native language probably imparted a conservative bias to the estimates of linguistic assimilation or russification of the non-Russian nationalities (Silver 1986). Furthermore, the data on native language in the Soviet censuses should perhaps more readily be regarded as a measure of the strength of ethnic self-identification or loyalty than of language ability or use (Silver 1974, 1978; Anderson and Silver 1985a).

**Second Language**

The Soviet censuses of 1970, 1979, and 1989 also asked respondents to name any “other language of the peoples of the USSR that they could freely command.” Although the census
instructions stated that “freely command” meant “freely converse,” no test of language ability was administered at the doorstep. Like the questions on nationality and native language, the answers to the second language question were essentially subjective (Silver 1975, 1986).

Further, the census planners clearly understood that the restriction to “languages of the peoples of the USSR” was designed to reveal how many people could speak the “language of internationality communication [iazyk mezhnatsional’nogo obscheniia]” – Russian. The political meaning of the answers to the second-language question was also apparently well understood by local census administrations and by the public at large. The percentages of non-Russians who reported free command of Russian language proved to be quite volatile in some settings.

Perhaps the most obvious case was in Estonia. Whereas in the 1970 census, 29 percent of Estonians claimed free command of Russia, in the 1979 census this percentage declined to 24 percent, and then increased to 34 percent in 1989. The decline between 1970 and 1979 was a silent mass public protest at the recent appointment of a new Communist Party First Secretary in Estonia who was considered to be a Russified Estonian. Another telling example is Lithuania. Between 1979 and 1989, the percentage of Lithuanians who claimed Russian as a second language dropped from 52 to 28 (it had been 36 percent in 1970). Thus, in the 1989 census, during an intense period of national mobilization of Lithuanians on the verge of the fall of the USSR, a substantial number of Lithuanians “forgot” that they could speak Russian.

As we shall see, it is especially in the treatment of languages other than the native language that the Baltic censuses have diverged most from the Soviet model. This change reflects their primary concern to learn (or to show) the prevalence of knowledge of Western European languages. At the same time, the approach does not preclude learning about how widespread is knowledge of the languages of other major ethnic groups or nationalities within the newly independent states. For example, it definitely matters to the Latvian, Lithuanian, and Estonian governments how many Russians (for example) can speak the language of the titular nationality in their country, even if the
test of language ability is weak. Those governments will be judged internationally by evidence of interethnic accommodation shown by the prevalence of bilingualism.

A draft plan for the Russian Federation census was available at least as early as 1998, for what was then expected to be the “1999 census.” I will refer to this as the “1999 pilot census.” This plan implied a new departure in the measurement of ethnicity (nationality) and language compared with the 1989 census. While keeping the practice from the last six Soviet censuses of having an open-ended question on “nationality,” with the responses to be entered verbatim into a blank on the census form, in place of the single word “nationality” was a question, “To what nationality, people, or ethnic group do you regard yourself to belong? [K kakoi natsional’nosti, narodnosti ili etnicheskoi gruppe Vy sebia otnosite?]”5 While the formulation of the question changed in the final design for the 2002 Russian census, the idea of recording the answers verbatim remained.6 So, too, did the practice of developing and applying a “dictionary of nationalities and languages” to code the responses to the open-ended questions into categories used in census tabulations and publications.

The 1999 pilot census for Russia retained as Question 5 the word “native language” [rodnoi iazyk] followed by a blank space – virtually identical to the formatting of the question in the last four Soviet censuses. But the “second language” question was modified to read, “Indicate another language that you freely command [Utochnite drugoi iazyk, kotorym svobodno vladeete].” Thus, the criterion “freely command” was retained from the last three Soviet censuses, but in principle any “other language” (though only one such language) could be recorded.

5 The idea for such a formulation had been percolating for a long time. For example, during a convocation of experts in 1968 to discuss plans for the 1970 Soviet census (Pod’iachikh 1976: 32), certain ethnographers “recommended that [the question on nationality] be formulated as ‘To which nationality (people) do you consider yourself to belong (K kakoi natsional’nosti [narodnosti] sebia otnosite?)’” – virtually identical to the formulation in the 2002 census of Russia.

6 Question 8 for the Russian pilot census of 2000 was “To what nationality (people) or ethnic group do you consider yourself to belong?” [K kakoi natsional’nosti (narody) ili etnicheskoi gruppe Vy sebia otnosite?]. However, this version of the question would not have been known to the census planners in the Baltic states when they completed their own questionnaires for the year 2000 census. Moreover, at the last minute (April 2002), Goskomstat in Moscow changed the formulation again to one that is very similar to previous censuses: “To what nationality do you consider yourself to belong” [K kakoi natsional’nosti Vy sebia otnosite?]. This, in effect, reinstated the status quo ante.
The Statistical Committee of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) also developed a standard questionnaire that it made available to all CIS countries, to whom it also provided technical and financial support in planning their year 2000 censuses. Although the Baltic States do not belong to the CIS, it is worthwhile to note any changes in standard census recommendations from Moscow after 1989. In its approach to nationality and language, this “Model Questionnaire (Minimum Program) of the Population Censuses in the SNG Countries” was only a slight modification of the Soviet census of 1989. It did not reflect the new approach toward nationality in the Russian 1999 pilot census. Instead, it proposed as Question 8 “Name your native language [Nazovite svoi rodnoi iazyk]” (with a blank for inscribing the language verbatim), and “Other languages that you freely command” (with two blanks for writing in answers). Thus, the CIS model envisioned an opening up of the second language question to allow any language, but it stayed with the Soviet standard of “freely command.”

