

Chechen Census Fiasco

Author: [Timur Aliev](#)

A Russian-organised census says Chechnya population has inexplicably swelled during the last few years of war.

Given that the republic has suffered three years of conflict and emigration, many here were astounded when the results of the first census since the second Chechen war showed that the population had undergone a miraculous expansion.

Provisional returns from the Russian Federation census, conducted here over two days last week, showed that Chechnya's population stood at 1,080,000 - around three hundred thousand higher than 1999 estimates.

Since then, human rights activists calculate that up to 100,000 Chechens have died in fighting and far more forced to flee the republic. Around 150,000 refugees are registered in Ingushetia alone.

According to the Soviet census of 1977, the autonomous republic of Chechen-Ingushetia - Chechnya and Ingushetia combined - had a population of 1.1 million people. These included 300,000 Russians, almost all of whom have left since 1991, and 200,000 Ingush who formed their own separate republic in 1992.

Chechnya underwent another census in 1998, when it was de facto independent from Moscow. "A lack of funds, allocated to conduct the census, did not allow us to make a detailed analysis of the data," said Lyuba Magomadova, who was responsible for that count. "But the number of residents of the Chechen Republic was counted - it was approximately 800,000 people."

Moscow allocated almost 50 million roubles (more than one and a half million US dollars) to last week's census in Chechnya - Chechens are considered Russian citizens - and employed more than 10,000 people to work on it.

Perhaps fearing a backlash from the local population, it produced trinkets and pens and printed 400,000 leaflets - 200,000 each in Russian and Chechen - advertising the coming count. It was then trailed in newspapers and on television.

"The population of the republic actively participated in this state activity," Ramzan Digayev, the top census official told a session of the local government, who estimated that 90 per cent of the population had taken part. "The only people we could not count were those living in places which were hard to reach because of military action or the weather."

Yet many people, including those living in Grozny, say the census simply passed them by. Fatima Rasayeva, who lives in the Chernoreche on the outskirts of Grozny, simply shrugged her shoulders when asked if she was surveyed. "No one came either to us or to our relatives," she said.

Other Chechens, who want to be independent from Russia, say they refused to take part on principle. "That's why the authorities told the census-takers to go about with soldiers, because they knew we would not sign their papers otherwise," said Said Dadayev from the village of Shali. "I am a citizen of the Chechen Republic and even if I had given in to them I would have written "Ichkerian" in the box for nationality." The pro-independence government named Chechnya Ichkeria.

At first, the authorities proposed that every census-taker be accompanied by two or three security personnel for their own protection. But the former turned down the offers. "How could we look people in the eye, coming to them with the police?" said Zara Suleimanova, who was delivering census forms in Grozny. "People would simply not have understood us and thought we were coming to 'mop them up'." She was referring to the Russian military's constant brutal "mop-up" operations over the last three years.

Chechens who did fill in the forms said that answering some of the questions was a real challenge. "Take the point 'size of space occupied,'" said Lidia Yusupova, who was in charge of the census in the Leninsky region of Grozny. "Many of our residents live in semi-destroyed homes. In my own two-room apartment, one room is closed. The floor has fallen through from the fifth to the first storey. What should I say?"

Census-taking in Grozny was a tricky undertaking altogether. "In one five-storey block of flats, which was not even ruined, I could not get an answer from a single apartment," said Suleimanova. "Either absolutely no one is living in the house or no one wanted to answer the door."

Security concerns were a major reason why the census in Chechnya was conducted over just two days, instead of the week allocated for the rest of Russia. "It's possible that this small time-frame was the reason for the figure of a million and more," said Murad Nashkoyev, a Chechen political analyst "The population size they came up with was a rough guess."

Others see a political motive for the inflated figures. "I see two possible reasons for what has happened," said Ruslan Badalov, a prominent Chechen human rights activist based in Ingushetia. "In the first place, a deliberate increase in the size of the population is useful to heads of administration in Chechnya: it means allocation of financial resources for 'dead souls' - children's benefits, pensions and so on, which can then be 'pocketed away'.

"Secondly, the authorities in the Kremlin and the Russian military need this to show that people are returning and that means that military action in the republic has ended and peaceful life has returned."

Despite the chorus of complaint, the authorities have already begun to make use of the new figures. Meeting the president of Ingushetia, Murat Zyazikov, the pro-Moscow prime minister of Chechnya, Stanislav Ilyasov, asked, "One million one hundred thousand people are living peacefully in Chechnya, so why don't the refugees in Ingushetia return home?"

Ilyasov said that the census data showed that there were only 26,000 refugees living in camps in Ingushetia (many others live in private accommodation). He said most of them could be found homes in Chechnya.

Timur Aliev is a freelance journalist based in Nazran, Ingushetia.

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