

ESS STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

EUROSTAT, DIRECTORATE DG

UNIT 01 — EXTERNAL AND INTERINSTITUTIONAL RELATIONS; COMMUNICATION

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis is having a direct impact on the production of European official statistics and, at the same time, is leading to an increased demand for data published by Eurostat and the National Statistical Institutes (NSIs) of the European Statistical System (ESS). In the face of the crisis, Eurostat and its ESS partners are working closely together to develop practical solutions and concrete responses to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 outbreak.

This document is based on the experience gathered by Eurostat and 15 out of the [18 National Statistical Institutes](#), who together constitute the 'Task Force on ESS strategic communication', created in March 2020. It presents the first summary of the challenges faced and communication actions taken by NSIs in response to the COVID-19 outbreak as well as the lessons learned in the first months of the spread of the pandemic.

It is hoped that the ongoing exchange of experience in the area of communication between Eurostat and its European Statistical System partners will provide useful advice for communication professionals and also contribute to the deepening of the debate about the role of official statistics in a time of crisis.

2. ESS communication response to the COVID-19 crisis

KEEPING USERS INFORMED

One of the main communication challenges that NSIs have faced since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has been informing their users, partners, and data providers in a timely and transparent way, about the changes to their operations brought about by the crisis. Most NSIs have faced difficulties in providing all of the data that they normally produce, since survey

respondents have not been able to report and certain surveys could not be carried out. Major efforts have therefore been made by NSIs to inform users about the effect that missing or incomplete data have had on the publication of regular statistics and about other changes to the organisations' operations. Users have also been reassured that NSIs are focusing all of their efforts on maintaining business continuity, delivering the planned products and services, and assuring high quality output.

PROVIDING INNOVATIVE SOURCES AND PRODUCTS

NSIs have been exploring the use of alternative data sources, not only to replace regular data but also to provide new data for monitoring the impact of the crisis. Furthermore, a number of NSIs have started providing statistical products and services targeted at specific groups of users, such as material for students and teachers, special reports for policy-makers, tailored data services for the media, and fact-checking content for citizens.

ENGAGING WITH RESPONDENTS

NSIs have appealed to data respondents to continue to participate in surveys as far as possible during the crisis, by underlining the importance of collecting reliable statistics to assess the impact of the crisis across the EU. In some cases, where it has not been possible to continue with a data collection, the NSI has introduced a temporary suspension of the data collection. In the feedback from Task Force members, keeping respondents informed of the changes to the data collection process was identified as a good practice.

SUPPORTING THE FIGHT AGAINST FAKE NEWS

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic saw a significant rise in the spread of disinformation and fake news. As producers of official statistics, NSIs have a distinct role to play in the fight against fake news and most see the crisis as an opportunity to further strengthen their brands as reliable sources of information. Some NSIs are actively contributing to the fight against fake news by publishing relevant data more frequently (e.g. mortality, labour market and business statistics) and by issuing official figures on social media. Other NSIs have not yet taken action and are seeking ESS guidance or coordinated ESS action in this area.

COMMUNICATING WITH STAFF

The health and well-being of staff has been taken very seriously by all NSIs and internal communication has consequently been an important element in managing this crisis. The NSIs have made significant efforts to keep their staff regularly and clearly informed about the impact of the crisis on working arrangements. This has been done via traditional channels, such as e-mails, but also newly launched channels and tools, including new, bespoke platforms, WhatsApp groups and Facebook groups. Staff have also been encouraged to share updates

from their NSIs on their personal social media accounts. A particular challenge has been to communicate effectively with new staff who joined the organisation during lockdown.

FINDING COMMON SOLUTIONS AND COORDINATING WITHIN THE ESS

Significant efforts have been made within the ESS to ensure that a common approach to data quality and methodology is communicated in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Eurostat and NSIs have prepared guidelines and notes to support ESS statisticians and these are published in a new dedicated section on the Eurostat website. NSIs report that they have intensified their collaboration and coordination efforts with Other National Authorities (ONAs) to ensure harmonised national communication activities for clear, consistent messages. In particular, they have shared methodological guidance, supporting material and new collaboration tools with ONAs.