Question 10 in the CIS The Model Questionnaire asked, “To what nationality do you regard yourself as belonging? [K kakoi natsional’nosti’ sebia otnosite?],” followed by a blank for inscribing the response verbatim. This is essentially identical to the approach taken in the 1989 Soviet census. It is noteworthy, however, that the question on native language preceded the question on nationality in the CIS Model Questionnaire, whereas in the Soviet censuses the native language question followed the question on nationality. In principle, this modification in question order would reduce the tendency of respondents to hinge their responses to the language question on their prior answer to the nationality question.

If they had wanted to adhere to the Soviet legacy or one modified by the experience of the Russian census planners or the statistical office of the CIS, only for “native language” did the Baltic States have a clear and consistent model. For “nationality,” the census designers for the Russian

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7 My thanks to Ward Kingkade of the U.S. Census Bureau for providing a copy of this form. Kingkade reports (personal communication) that this form was distributed to CIS members at UNECE census planning seminars as well as to the Baltic statistical agencies.
Federation debated and experimented with various formulations to supplant the model of recent Soviet censuses, but the CIS stayed with the model of those censuses. On “second language,” the last Soviet censuses employed the concept of “free command” of a second language and the post-Soviet descendants opened the question up to include any such “other language” that the respondent freely commands.

**Estonia 2000 Census**

Authority for conducting the census was provided by the Estonian Population and Housing Census Act passed by the Parliament on 13 May 1998. The census sought to count everyone who was present in Estonia at the critical moment of the census, except for foreign diplomatic and military personnel in Estonia. It also sought to include persons (and family members) in the Estonian diplomatic service abroad as well as other permanent residents who were temporarily abroad for less than 12 months. Further, it sought to fix people’s actual (“usual”) place of residence in Estonia, not their legal or official place of residence.

The 1998 Law on the Census also established under Article 27 that “Census questionnaires shall be in Estonian and shall be completed in Estonian.” A person covered by the census “has the right to answer the enumerator in Estonian or, if the person is not proficient in Estonian, in another language in which he or she is proficient.” Furthermore, under Article 28, persons covered by the census were “required to provide true and complete answers to all questions on the Census questionnaires” except that they have “a right to refuse to provide data relating to their religious affiliation.”

**Nationality**

“Nationality” as an ethnic concept in everyday life and in public administration in Estonia is rarely ambiguous. This is not just a legacy of the Soviet political system but also the result of centuries of historical development of Estonia. Furthermore, the Estonian censuses of 1922 and
1934 enumerated the population by nationality. A 2000 census official told me that only three out of nearly 1.3 million census respondents could not name their nationality in the 2000 Estonia census. No member of one of the major nationalities in Estonia was likely to take the point of view of, say, the “man-on-the-street” in Baku, Azerbaijan who, when asked what were the critical elements of Azerbaijani national consciousness, responded: “How can one speak of self-consciousness of a people whose alphabet has changed four times in the last fifty years?” (Safizade 1997).

According to the Estonian “Law on the Census,” the language of the census questionnaire is Estonian and answers were to be recorded in Estonian. However, census respondents had the right to answer the enumerator either in Estonian or, if the person is not proficient in Estonian, in another language in which he or she is proficient. The Estonian word rahvus used on the census forms carried unambiguous meaning and would be translated to Russian-speaking respondents precisely as natsional’nost’ (nationality). The concept of “nationality” in the 2000 Census of Estonia is thus exactly the same as in the 1989 Soviet census. Estonian census officials explained to me that in translating rahvus into English they used to employ the term “nationality,” but now in order to avoid confusion between the concepts of “nationality” and “citizenship” they translate rahvus as “ethnicity” or “ethnic nationality.”

The major divergence from the Soviet census is that instead of just writing the respondent’s answer verbatim on the census form, they provided (in Question 12) six precoded categories, with boxes to be checked on the form: Estonian, Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Finnish, and Latvian, with an additional line for “other ethnic nationality (write)” (ESO 1999). A pilot census form in 1998, however, had provided only five categories (omitting Latvian from the above list), along with a category “Other (specify, includes also ethnic group such as SETU).” Thus, during its initial planning, the Estonian census administration provided for respondents to volunteer smaller ethnic groups if they did not find their nationality among those listed explicitly on the form.
Unlike the Soviet censuses that indirectly encouraged respondents to offer names of ethnographic groups, the 2000 Estonian census turned enumerators into coders and focused only on the most numerous nationalities. The clear message to the census takers as well as respondents must have been, “Mark one of the following boxes to indicate which nationality you belong to, and only if you don’t fall into any of these then you can indicate something else, including an ethnic group.”

As in the Soviet censuses, the 2000 Estonian census question calls for a “subjective” answer. The specific instructions to the enumerators scarcely differ from the approach in the last several Soviet censuses:

One variant of answers is recorded. The ethnic nationality named by the person himself/herself is recorded. The person has the right to consider himself/herself to be a member of that ethnic nationality with which he/she feels to be most closely connected to ethnically and culturally. Parents shall determine the ethnic nationality of their children. If the child’s mother and father are of different ethnic nationalities and the parents have difficulties in determining the ethnic nationality of their child, the ethnic nationality of the mother should be preferred (ESO 1999).

In the Soviet censuses, the question on *natsional’nost’* had served a double purpose. A secondary instruction on the form stated “for foreigners, indicate also citizenship.” The Soviet censuses did not have a separate question on citizenship. This points up a major change a new dimension that all of the censuses in the countries of the former Soviet Union had to incorporate in some way: the civil status of population. In the 2000 census of Estonia, a separate question (Question 8) had asked “What is your citizenship?” Boxes were provided for Estonian, Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Finnish, and Undetermined, as well as two blanks for “Other citizenship (write).”

By including a question on citizenship in the census, Estonia not only sought to classify the population exhaustively by civil status but it also conformed to UNECE/Eurostat recommendations.

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8 Setu are a small Estonian ethnic group living in southeastern Estonia.
Language

Mother Tongue. “What is your mother tongue [Mis on Teie emakeel?]” was Question 13 on the individual census form. That it followed rather than preceded the question on nationality shows that the Estonian census designers did not learn from or heed the Russian or CIS census planners’ conclusion that the responses would be more valid if the language question preceded the nationality question.

