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Goskomstat and the Census: Evaluating the Process and Results

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Abstract

The issue of accuracy, or whether Soviet censuses have or have not presented data in a way that is as close to reality, or the "truth," or closer to results produced by established western methods, as possible, has been a primary focus in studies of Soviet censuses. While such analyses are obviously important, as I argue below, the census must not only be analyzed in terms of the data alone. Instead, as in other democratic institutions, the process is just as, if not more, important as the results.

Moreover, in order to understand why the results of the census do or do not measure up to international standards, we should consider the role of Goskomstat, the Russian state statistical committee, which is the institution that was responsible for organizing and carrying out the census, because it is by understanding the workings of this institution that we will be able to understand the basis for problems or successes in the census data. In other words, to focus only on results misses the underlying causes of those results; it is not that accuracy doesn't matter, but that results alone don't give insight into why there are or are not problems with results.

Finally, it is important to note that the census marks a crucial organizational achievement in the post-Soviet development of Goskomstat, perhaps as significant as the earlier move to a system of national accounts, and the census is therefore a window into the process of Russian state development. As I will discuss below, despite the problems with the census, Goskomstat is not the same old Soviet state bureaucracy, but it is also still a long way from an efficient, reliable, democratic institution.