
OFFICIAL STATISTICS PEER REVIEWS 2021 TO 2023

Procedure for and evaluation of the peer review conducted
in December 2021 at the Federal Statistical Office

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ABSTRACT

In 2021, the Federal Statistical Office participated for the third time in the peer review held at regular intervals by the Statistical Office of the European Union. This is an important procedure which harmonises and ensures the quality of the official statistics processes in the European Statistical System. It is applied in all European Union Member States and in the countries of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA). In the peer review, an independent expert team examines how the European Statistics Code of Practice is implemented in the national statistical institutes and then prepares and submits a public report containing recommendations for further development. This article focuses on the recommendations given by the expert team for the German statistical system.

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1

Introduction

The statistical office of the European Union (Eurostat) and the statistical offices of the European Union (EU) Member States are the leading providers of high-quality statistical information on the EU, its Member States and regions. The internet and the data that are permanently available there, coupled with debates around fake news and alternative facts, mean that the reputation of official statistics and the confidence and trust stemming therefrom are extremely important. In order to safeguard the quality of European statistics and to ensure that they can be developed further, extensive reviews of the quality criteria agreed on a pan-European basis – so-called peer reviews – are carried out at intervals of several years in the European Statistical System (ESS). During the current round of peer reviews from 2021 to 2023, German official statistics bodies were reviewed in December 2021. As well as setting out the sequence of events involved in the peer review visit, this article explains the recommendations made in the review and the actions to be taken. It also looks at the peer review tool within the context of the current development of the ESS and assesses its prospects.

2

Peer reviews as a tool for ensuring independence and quality in the ESS

2.1 Political independence as a key defining feature of official statistics

The Federal Statistical Office, together with representatives of the statistical offices of the Länder and other national authorities (ONAs) which supply data to Eurostat, has successfully undergone the third round of the European peer reviews in official statistics 2021-2023. Following consultation with the expert team, the actions are published on the Eurostat website¹. These show the areas of German official statistics where processes need

1 ec.europa.eu

to be optimised further in order to comply even more closely with the Code of Practice. Compliance with the European Statistics Code of Practice essentially ensures that the fields of politics, business and finance, but also citizens, have reliable statistics at their disposal.

In contrast to various areas of the academic community, where such peer review procedures have been in use for a long time, the European peer review procedure in official statistics is a relatively new quality assurance tool which has only become established since 2006 onwards.

The focus of the peer reviews that are conducted is to safeguard the independence of official statistics. The importance of this issue is exemplified by the recent development in Spain, where short-term economic data published by the country's National Statistics Institute (INE) have repeatedly been called into question by policy-makers. This ongoing dispute, which has been increasingly played out in the media too, ultimately resulted in the resignation of the INE's president (WirtschaftsWoche, 2022). Particularly in times of crisis concerning the economy and energy policy, together with a global pandemic that continues to rage, the damage caused by such arguments surrounding the credibility of official statistics can be considerable. Guaranteed professional independence is not only a key feature that lends official statistics a unique status, but also a vital commodity in democratic countries:

“Reliability of statistical data in terms of technical quality-assessment criteria is a pre-requisite in order to ensure the trust of users. But equally important is the credibility of the institutions producing statistics. In this context, the professional independence of statistical authorities must receive particular attention and be guaranteed by law.”²

This view is also shared by the European Statistical Governance Advisory Board (ESGAB)³. In a press release dated 5 July 2022 (ESGAB, 2022), it stated the following:

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- 2 Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EC) No 223/2009 on European statistics, here: Page 2 Explanatory Memorandum, 1. Context of the proposal, paragraph 2, sentences 3 to 5.
 - 3 The European Statistical Governance Advisory Board (ESGAB) is a body comprising high-level, independent statistical experts from EU Member States. It monitors compliance with the Code of Practice in the ESS and thus contributes to the quality and independence of European official statistics.

“ESGAB reiterates the legal obligation of national governments to respect the professional independence of NSIs stipulated in Regulation (EU) 223/2009 on European statistics. Policy makers exerting pressure on NSIs and other European statistics producers on the methods of calculation of certain statistics, like GDP or the inflation rate, breach this obligation.”

2.2 Key – albeit non-obligatory – element for reviewing the implementation of the Code of Practice

The peer review is not a legally mandatory procedure but is instead based on the principle of voluntariness by the ESS Member States. The attempt to create a legally binding framework resulted in 2015 in the “Commitments on Confidence in Statistics”, which individual Member States signed up to.