Furthermore, that a set of languages was given, with boxes to check, differed from both past Soviet census practice and the approach taken in Russia and recommended by the CIS State Committee on Statistics. Of course, the Baltic States are neither members of the CIS nor bound in any way to harmonize their statistical practices with the CIS or Russia. The languages of the same six nationalities that were listed in the nationality question were printed on the form (Estonian, Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Finnish, and Latvian), with a blank space provided for “other language (write).” Whether intended or not, this format in combination with the question order was likely to encourage congruence between the nationality and mother tongue responses as well as to emphasize larger nationalities and national language groups.

At first glance, the use of the term “mother tongue” in place of “native language” appears to be another departure from Soviet census practice. “Mother tongue” emphasizes the first language the person learned in early childhood, while “native language” emphasizes the language the person prefers now or knows best or perhaps the language of one’s nationality. The instructions to the census-takers in Estonia in 2000 stated:

One variant of answers is recorded. The language which was the first language spoken in early childhood and which is usually the language that person commands best is recorded. [A] person’s mother tongue should not necessarily coincide with his/her ethnic nationality. Parents shall tell the mother tongue of their babies/small children. If parents have difficulties determining the child’s mother tongue, the language most currently spoken in the household is recorded. . . . (ESO 1999: 28).
This contrasted with the instructions for the question on “native language” in the 1989 Soviet census:

In answer to the question on native language write the name of the language that the respondent himself considers his native language. Native language need not coincide with nationality. If the respondent has difficulty naming some language as native language, then it is appropriate to inscribe the name of the language that he knows best or that is usually used in the family (USSR Goskomstat 1987: 57).

Although the instructions to the “mother tongue” and “native language” questions share some common content – both refer to the language the person commands best, and both state that nationality and native/mother tongue do not need to coincide – the question on “mother tongue” in the 2000 Estonia census gives priority to the person’s first language or language of childhood.

How much difference the change of concepts from “native language” to “mother tongue” makes cannot be determined, since to my knowledge the Estonian census planners did not debate this subject or experiment with alternative formulations. Another reason why it may not make much difference is that in actual practice in the 1989 (and earlier) Soviet census rounds in Estonia, even though the census blanks (the forms) were printed only in Russian and used the words rodnoi iazyk (native language), the Estonian-language instructions used the word emakeel (mother tongue), the same concept as was used in the 2000 census in Estonia.9

In other words, persons who answered the census of 1989 in Russian heard the question as “native language,” while persons who answered the census of 1989 in Estonian heard the question as “mother tongue.” But if the respondents were not sure of their answers, then the instructions to the census came to bear. In 1989 those instructions were the same whether the respondent was a Russian-speaker or an Estonian-speaker – they would be advised by the census-taker that rodnoi iazyk or emakeel is the language they know best or is most often used in the family. In 2000, however, both Estonian- and Russian-speaking respondents would be advised that the question refers to the language they first spoke or used in childhood.
Other Languages. The Soviet censuses of 1970, 1979, and 1989 asked respondents what “other language of the peoples of the USSR” they could “freely command.” Answers were recorded verbatim on the census form. The 2000 Estonia census (Question 14) asked respondents “What other languages do you speak [Milliseid keeli Te veel oskate]?” Answers were recorded by marking an X in a box next to one of eight languages (Estonian, Russian, English, German, French, Finnish, Swedish, Latvian), their “native language” [ota rahvuse keel – language of their nationality], other languages (without specifying any language), or “no command of other languages.” However, answering the question itself was voluntary.

The 1998 pilot census formulated the questions on second language very differently: “Characterize your knowledge and use of the Estonian language,” with the answer categories “My everyday language,” “I speak,” “I read,” and “I write.” This question was stricken from the census form and replaced by the question asking about knowledge of a list of languages.

When I asked Estonian census officials why they replaced the question on knowledge of Estonian, I was given two reasons. First, people were not able to answer the question on Estonian language very precisely, and the question in any case only asked about the ability to “speak” Estonian. Second, the Minister of Education considered it very important to learn how well the people of Estonia were learning “European languages” (by which term he apparently did not mean to include all European languages including Russian but rather “languages of the European Union”). It is difficult to accept either explanation at face value.

Any question on language knowledge on the census produces imprecise answers. The history of the second-language question on the Soviet censuses in Estonia reveals how readily politicized such questions can be. Also, even though the question on second language was nominally voluntary, some census respondents could well feel pressured to give a “politically

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9 I am indebted to Allan Puur for reporting that the census blanks for all post-War Soviet censuses were printed only in Russian. He notes, however, that the census-takers could write on the census forms in Estonian or Russian.
correct” answer or else to demonstrate consistency between their citizenship status (or aspirations) and their knowledge of Estonian language. When, during a meeting with Estonian census officials in October 2000 I recounted the history of the “second language” question in the Soviet censuses in Estonia, the officials smiled and acknowledged that answers to second language questions were indeed “very political” during the Soviet era and would remain so in the 2000 Estonian census. One of them remarked that Russians in Estonia who were citizens would feel compelled to say that they knew Estonian well even if their command of Estonian was poor.

The second explanation for replacing the “knowledge of Estonian language” question with a more general question on spoken languages is more plausible. Estonia’s pending accession to the European Union made knowledge of a (Western) European language by the population relevant for policy planners in the fields of commerce, education, and culture. Nevertheless, given the lack of a test of the respondents’ degree of command of these languages, at best the data would provide only a rough approximation of the prevalence of knowledge of these languages.