WIDENING THE RANGE OF COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

NSIs have employed a number of channels and tools to engage with their users. Some of these channels were already in use, while others have been created for the purposes of communicating during the COVID-19 crisis. Several NSIs have used social media monitoring tools to identify new data needs in relation to COVID-19 or to track the online reputation of the NSI. A complete overview of all the employed channels and tools is presented in the table below:

Channel	Content
Website – homepage	Banner on the homepage
Website – dedicated section	General information and announcements regarding the organisation's operations
	Topical information (key indicators for economy, society, demographics, health)
	Up-to-date press releases and news articles (regular releases and new data relevant to the crisis)
	Up-to-date release calendar
	New surveys and data for assessing the impact of the pandemic (e.g. special new analyses, territorial statistical information, demographic information, tourism, etc.)
	New data visualisation tools (infographics, maps, dashboards)
	New special reports
	Links to relevant datasets
	Fact-finding sections
	Visual identity material for COVID-19 communication (special images, logos)
	FAQs with most frequent requests from users
	Material for teachers and students
	Access to special tailored services for the media, available on demand
Links to other bodies providing statistics	

Social media (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube)	Amplifying all institutional communication
	Relaunching content published on the website
	Providing user support via social media channels
	Targeted communication (especially targeting citizens with fact-checking content)
	Monitoring organisations' online reputation
	Special hashtags
Other media	Radio and TV interviews with managers
	Targeted videos (for staff, for respondents)
Direct contact	Press conferences (physical and virtual)
	E-mails and letters (to respondents; as PR actions for key stakeholders and institutional partners)
	Newsletters
	Weekly reports on COVID-19
	Telephone calls
	Special communication to researchers and microdata users on new initiatives to produce COVID-19 data

3. First lessons learned

While giving their input on the first lessons learned, most NSIs underlined the need for a pre-defined crisis communication plan within the organisation, that can be quickly activated in situations such as this. Specific issues to be taken into account in such a plan include the need for fast and clear communication channels with data producers, users, the general public and other relevant partners. In addition, social media play a major part in the effective communication to key audiences and their use in crisis situations should be maximised.

4. Opportunities offered by the crisis

In a sudden crisis situation, it is still important to think strategically, and to recognise and act on the opportunities that are created. Promoting the value of official statistics, enhancing brands and advocating the use of new data sources are some of the areas of work that have been identified as important and timely in the current situation. In addition, many NSIs have used the crisis as an opportunity to demonstrate their value and relevance to society by providing new products and services.

Members of the Task Force on ESS strategic communication

Organisation	
1	Statistics Austria
2	Statistics Belgium
3	Destatis
4	Statistics Denmark
5	Hellenic Statistical Authority
6	INE Spain
7	INSEE France
8	Croatian Bureau of Statistics
9	Hungarian Central Statistical Office
10	CSO Ireland
11	Istat
12	Statistics Lithuania
13	Statistics Netherlands
14	Statistics Poland
15	Statistics Portugal
16	Statistical Office of Slovenia
17	Statistical Office of Slovakia
18	Statistics Finland
19	Eurostat

NSIs that contributed to this document by sharing their experience

National Statistical Institute	
1	Statistics Austria
2	Statistics Belgium
3	Hellenic Statistical Authority
4	INE Spain
5	INSEE France
6	Croatian Bureau of Statistics
7	Hungarian Central Statistical Office
8	Central Statistics Office Ireland
9	Istat
10	Statistics Lithuania
11	Statistics Netherlands
12	Statistics Poland
13	Statistics Portugal
14	Statistical Office of Slovenia
15	Statistical Office of Slovakia