The document in question explicitly addresses the use of Commitments on reliable statistics as a basis for the implementation of the Code of Practice. An amendment to Regulation (EC) No 223/2009 in 2015 expanded Article 11. This now states that the Member States must establish and publish Commitments. Should they fail to do this, they shall then be obliged to submit and make public a progress report on the implementation of the Code of Practice and on the efforts undertaken towards the establishment of a Commitment every two years. This procedure shall be monitored on an annual basis by the European Commission.

The European Commission shall report to the European Parliament and the Council on the published commitments and, where appropriate, progress reports every two years. The first two reports were published in 2018 and 2020. The legal framework for the self-regulatory Code of Practice established in 2005 for the development, production and dissemination of European statistics by the ESS is laid down in Regulation (EC) No 223/2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 March 2009 on European statistics. This is set out in Article 12 and Article 2.

There is no all-embracing interpretation of this framework that is binding in all European Member States. In both the European peer review and in the international context of the United Nations (UN), this means that

although the Code of Practice is basically part of a legal framework, there is no obligation beyond this framework.

2.3 Ongoing evaluation is designed to increase acceptance and benefit

A separate Eurostat Task Force, in which the Federal Statistical Office is also represented, exists for the peer review. As of August 2022, the other members of the Task Force were Austria, the Czech Republic, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Sweden, Slovenia and Spain. The ESGAB also has a representative. The Task Force meets two to three times a year and discusses both the peer review procedure and the implementation steps. Its objectives include harmonising the peer review processes and reports and creating a high degree of transparency. Specific efforts for standards include developing a uniform template design and harmonising statistical terminology. The Task Force also takes decisions on suitable media activities.

3

Current round in the German statistical system

As well as reviewing the implementation of the Code of Practice, the third round of peer reviews that is currently taking place aims to provide support in improving national statistical systems further by drawing up forward-looking recommendations. The peer review visit in Germany was conducted virtually from 13 to 17 December 2021. The timeline agreed by Eurostat was geared towards these dates, and includes the following key events:

3.1 Selection of the participating ONAs

The ONAs participating in the peer review were selected by the Federal Statistical Office in consultation with the respective authority based on predefined criteria (for example, the size and the frequency of data supplied to Eurostat). As was the case in the second round of peer

reviews, the fourteen statistical offices of the Länder formed a combined ONA due to their prominent role in the production of statistics in Germany. In addition, the Federal Employment Agency and the Federal Office for Agriculture and Food also agreed to participate in the peer review.

3.2 Self-assessment questionnaires

Once the choice of ONAs had been sent around five months before the peer review visit, the first stage of the review process began. Each authority participating in the peer review completed an extensive self-assessment questionnaire containing up to 300 questions. This contained an assessment of the implementation status for each of the Code of Practice's 84 indicators, and the rationale underpinning the assessment. A SWOT analysis also needed to be carried out for each of the 16 principles. Here, the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in terms of compliance with the principle had to be identified. In addition, institutions had to answer overarching, forward-looking questions for each of the three sections of the Code of Practice and on how it is dealing with the coronavirus pandemic. A whole range of additional documents also had to be submitted in addition to the self-assessment questionnaires. These covered the participating authorities' legal basis, working programmes and internal information on their resources structure, among other things.

The process of drawing up all documents was coordinated by the Federal Statistical Office for the German statistical system. All documents were sent on time three months before the peer review visit.

3.3 Coordination of the agenda

The peer review visit was prepared by the expert team based on the documents submitted. Each visit addresses a range of topics covering the principles included in the Code of Practice. As regards the contents of the visit, however, the issues that are prioritised vary from country to country. A second component of the visit sees the expert team hold discussions with external stakeholders in order to seek users' views on official statistics. Two months before the visit, the expert team submitted its initial draft for an agenda to the Federal Statistical Office. This marked the start of an intensive period of prepara-

tion in which, in addition to internal measures relating to the content and organisation of the visit, around 25 external stakeholders were invited to take part. Because of the rapidly changing situation regarding the coronavirus pandemic in Germany, it was agreed at short notice to conduct the visit virtually. The final version of the agenda was agreed on by the expert team, Eurostat and the Federal Statistical Office two weeks before the start of the visit.

3.4 Staging of the visit

The first two days of the virtual visit were devoted to discussing compliance with the Code of Practice principles by the statistical offices of the Federation and the Länder. In terms of content, the priority issues were cooperation and safeguarding quality standards in the federal system, the availability of resources and political independence of the Federal Statistical Office, as well as the legal basis. The expert team was also presented with the development plans of the network of statistical offices⁴. A discussion with junior staff, both male and female, from various departments at the Federal Statistical Office provided the expert team with an insight into the working situation.

The focus on the third day of the visit was on the production of statistics by the participating ONAs. Besides the productive cooperation between the Federation and the Länder within the German official statistics network, the expert team praised the statistical expertise of the Federal Employment Agency.