Religion

The most unexpected innovation in the 2000 Estonia census was the inclusion of a question on religion. The only Soviet census to include a question on religion was the suppressed census of 1937. The designers of the new Russian census have explicitly rejected including a question on religion, and the model census for the CIS also did not include such a question. I was told during interviews with Estonian census officials that the census planning committee included representatives of major ministries, and that it was the Ministry of the Interior (which had two representatives on the committee) that wanted a religion question on the census. I was also told that both the Russian Orthodox Church and the Lutheran Church supported the inclusion of these questions. Religion is not included in the UNECE/Eurostat core questions or the Eurostat table program; however, UNECE/Eurostat did describe three basic alternative types of questions on
religion and recommended that if only one question on religion were to be included in the census it ought to be one on formal membership in a church or a religious community (UNECE 1998).

Because the constitution of Estonia guarantees freedom of religion, the questions on religion were made voluntary on the census. They were addressed only to persons who were at least age 15 on the census date. Respondents were first asked (Question 23), “What is your religion (faith) [Milline on Teie suhe religiooni (usku)]?” The response categories offered were follower of a particular faith, has no religious affiliation, atheist, cannot define the affiliation, and refused to answer. I was told by one census official that despite the voluntary nature of the question very few respondents refused to answer it. Those who answered that they were followers of a particular faith were then asked to indicate which faith they followed. Fixed categories offered included Lutheranism, Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Baptism, Pentecostal, Methodism, Adventism, and Islam. Two blank spaces were provided into which “other faith” might be inscribed.

**Preliminary Census Results and the Undercount**

The Estonian Statistical Office (ESO) released preliminary figures from the 2000 Census in Summer of that year showing a total “permanent” population of 1,376,743 (ESO 2000a). According to the census officials with whom I spoke, these figures were preliminary because the census administration had not completed analyzing the results of the post-enumeration survey or finished other quality control checks of the enumeration. However, they described this total as 62,500 smaller than the number that they had previously reported as the official population count of Estonia in the year 2000. The ESO attributed about 34,000 of the 62,500 shortfall to people who were not enumerated because they had left Estonia – such cases would be analogous to the 44,000 cases of previously uncounted emigrants reported by the CSB in Latvia. The remaining approximately 28,000 (or 2 percent of the total population count) was thus regarded as an actual undercount. The ESO reported the distribution of the population by region and sex but not by nationality.
The ESO apparently estimated its 2 percent net undercount by comparing the census count with the count in the population register, after making allowances for previously uncounted emigrants. According to Estonia’s leading demographer, Kalev Katus (personal communication to the author), 2 percent is probably less than half of the actual undercount, because Estonia’s population register is not a good standard. In addition to the legacy of underregistration of emigrants, after the mid 1990’s the Estonian registries have undercounted migrants to cities, especially large cities such as Tallinn (Katus et al. 1999). Estonian census officials attributed some of the undercount in urban areas, especially in Tallinn and Tartu, to students who were renting space but were not reported by their landlords as living there. They remarked that perhaps some Russian students who had gone abroad to study were not counted. But these claims preceded any analysis of post-enumeration survey results. In any case, the ESO has a bureaucratic interest in making light of the extent and bias to any undercount of the population.

The census officials also remarked that the enumerators encountered difficulties finding people. In all, 19.8 percent of the enumerated individuals did not actually live at their official place of residence. In fact the test census had included questions on both the permanent place of residence (which was to be understood as the usual place of residence) and the registered place of residence. But the latter question was excluded after the test census because many respondents were confused by the terminology. This finding in the test census, however, forewarned the census officials that they might have difficulty obtaining a complete enumeration.

Because Russians in Estonia disproportionately reside in cities, it is conceivable that the phenomenon reported by Katus would lead to a differential undercount of Russians. However, the ESO officials with whom I spoke were reluctant to attribute the undercount differentially to any ethnic group or to individuals based on civil status. They asserted that even persons who were illegals had “permanent places of residence” and hence could be counted. But it is notable that while the ESO claims that the number of illegals is in the neighborhood of 20 to 30 thousand
individuals, an analyst for a non-Estonian advocacy group claims that the number ranges between 30,000 and 80,000 (Arjupin 2000). It seems likely that non-Estonians who actually have residency permits or alien passports (or both) have reason to be sure that not only are they counted but the information about their residency and work status will be accurate. Aside from the general requirement that census respondents tell the truth, aliens and temporary residents are likely to have regarded themselves as subject to potential deportation or other administrative sanctions if they did not comply with the law on the census. But the balance of incentives for “illegals” may well have been different.

After the census, additional legislation was proposed to improve the coverage of the population registers in Estonia, in particular to obligate employers and local government agencies to report individual names to the register, so that they register could follow up and seek to complete the registration. The registers could not be relied on as a source of accurate information on the single most important information that could help the census count: permanent address. Many people in Estonia still follow the “Soviet” practice of listing one address as an official address while actually residing at different one. The census was supposed to enumerate people according to their “permanent” place of residence, which is interpreted to mean their “usual” place of residence, not their “legal” place of residence. But in cases when the population register listed people according to their legal residence, it was of little help to census takers in trying to locate people.

Further impairing the census takers was the rigorous, perhaps a better word is “zealous” application of the “Databases Act” and the “Personal Data Protection Act,” which not only limited the extent to which census enumerators could ferret out information from the population registries but also prevented the census administration from reporting correct addresses or other information to the register.10 In a most bizarre event, at one stage during the census enumeration the “Data

10 According to one Estonian census official, about 25 thousand persons enumerated in the census did not have or know their Personal Identification Number. However, the census bureau was forbidden to look in the population
Inspectorate,” which is charged with enforcing these two acts, induced the Ministry of Justice to indict the ESO for criminal acts by illegally trying to link information from official registries to the census.\footnote{On the mandate and operations of the Data Inspectorate, see their website at \url{www.dp.gov.ee/}.} Ultimately, the case was settled by negotiation but a year later when I visited Tallinn it left a bitter taste in the mouths of census officials, while the director of the Data Inspectorate expressed exasperation to me that the case had been settled through negotiation.

