

Uses of statistics in the civil war in Chechnya

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It is often assumed that the main function of statistics is to contribute to the development of beneficent public policies. But the conduct of the very first censuses, for example, had nothing to do with the distribution of resources to the population. The censuses were conducted in order to obtain conscripts for the Roman Army on a pro rata basis. The formal function of economic statistics is to guide management of the economy. But the practical function of the systems used to produce economic statistics in today's world is to support revenue-raising necessary for the existence of national governments – and most international organizations.

These examples illustrate that a major function of statistics is to support government activity and the exercise of governmental power. Whether the outcome is beneficial or not depends upon the way governmental power is exercised. Governments are also capable of inventing statistics to justify their activities.

Estimates of the size of the population of Chechnya in Russia, before and after the census conducted in October 2002, provide an example where statistics, including invented statistics, were used to support a variety of governmental activities. Some of these activities were beneficent, some routine, some fraudulent and some inhumane.

The account given here depends almost wholly upon a book on events in Chechnya in 2003 that culminated in the election of a president. The book entitled *The Imposition of a Fake Political Settlement in the Northern Caucasus* was produced by the Moscow Helsinki Human Rights Group and published by *ibidem*-Verlag in Germany. As one of the editors I believe that this book, through its many first-hand reports, gives a more comprehensive account of political developments in Chechnya in 2003 than is available elsewhere – even from Russian language sources. The matters relating to population covered in this article are drawn from a chapter, *Book of numbers – book of the lost*, by Alexander

Cherkasov of the Memorial Human Rights centre in Moscow. Page numbers are given for other references.

The second Chechen war

The first Chechen war started in 1994 with invasion by the Russian army and the destruction of Grozny by bombing, but ended in 1996 with an agreement that made Chechnya independent. An incursion from Chechnya into neighbouring Dagestan in 1999 led to the second Chechen war. Putin declared in September 1999 “We'll follow terrorists everywhere. Should we catch them in a shithouse, we'll kill them in a shithouse”. Putin's words have been widely quoted as ‘wiping them out in the shithouse’ (see http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Vladimir_Putin) [The language indicates the strength of feelings in Russia about Chechnya.

Comment: source

Those feelings make it easy to forget the uncomfortable fact that in the first Chechen war and in the period since 1999 the Russian army has effectively been conducting a civil war in Chechnya in which citizens of Russia have been killing each other. Those feelings help explain an unwillingness to admit that most of these killed and most who suffered in other ways were civilians, and help to explain a refusal to make a distinction between terrorists and separatists, who want Chechnya to become an independent state within the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) rather than part of Russia.

Alexander Mnatsakanyan, a freelance journalist, characterised the Russian government's perspective when he observed (in 2003): “I remember in January 1995 watching federal soldiers throwing loaves of bread into a crowd of Chechen women and elders, like a bone to a dog. I realized then that the objective of this war was not a matter of seizing territory or killing enemy soldiers. The key objective was to degrade the civilian population so that they become ready to accept any power – domestic, foreign, or even extra-terrestrial – as long as that power ensures order, food, and protection.” (page 37).

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What was the size of the population?

The October 2002 all-Russian census results in Chechnya were a surprise to everyone. The census takers expected to find a population of less than 800,000 and had asked for 825,000 forms to allow for some spoiling. But they ran out of forms, and several hundred thousand new forms had to be printed. The census estimate was that the population in 2002 was 1,088,000.

This compares with the previous census figure of 1,100,000 for 1989. So why the surprise?

There had been a massive refugee movement associated with both the first and second wars. The official estimate was that 750,000 Chechens had moved outside the Republic by 1999. Figures given by the Kremlin and the military put the population of Chechnya at the beginning of the second war in 1999 in the range 250–350,000. The 2002 census results were surprising because it appeared that the population of Chechnya had tripled between 1999 and 2002.