Day four of the visit was dominated by talks between the expert team and various stakeholders in the field of official statistics in Germany. Discussions with data providers, different user groups (associations, ministries and the media) and the chair of the Statistical Advisory Committee openly addressed strengths and opportunities for improvement.

In the closing discussion held with the responsible parties from all of the authorities taking part in the peer review, held on the final day of the visit, the expert team presented its recommendations for the German statistical system. These recommendations were subsequently formulated in writing for the report.

⁴ The statistical offices of the Länder and the Federal Statistical Office form the network of statistical offices.

4

Review report: German official statistics complies with the Code of Practice

4.1 Expert team praises the excellent development in the last five years

The report notes that the German statistical system is well aligned with the Code of Practice and it praises the progress made in the last five years. This includes making statistical results more user-friendly through new forms of publication, such as dashboards or interactive applications. The integration of new digital data into official statistics and the broad range of experimental statistics are also highlighted as positive developments. Moreover, the report confirms that tasks within the network of statistical offices are shared efficiently and that coordination is good.

4.2 Recommendations for improving the national statistical system

Recommendations to improve the implementation of the Code of Practice are the central plank of the report. These are split into those which are necessary to ensure

compliance with the European Code of Practice and those which are geared more towards achieving further improvements in areas where the principles of the Code of Practice are essentially already met.

In the report available for Germany, eight out of a total of 23 recommendations relate to direct compliance with the Code of Practice. As provided for under the peer review process, the respective national statistical institute and the participating ONAs have the chance to present diverging views on the recommendations and to set out their reasons if they do not adopt a particular recommendation. In close consultation with the institutions involved in the peer review (statistical offices of the Länder, Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community, Federal Employment Agency, Federal Office for Agriculture and Food), the Federal Statistical Office rejected seven out of a total of 23 recommendations, stating a diverging view. With regard to the remaining 16 recommendations, the Federal Statistical Office has been asked to put forward corresponding measures to implement the recommendations (“improvement actions”). Following harmonisation with the expert team, these are published as part of the review report. [↪ Figure 1](#)

Figure 1

Peer review 2021-2023: Extract from the recommendations of the peer review report, by topics

Quality	Cooperation	Other
Improve access to data; establish a metadata system	National Guidelines to strengthen the statistical system as a whole	Sufficient distribution of resources by respective administrative supervisory bodies
Modify the legal basis	Adaptation and broadening of the Memoranda of Understanding	Knowledge-sharing between methodological units at the Federal Statistical Office
Expand quality monitoring	Closer interaction at committee level between the Federal Statistical Office, the statistical offices of the Länder and ONAs	Examination of opportunities to expand the Research Data Centre

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4.3 Recommendations relate to virtually all areas of statistics production

Recommendations in the peer review not only show suggestions for potential improvements but also offer an excellent opportunity to systematically place key actions at the core of the work programme and to implement them with broad approval. Three examples are set out below:

Actions 1 and 2: Enhancing cooperation and coordination

Upon completion of the review visit, the impression gained by the peer review expert team was that the coordination role of the Federal Statistical Office is well established as far as the statistical offices of the Länder are concerned but should be reinforced regarding ONAs. To comply with the European Statistics Code of Practice, the Federal Statistical Office should therefore formalise and publish National Guidelines to ensure quality in the development, production and dissemination of European statistics, applicable to all ONAs.

The establishment of an overarching coordination mechanism to bring together the statistical offices of the Länder and the ONAs should also be considered. In this way, experiences and insights about implementing the principles of the Code of Practice to strengthen the German statistical system can be shared. Against this background, the Federal Statistical Office is planning to gradually expand the quality guidelines applicable to the network of statistical offices to the ONAs and to establish binding rules on their application in a Memorandum of Understanding. Compliance with and implementation of the quality guidelines is monitored regularly in the course of the evaluation of the respective Memorandum of Understanding. Furthermore, the form of cooperation that is established in the network of statistical offices is ideally to be expanded to cooperation with the ONAs. The specific form of cooperation is defined in the two working groups of “IT and Standards” and “Methods and Quality”. A number of statistical offices of the Länder should also play a part in implementing best practices.

The contribution made by this action is therefore two-fold: not only does it help in clarifying the role of the Federal Statistical Office as a coordinating body in the

national statistical system, but it also offers ONAs the opportunity to improve the quality of the data they produce through the sharing of best practices.

Action 6: Enhancing the legal and institutional environment

The peer review expert team established that the Federal Statistical Office does not publish a statistical work plan for the German statistical system as such. Nor are there many statements on the planned measures for strategic development. This makes it hard for users to appreciate the range of work that the German statistical system is responsible for. As a result, the Federal Statistical Office should improve the transparency of the operation of the German statistical system by publishing an accessible work plan. This recommendation is to be met by establishing a new web-based publication which will provide information on the current statistical programme as well as on upcoming projects and strategic measures. The action therefore directly reflects the Federal Statistical Office’s strategic development, one of the aims of which is the publication of target group-oriented products.