According to a publication on the 2000 census \cite{ESO2001a}, the estimated total population for March 31, 2000 based on the census was about 67 thousand fewer than the estimated January 1, 2000 population based on the 1989 census and vital registration statistics for the intercensal period.\footnote{\url{www.stat.ee/index.aw/section=6579}.} This deficit is about 5,000 persons greater than the 62,500 “missing persons” initially reported. In the published final 2000 census totals, the ESO reports the nationality breakdown of the population as 68 percent Estonians – higher than the 62 percent reported in the 1989 census \cite{ESO2001b} as well as the 65 percent that the ESO had previously estimated for January 1, 2000 \cite{ESO2000b}.\footnote{The estimates for January 1, 2000 had been based on the 1989 census count and on current registration data (births, deaths, and migration) for the intercensal years.} Russians comprised 26 percent of the population in the year 2000 census, compared to 30 percent in the 1989 census. Thus, the vital registration system missed the emigration of a substantial number of Russians (and other non-Estonians) during the 1990’s.

\textbf{Latvia 2000 Census}

The 2000 census in Latvia was a hybrid. The data for 10 of the 33 census questions were drawn from the register of population and the state revenue service \cite{CSB2001;UšackisSenkane2000}. During the census, only 14 questions were asked of persons age 7 or older living in a dwelling, and 9 questions were asked about the dwelling itself. No other census in the successor

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11 On the mandate and operations of the Data Inspectorate, see their website at \url{www.dp.gov.ee/}.
12 \url{www.stat.ee/index.aw/section=6579}.
13 The estimates for January 1, 2000 had been based on the 1989 census count and on current registration data (births, deaths, and migration) for the intercensal years.
states of the Soviet Union could contemplate such an approach because none has as well-developed a population register as Latvia. This approach was driven substantially by considerations of cost.\(^\text{14}\)

The type of legislation in Estonia that made it difficult for government agencies to intermingle information from the register and the census was not in place in Latvia.

**Nationality**

In 1998, I contacted a demographer in Latvia to request a copy of the questionnaire for the next census (then scheduled to occur in 1999). Not knowing at that time that the CSB was planning to draw some information directly from the population register, I was mystified when I first saw that the “pilot census 1997” did not include a question on nationality. Only after I noticed that the form contained each respondent’s PIN (personal identification number) did it occur to me that the CSB might be planning to draw information on nationality from the population register.

When I arrived in Riga in May 2001, I was planning to verify my interpretation by talking to demographers and census officials. In an early conversation with a leading demographer, I asked why “nationality” was omitted from the census. In response I received a second surprise: the actual 2000 Latvia census had included a question on nationality after all. Question 3 on the census stated “Your nationality” – Jūsu tautība on the Latvian version of the form, and Natsional’nost’ on the Russian version.\(^\text{15}\) Three nationalities were listed: Latvian, Russian, and Belarusian, with boxes next to each to be marked with an X. An additional blank was provided for “other (write in).” This is more normal, I thought. They had gathered the responses on nationality at the same time that they gathered the rest of the information in the census and therefore ran less risk of having missing data on nationality in the census. Because I recalled that nationality was often missing from the


\(^{15}\) The Latvian CSB translates tautība in the same way that the Estonian Statistical Office translates rahvus – as “ethnic nationality.” Unlike in Estonia, where there was only one official language in the census (all forms and instructions were printed in Estonian), in Latvia census blanks were printed in both Latvian and Russian. The word natsional’nost’ was used in Question 3 of the Russian-language version of the census form.
population register in Estonia, I was relieved to learn that the Latvian CSB was not relying heavily on the population register for such a critical census indicator.

Then came a third surprise. In a meeting with census officials later that week, I was given a copy of a recently published booklet with provisional results of the 2000 census (CSB 2001). Table 1.6 looks normal enough: a list of nationalities tabulated in the census along with information on the numbers who claimed Latvian and Russian as a native language or a second language. I was told that although some people had expressed skepticism about the data that showed that some 3 percent of Latvians did not claim to speak Latvian, this is what the data actually revealed. There was no reason to question the accuracy of the classification of people by nationality, I was told, because the nationality information had come directly from the population register.

Therefore, while it was true that the Latvian census (in Question 3) asked respondents to designate their nationality, and this information was coded and scanned into electronic data files by the CSB, the data on nationality that were published in the pamphlet came instead from the population register (formally, the Residents’ Register -- Iedzīvotāju ģimene). Thus a statistical office that professed to be strapped for cash had put a question to some 2.3 million people that it did not plan to use in census publications.

That the CSB had asked a question on nationality yet did not plan to use it in publications was puzzling. The only explanation that I was given was that “our experts” had insisted that the nationality question be put on the form, and that these experts would be able to do some special studies of the degree of congruence between the census nationality and the nationality in the population register. However, if the only purpose of asking the census question on nationality was to serve the interests of science, the question could readily have been asked of a sample of respondents (say 10 percent or 25 percent), a practice that the CSB was familiar with from Soviet censuses as well as international census practice.
This left the question, why was the nationality item added to the census after the pilot stage if the population register was intended to be the used as the source of nationality information in official statistical reports? One possibility is that shortly before the census date, the CSB had doubts about the reliability of the population register or about its ability to integrate data from the population register with data from the census. At the time of my visit in May 2001, however, I heard only strong expressions of confidence in the population register. And without doubt adding nationality to the census form (as well as coding and processing the results) was very expensive. My current surmise is that the CSB included the nationality question on the census form – despite its intention to rely on the population register for the nationality data in census reports – because it was uncertain that it would ultimately have access to the population register data for the census reports.