It is difficult to believe the estimate that 750,000 had moved out of Chechnya by 1999. But at that time those who favoured the war wanted to minimise estimates of the population to avoid challenge to further bombing of civilian areas. The smaller the population to be degraded, the easier to pretend that the problems of Chechnya in 1999 were just local skirmishes provoked by Islamic extremists. The associated population estimates of around 300,000 were understatements designed to reduce the apparent size of the conflict. A more realistic estimate, made by the Danish Refugee Council as described below, would be 600 thousand. The difference between 300,000 and 600,000 is a measure of the Kremlin's determination and ruthlessness.

The Russian government did not count the cost of this ruthlessness in terms of deaths or other casualties. Cherkasov points out that they followed the tradition set by Ivan the Terrible. The Tsar would periodically repent and try to make a list of those who he had killed or ordered to be killed. But he was aware that he did know of, or remember, all of them. He would end the list by saying 'As for the rest, You, Our Lord, know them yourself'.

There are no definitive estimates, but a survey was conducted in Grozny in the first Chechen war. Using the method devised in 1995 by Eduard Gelman of the Kurchatkov Institute, it was concluded that there were 25–29 thousand civilian deaths. Cherkasov reports that the Chechen State Committee, using the same data, made its own estimates of 30–40 thousand deaths. In the second Chechen

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war Cherkasov reports that, using the same method, the best estimate is 15–24 thousand civilian deaths. But this estimate does not take into account many of those identified as missing or ‘disappeared’.

What was the population of Chechnya in 2002?

In the winter of 2002 the Danish Refugee Council conducted a house-to-house survey in Chechnya in order to help determine needs for humanitarian aid. The Council counted 600,000. This was the figure cited to an OSCE meeting held in August 2002. Cherkasov, taking into account other sources, indicates that this may be the most accurate and reliable estimate of the population at the time of the Census conducted in October.

The other sources include a census conducted between August and October 1998 before the second war began. That census put the population at 800,000 – consistent with the official figure, derived from administrative sources, of 797 thousand as at January 1999. The Danish Refugee Council estimate of 600,000 would appear reasonable if, after allowing for civilian deaths, it were assumed that the second war had resulted in about 190,000 refugees escaping from, but not returning to Chechnya.

In November 2002, a month after the all-Russia census, the Danish Refugee Council conducted its regular house-to-house survey, and this time came up with the figure of 700 thousand. Cherkasov notes that “the interest of village administrators in the distribution of humanitarian aid might have augmented its earlier estimate”.

Such an augmentation gives a clue to the factors influencing the census estimate of 1,088 thousand for October. The governmental requirements had changed. Earlier the Kremlin had understated the population in order to support its military strategy. But by the time the census was conducted it was being asserted that the insurgents had been defeated. The governmental interest had changed, the Kremlin wanted to demonstrate that its victory was complete. The return of population could be seen as indicative of victory.

State and local government in Chechnya had an interest in demonstrating that the situation had been restored to normal in order to ensure a flow of resources to support the Chechen population. In order to draw more resources from the centre,

officials at all levels in Chechnya also had a motivation to be complicit in the overstatement of population.

There is no reason to suppose that the local administrators or census takers in Chechnya carried out any kind of fraudulent activity. It can be assumed that unanticipated demand for extra census forms was quite genuine. Cherkasov explains that the authorities in Chechnya as elsewhere stated that the privacy of the content of the census forms would be respected. But the population of Chechnya were rather less likely to believe such assurances than the population of most other countries.

At the time of the census many residents of Chechnya had two addresses. Having two addresses was not an indicator of affluence. One address was the former home destroyed or rendered uninhabitable by the war. The other was that of the relative or friend where the family had found refuge. The government had promised compensation for war damage. It was important that families registered their ownership of their former home. It may also have been important for an individual to register such an interest on behalf of a relative or friend who had fled further afield. Filling in census form was seen by many as a way of substantiating a claim for compensation.

Another factor was a matter of self-protection. In the second Chechen war, and at the time of the census, and in the period since, the population of Chechnya was, and is, subject to cleansing, or mop-up operations. The cleansing or mop-up operations might be conducted by law enforcement agencies or by the siloviki – the often unidentifiable groups in Chechnya who had de facto power to arrest, detain and kill. The putative aim of cleansing or mop-up operations was to identify and arrest or kill insurgents.