Action 19: Improving dissemination of statistical releases and data

In order to enable the ministries concerned and/or the directly participating ONAs to prepare for queries, these selected bodies are given pre-release access to specific statistics from 2 pm the day before the publication of a press release. Statistical authorities have to ensure the objective and transparent production and dissemination of European statistics and all users should be treated equitably. In the case of the advance release of statistics, the peer review team therefore sees a need for strict limits to guarantee compliance with the European Statistics Code of Practice. For this reason, the Federal Statistical Office should ensure that the privileged pre-release access for outside users is justified more clearly, and is more limited in time and number. The implementation of this action saw a critical examination of and significant reduction in the group of privileged bodies. Such a decrease would have been much more difficult without this urgent recommendation from the peer review report.

4.4 Peer review recommendations provide significant impetus for strategic development

Overall, the recommendations of the peer review expert team are a source of important information on the potential for improvement at virtually all levels of statistical production. They also provide opportunities to transform this potential into innovations and to optimise processes. No less important is the fact that the peer review report gives the Federal Statistical Office direct feedback from an important group of users regarding the products published and the underlying processes, information which would otherwise have to be ascertained through time-consuming and costly workshops. Finally, the administrative and specialist supervisory authorities receive valuable information on the targeted support required by the statistical offices of the Federation and the Länder in order to take full advantage of the potential that exists.

Based on the requests made to all of the Member States, Eurostat will compile an annual summary report for the European Statistical System Committee (ESSC) and the ESGAB. As well as describing the progress achieved in implementing improvement actions, the report gives an overview of outstanding issues, any delays that have occurred and the reasons for them, and the proposed timeline for resolving these problems.

5


Conclusion and outlook

With regard to peer review visits, the preparation process in particular involves considerable effort on the part of the coordinating national statistical institute. Completing the detailed self-assessment questionnaire and compiling the additional documents tied up a great deal of human resources in various departments at the Federal Statistical Office. Added to this was the lengthy process of coordination and harmonisation that was required to bring together all of the requisite documents from the participating ONAs. Answering the many specialist statistical questions was unfamiliar and required

a lot of work, especially for authorities whose main job is not the production of statistics.

With its aim of posing the same quality-related questions to all national statistical systems in Europe, the peer review pursues an ambitious policy. The systems in Europe are not only sometimes very different from one another, but also have different strengths and face different challenges. Consequently, a formalised and highly standardised review mechanism such as the peer review has limitations. The same is true for the various specialised statistics within a system, which are often at different stages of development or have a different legal basis. It is similarly challenging for national statistical institutes to make general statements since questions for different areas of statistics sometimes require different responses.

Generally speaking, there is scope for improvement when it comes to sharing documents with Eurostat and the expert team throughout the entire peer review process. In the current round, documents were exchanged exclusively via e-mail. To make sending the documents to be submitted for the peer review easier, Eurostat could in future provide an online portal where they could be uploaded. An online questionnaire in which answers can be entered directly and changed up to a particular point in time would also be an option. Overall, the formal sequence of events involved in the peer review is no longer appropriate for a digital and modern Directorate-General at EU level.

Nevertheless, the Federal Statistical Office can draw a positive conclusion overall from the peer review round 2021-2023. The processes of preparing and conducting the review visit, and the subsequent evaluation process, led to a thorough analysis and improvement of internal processes. Insights from discussions with representatives of the ONAs and stakeholders during the review visit were also valuable. The productive exchange with the external expert team, comprising international specialists, should be highlighted. All in all, the peer review provides valuable ideas for developing the national statistical system further. The peer review is therefore a lengthy yet rewarding process which should be retained and refined in some places. 

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Abbreviations

WISTA	=	Wirtschaft und Statistik
JD	=	annual average
D	=	average (for values which cannot be added up)
Vj	=	quarter of a year
Hj	=	half-year
a. n. g.	=	not elsewhere classified
o. a. S.	=	no main economic activity
St	=	piece
Mill.	=	million
Mrd.	=	billion

Explanation of symbols

–	=	no figures or magnitude zero
0	=	less than half of 1 in the last digit occupied, but more than zero
.	=	numerical value unknown or not to be disclosed
...	=	data will be available later
X	=	cell blocked for logical reasons
I or —	=	fundamental change within a series affecting comparisons over time
/	=	no data because the numerical value is not sufficiently reliable
()	=	limited informational value because numerical value is of limited statistical reliability