Why this might be so has to do with the regimes for the use of sensitive data. If it turned out that because of pending legislation in the area of data protection (adhering to standards established by the European Union) the population register data had to be kept separate from the census, or perhaps the “nationality” code in the population register would have to be made voluntary (as it was in Estonia) rather than universal and mandatory, then the census-based nationality data would serve as a critical back-up. Information on nationality is so important that it would have been risky not to ask the question in the census.

Although my interpretation remains speculative, that the reported year 2000 data on nationality actually come from the population register rather than the census is important because whereas nationality on the census is “subjective,” nationality on the population register is “objective” or “official.” “Official nationality” in the population register in Latvia is determined in virtually the identical fashion as official nationality was determined in the Soviet Union (Anderson and Silver 1983). When children choose their official nationality at age 16, they have to choose the nationality of one of their parents. If their parents are both from the same nationality, the child has no real option. However, if the parents are from different nationalities, the child can choose the
nationality of the mother or the father. Once this nationality is selected, however, it is fixed for life. This practice remained in place in 2001. Conceivably, however, it will be subject to modification as Latvia moves further toward conforming its human rights legislation to European Union standards.

Thus, “nationality” in the Latvian 2000 census is both subjective (and unofficial) and objective (and official). In Latvia today individuals are free to designate any nationality that they wish to designate in response to the census-taker. But the nationality that will turn up in aggregate statistics based on the 2000 census in Latvia comes from the population register.

Language

Native Language. The Latvian 2000 census (in Question 4) asked respondents to indicate “Jūsu dzīmtā valoda [Your native language]” or “Rodnoi iazyk [native language].” It offered Latvian, Russian, Belarusian, and “Other (write in)” as response categories. The Russian-language instructions to the census taker state:

Native language: Mark one of the three available variants of answers or write the native language in the space provided for this as a fourth response variant. In some cases the native language does not coincide with nationality. If the native language is difficult to determine, write down the language that the person commands best or in which the person predominantly speaks in the family.

This instruction is very similar to the standard instruction in 1989 and earlier Soviet censuses. It emphasizes the language the individual commands best or uses in the family.

Other documentary evidence confuses the interpretation. In its English-language translation of the census, as well as publications of provisional data from the census, the CSB translates dzīmtā valoda into English as “mother tongue.” This interpretation is also likely to be given to the data submitted to international organizations. The CSB states in a glossary to its publication of provisional census results that dzīmtā valoda is an individual’s mother tongue (“Dzīmtā valoda ir personas mātes valoda”) (CSB 2001: 60). In the English-language section of that glossary, the CSB offers a definition:
Mother tongue – first language which the person spoke in early childhood. In some case[s] it could be not the same as ethnic nationality. In complicated cases to define mother tongue, the language that person commands best or [that] is most [often] currently spoken at home was marked on the person’s questionnaire (CSB 2001: 62; also see CSB 2002: 280).

This differs from the interpretation of čimtā valoda given in the census instructions, but it is consistent with common uses even in technical language in Latvia. For example, a dictionary of demographic terminology published recently by Latvia University (Zvidriņš 2001: 33) defines čimtā valoda in the same way as the CSB report of provisional census results:


Thus, while the 2000 census in Latvia appeared to adhere to the terminology of the Soviet censuses by asking about native language in both Latvian (čimtā valoda) and Russian (rodnoi iazyk), in translating the terms and reporting the data in English the “native language” question is referred to as “mother tongue” (mātes valoda) and offered with a definition that is more consistent with the concept of mother tongue than with the concept of native language as it was used in the Soviet censuses. In contrast to the 2000 census in Estonia, which used “mother tongue” (emakeel) as the official term and defined it in a way that was consistent with the idea of mother tongue (language of childhood), the 2000 census of Latvia used “native language” as the official term and in the instructions to the census taker but has subsequently translated the term as it meant “mother tongue.”

Ambiguity or flexibility in the interpretation of čimtā valoda in Latvia might also have come from following the UNECE/Eurostat manual. This manual offered four alternative questions on language: mother tongue (defined as first language, acquired in early childhood), main language (the language the person knows best), the language most often used at home and/or at work, and knowledge of languages (the ability to speak and/or write in one or several defined languages). None of these concepts refers to “native language.” That the CSB offers a definition of the census question on native language that is consistent with the first Eurostat option – mother tongue, the
language that the individual first spoke in childhood – makes it appear that the census practice was in greater conformity with the Eurostat standard than it was in actuality.

The approach taken in the 2000 census in Latvia differed from the 2000 census in Estonia: the census instructions in Latvia emphasize the language the individual knows best, while the instructions in Estonia emphasize the language the individual first learned. However, after the census Latvian CSB interpreted the native language question as if it meant mother tongue, which is consistent both with the Estonian census and with Eurostat’s recommendation.

For most census respondents the difference between “native language” and “mother tongue” is likely to be of no significance. It is probably true that, as one of my colleagues in Estonia wrote to me, “rodnoi iazyk is principally with similar connotation as our emakeel.” And it is probably true that for most Latvian census respondents, dzīmā valoda is equivalent to “mother tongue” even if that is not its literal translation. The closeness of meaning of mother tongue and native language could also have led to the hybrid use of dzīmā valoda in different CSB documents. But even allowing for ambiguity or flexibility of the concept, the instructions used in the Latvian census differed from the Eurostat definition of mother tongue, while the instructions in the Estonian census did not.

The distinction between native language and mother tongue may be important in a multi-ethnic setting and especially to people of mixed ethnic background. While in Riga, I presented a lecture about my research project to a first-year class in demography at Latvia University. During the question period one student remarked that how she would answer the census question would depend on whether the term was native language or mother tongue. When she was young she spoke mainly Russian with her mother and in the family, but now she thinks that since she is living in Latvia and Latvian is the national language then she should say Latvian is her native language. (I learned later that her mother is Russian, her father Latvian.) A young man approached me

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16 Ethnically mixed marriages are common in Latvia. About 20 percent of Latvians marry non-Latvians, while about 40 percent of Russians marry non-Russians. See Ezera (1999).
afterwards and told me that he did not know what his native language is (I think he was actually asking for my advice) because his father is Latvian and his mother is Russian, and he speaks both languages equally well. I told him that I did not have an answer for him and that censuses were not well designed to address this type of situation, though perhaps they could be improved.