Any individual who could not show that they belonged at the address at which they were found was at increased risk of being identified as an insurgent. It can be expected that many members of the Chechen population would believe that filling in the census form would give some protection against that risk. That protection might be specially important if, for example, they were visiting their former home in order to make repairs. Filling in a census form for two addresses would be seen by some as a kind of insurance ticket that might help them to survive a cleansing operation.

Election results

The inflated census results may have brought more resources to Chechnya for a period. But it can be expected that the overstatement was not consistent with the local authorities own administrative needs. Extensive double counting would have created inequity problems at a local level. Russians traditionally register their home address with the local authority. The Chechen state committee for statistics drawing on the records of such registrations used a figure of 813,000 for the population of Chechnya in 2003 not a figure based on the census result of 1,088,000.

The area in which the census results were most influential was in the reporting of the referendum held in March 2003, the presidential election held in October 2003, and the Duma elections held in December 2003. The census figures provided a cover for the invention of statistics for inflating the size of the electorate. The invented figures provided what Cherkasov calls an 'army of dead souls' used to create fictitious election results. The declared number of electors in the presidential election, for example, was given as 561,817, including 30,000 servicemen. An electorate of that size implies a total population level of about 890,000. Such a population level is well below the inflated census figure, but substantially above the state committee of statistics figure of 813,000.

The Kremlin objective at this stage was to convince the population that their nominee Kadyrov was the popular choice. The election was rigged. Credible opposition candidates were withdrawn. The election results were largely invented statistics. It was declared that the deeply unpopular Kadyrov, the Kremlin nominee, had received 83% of the votes with an 82% turnout. Tanya Lokshina's account, in chapters 11,12 and 13 denies the credibility of that result.

Overstatement of the size of the electorate as well as the number of votes cast reduces the credibility of the results. But it appears that the powers-that-be in Chechnya did not see anything untoward in compounding invention of voting figures with overstatement of the size of the electorate. It appears that the powers-that-be were more interested in demonstrating their control than being credible.

The role of statistics

Chechnya's experience should act as reminder and warning of the ways governments can use statistics to the detriment as well as to the benefit of the subject population. In the case of Chechnya the Russian Government understated the population to help justify the second war and overstated the population in 2003 to help impose its own nominee as president. Statistical truth was among the later as well as being among the first casualties in this particular war.

It would be optimistic to imagine that a national statistical office has complete independence from government while a war is going on. The Russian Government was able to get away with telling blatant lies about the population of Chechnya because of the compliance of the mass media. Russia lacked an independent press or independent TV services as well as an independent statistical office.

The statistics produced by the local administration in Chechnya did not grossly understate the population at the beginning of the war. Had there been an independent press the population statistics produced by the local administration in Chechnya could have been used to expose the Kremlin's understatement of the population at the beginning of the second war. The local administrative statistics did not grossly overstate the population in 2003 and, had there been an independent press, the evidence could have been used to indicate falsification of the presidential election results in 2003. The local statistics were closer to reality because of the links to what remained of the local administrative services.

The universal message from Chechnya's experience is that sub-national statistical offices in touch with local conditions can be crucial component in supporting a statistical service independent of central Government. The massaging of statistics and the big lie comes more easily to the statistical office that is remote from the population it is supposed to serve.

That message may be important for the UK. The Labour Party's 1997 election pledge to create a statistical service independent of government has been revived by proposals to introduce new legislation and, at the time of writing, a public consultation is underway. But it is difficult to find any mention of local government in the seventy eight submissions by individuals and organization to this consultation. At <http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/budget/budget_06/other_documents/bud_bud06_odstatistics_responses.cfm>

Britain has a highly centralised statistical system. The abolition of the Greater London Council in 1986 removed the last possibility of local government playing a significant role in the production of statistics in the UK. The debate about independence since that time has focused on the roles of different Whitehall organizations: ONS and Treasury, GSS and Ministries, OPDM and Parliament, etc. Apart from devolution to Scotland and Wales there has been no acknowledgement of the degree of geographical centralisation. The case of Chechnya should remind us all that local government can play a part in creating a statistical service that creates trust because it is independent of both Whitehall and central Government.

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Thanks to the three external reviewers who gave comments on this paper.