So here were two spontaneous illustrations that the choice of concepts can make a difference. They illustrate the types of census response errors noted by Soviet demographers and statisticians in debates prior to the Soviet censuses (Silver 1986).17

**Other Languages.** Question 5 asks respondents to identify other languages that they could command (*prasme*). Six languages were listed on the form (Latvian, Russian, Belarusian, English, German, French) with boxes to check, along with a blank space to list one more language. In principle, an individual can check multiple boxes.

The approach is similar to the one adopted in Estonia, Lithuania, and, for that matter, Russia – though the idea of “command” of a language is not qualified with the adverb “strongly” or “freely.” Rather, the instructions state that the criterion is “Other languages that the person commands on the level of conversational speech [*na urovne razgovornoi rechi*].” Even without a formal test, therefore, some respondents are likely to audit their responses to correspond with their judgment of what it means to know a language well enough to carry on a conversation.

**Religion**

I remarked to a Latvian census official that both the Lithuanian and the Estonian censuses had included questions on religion. Did the Latvian census planners consider this also? He responded that after the census someone from the Ministry of Justice (which deals with church

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17 As Arel (2002) observes, in original conception *rodnoi iazyk* (native language) in Soviet censuses was chosen to emphasize the link between census respondents and their historic ethnic community, while the idea of mother tongue would have given greater emphasis to current linguistic facility (the language someone actually first learned to speak at home). That respondents to the Soviet censuses often claimed as *rodnoi iazyk* a language that they do not speak at all is evidence of this type of bias to the question and motivated later proposals to revise it during the Soviet period (Silver 1986). However, even *mother tongue* may not represent a language that a person knows best or can speak today but rather
relations) expressed regret that a religion question was not on the census, but by then it was too late. He said that it was not important to the census administrators to have such a question because they were focusing on the UNECE/Eurostat standard questions and the standard tabulations. Thus, it appears that including a religion question was never seriously considered.

**Census Results and the Undercount**

How members of the population are labeled is only one factor that affects whether they are counted. The accuracy of the count of the population by nationality or ethnicity is affected in the first instance by the completeness of coverage and by whether is a differential net undercounting by ethnicity. In November 2000 the CSB issued a press release under the title “The population of Latvia stands at 2 million and 375 thousand.” This was described as a decline of 10.9 percent or 291 thousand persons from the population counted in the 1989 census. The CSB also announced that the census had enumerated 44 thousand fewer individuals than had been estimated previously. It attributed this differential to unregistered emigration in the early 1990’s, primarily by non-Latvians. To my knowledge, however, the CSB has not reported any undercounting of persons who actually lived in Latvia at the time of the census (March 31, 2000). On the whole, the CSB thinks it has the totals about right.

The 44 thousand shortfall in the census was said not to be due to undercounting but rather to the difference between the census (and population register) count of the population in the year 2000 and previous population projections or estimates produced by the CSB. Those earlier estimates had been based on the usual population balancing methods – starting with the 1989 census count as a baseline, adding the number of registered births, subtracting the number of registered deaths, and adjusting for net migration. A study published in 1998 had already shown that the

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"it only is the language that respondents first learned or that was used in the family during their childhood. In some cases, the respondents may have lost their “mother tongue.”"

CSB’s published current estimates of the population of Latvia were exaggerated, especially for Russians and Jews (Zvidriņš 1998).

That the census found 44 thousand fewer people than the previous CSB projection for the year 2000 does not mean that either the register or the census is accurate – even if the totals agree with one another. However, according to a census official (personal communication), the census found fewer than a thousand persons who were not in the population register. The same official told me that some people think the census undercount could be as high as 5,000 but that he personally thought the number was much lower than that.

Because the 44 thousand person discrepancy was due to underestimated emigration, and because emigrants tend disproportionately not to be ethnic Latvians, the census count had the effect of increasing the proportion of the population that was Latvian, and decreasing the proportion that was Russian. Prior to the 2000 census the CSB had estimated that Latvians comprised 56 percent of the population in 2000 (about two percentage points too low), while Russians had been estimated to comprise 32 percent (about two percentage points too high) (CSB 2000: 37).

**Lithuania 2001 Census**

The census of Lithuania was intended to count the permanent population. With an April 6, 2001 critical date (actually 24 hours at 5 April 2001), the census enumerated 3.496 thousand people, a 5 percent decline since 1989. This contrasts with the reported 11 percent decline in Latvia and 13 percent decline in Estonia between 1989 and the year 2000 censuses. The Lithuanian Department of Statistics (LDS) attributes the decline in population mainly to three factors: persons who left for work or study abroad, Soviet army personnel and their families who left the country; and elimination

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of a number of people who had been added to the Lithuanian census count centrally (i.e., in Moscow) in 1989.

Oddly, the LDS does not attribute the decline to negative natural increase (excess of deaths over births), a phenomenon that is found in all of the European parts of the former Soviet Union, including Lithuania during the 1990’s. Furthermore, in principle Soviet army conscripts were not supposed to be counted in the permanent population in the 1989 census according to where they were serving but rather according to where they were called up, but the LDS attributes 50,000 of the 1989 census count to members of the military and their families who departed after 1991.20 In addition, the LDS states that 15,000 persons had been “added” to the 1989 census total by Moscow. The LDS also states that scientists are studying how many residents of Lithuania who were temporarily abroad (mainly as tourists or students) at the time of the 1989 census should be added to the 1989 count. Thus, how much of the population decline between 1989 and 2001 can be attributed to various factors remains uncertain.

**Nationality**

Question 23 on the 2001 census asks for “nationality,” with the names of four nationalities and an other” category in which an X is to be marked, as well as a blank to list the name of the “other” response. The listed nationalities are Lithuanian, Russian, Polish, and Belarusian. The wording of the question in Lithuanian, **Jūsų tautybė** (“Your nationality”) is identical in meaning to that in Latvian (**Jūsu tautība**). This approach is very similar to the one adopted in both Estonia and Latvia. To date (July 2002), no nationality distribution of the population from the 2001 census has been released or published. Data on nationality are scheduled for publication in September 2002.

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20 See [www.std.lt/Surasymas/Rezultatai/index_pirm_e.htm](http://www.std.lt/Surasymas/Rezultatai/index_pirm_e.htm). Military personnel were to be enumerated by permanent residence according to where they were serving (if they were serving within the territory of the Soviet Union), but they were supposed to be counted in census totals according to where lived when they were called up. See Anderson and Silver (1985b). Perhaps the LDS figure refers only to officers and their families (not draftees), who could have been counted in the permanent population of Lithuania in 1989 and most of whom presumably left in 1991.
Language

Native Language. Just like in Latvia, the census asked the respondent to identify “your native language” (Jūsų gimtoji kalba) (Question 24). Four languages were listed on the form (Lithuanian, Russian, Polish, and Belarusian) along with an “Other” category. The LDS translates the term in English, however, as “mother tongue.” Thus, both the Latvian and Lithuanian censuses were consistent with the Soviet census in using native language (džimtā valoda, gimtoji kalba) as the term on the census form, but both appear to have interpreted this term as equivalent to “mother tongue.” In contrast, Estonia used mother tongue (emakeel) on the census form.

Other Languages. Question 25 asks “What other languages do you know, i.e., that you are able to speak and/or write [Kurias kitas kalbas Jūs mokate, t.y. galite kalbėti ir/ar rašyti?].” Listed on the form, with boxes to be marked, are Lithuanian, Russian, Polish, English, French, German, Other (write) (two blank spaces provided), and “no command of other languages.” The approach to “other languages” taken in the Lithuanian 2001 census appears to be virtually identical to that in Latvia and Estonia.

Religion

Like the Estonian 2000 census, the 2001 Lithuanian census includes a question on religion. And it takes a similar approach. It first asks (Question 32): “Ar Jūs tikintis(-i)?” – literally, “Are you a believer?” but translated by the census administration as “Do you belong to any religious community?” The available response categories are Yes, No, and Not Indicated/Cannot Answer. Unlike the census in Estonia, answering the question on religion in Lithuania does not appear to be voluntary, although respondents do have the option of checking the third box.

A follow-up question (Question 33) asks: “To which religion/confession do you attach yourself? [Kuriai religinei bendruomenei Jūs save priskirstumėte?].” The form lists nine religions, a blank space for inscribing another religion, and a final category “none” (nė vienai). The listed religions are
Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Old Believer, Evangelic Lutheran, Evangelic Reformer, Moslem, Jewish, Greek Catholic, and Karaite.

In the 1997 pilot census, only the second question was included and fewer religions were listed on the form (Roman Catholic, Evangelic Lutheran, Orthodox Believer, Old Believe), but a category “unbeliever” was included. By adding the first question, it was no longer necessary to have the category “unbeliever” in the second question.

**Discussion**

The collection of data on nationality and language in the Baltic censuses engendered no public controversy. The use of nationality in official identification papers and registries is a different matter. All three countries continue to maintain information on nationality in their vital statistics registers – for births, deaths, marriage, and divorce (Eidukiene 2000, Herm 2000, Ušackis and Senkāne 2000). The use of ethnic labels for such purposes has come under intense international scrutiny, however, especially by the Council of Europe and commissions involved in the EU accession process.

Estonia and Lithuania have implemented laws on personal data protection that, for some types of official records and personal documents, either prohibit the listing of nationality or make it voluntary. Only in Latvia is nationality a required pieces of data in the population register, whereas it is voluntary in the Estonian and Lithuanian registers. In Estonia nationality is not included in the passport, in Lithuania it is voluntary, and in Latvia it was mandatory until 2002 after which it was eliminated. Of the three countries, Latvia appears to have maintained the most thoroughgoing regime of official nationality. At the time of my last visit in May 2001, a review of the population registration system was underway in Latvia. I was told then that it was possible that nationality would be removed from the population register. A year later, however, new legislation had left nationality in the population register as well as in vital registration of births, deaths, and marriages.
while removing it from passports. The removal of nationality from passports is to be gradual over several years, as individuals apply for their first passports or renew their old passports.

Latvia lists religion of parents on birth certificates, religion of the deceased on death certificates, and religion of husband and wife on marriage certificates. In contrast, Estonia and Lithuania do not list religion on any of these documents. But Estonia and Lithuania did include religion on the census.

Because census data are central to assessing progress toward societal integration as well as the goals of policy planners in health, education, and many other spheres of activity, they will be used very widely. Assessing progress toward inter-ethnic harmony, and achieving the goals of policy planners in education, health, and other spheres, however, will require not only the use of census data on the ethnic composition of the population but also an understanding of the provenance of the data.

The design of all the Baltic censuses appears to have been driven not only by the state’s need for accurate information about the population but also by the desire by political leaders to become fully accepted and integrated into “Europe.” The European Union cares a great deal about the status of minorities within potential accession countries. It, too, will rely on census data about ethnic groups in the Baltic countries to assess the degree of societal integration. Oddly enough, because of its own sensibility about human rights, the EU did not require the collection of the very data on ethnicity, language, or religion that are needed by the accession countries to prove their readiness to become full members of the EU.

References


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