

### **In the “post-truth” era, trust in European statistics has never been more important**

In its 2016 report the European Statistical Governance Advisory Board (ESGAB) urges that more needs to be done to ensure trust in European statistics. Recent political campaigns in the US and in the UK referendum have highlighted how apparently “factual” statistics can quickly spread and mislead the general public<sup>1,2</sup>. Martti Hetemäki, ESGAB Chair, says *“we are in an era of ‘post-truth’ politics, where some important political messages are being supported by inappropriate or misleading data. Statistical authorities have a leading role to play in alerting users to the source and quality of data used in an official context”*.

While it has always been possible to present statistics in a misleading way, the vast numbers of institutions, agencies and experts now producing data mean that statistical “facts” can be provided on an array of issues, with varying degrees of quality and sometimes with conflicting messages. Under the European Statistics Code of Practice, statistical authorities have a clear responsibility to ensure that official statistics are properly presented in political debate.

ESGAB therefore recommends that statistical authorities not only comment publicly on criticisms and misuses of official statistics, but also vigorously defend the quality of their statistics where necessary. ESGAB also recommends that the value of official statistics should be better promoted to the public at large as a public good and an indispensable policy tool.

With regard to multiple data sources – surveys, registers and commercial databases - ESGAB is concerned that the analysis of such data requires special skills, particularly in the European context where comparability of data across countries is a fundamental requirement. The report highlights ongoing work which is looking at the necessary skills and at how skill gaps can be addressed.

Across the European Statistical System as a whole, there is good compliance with the Code of Practice. ESGAB acknowledges that good progress has been made in a number of areas identified in recent peer reviews and previous ESGAB reports and highlights the areas where even more progress is required. These areas include the recruitment and dismissal procedures for heads of Eurostat and national statistical authorities, the development of comparable information on the cost of statistical production, increasing the use of administrative data and the coordination of other national authorities producing European statistics.

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<sup>1</sup> See The Economist, 10 September 2016, “Art of the lie”, (<http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21706525-politicians-have-always-lied-does-it-matter-if-they-leave-truth-behind-entirely-art>)

<sup>2</sup> William Davies, 24 August 2016 “The Age of Post-Truth Politics”, (<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/24/opinion/campaign-stops/the-age-of-post-truth-politics.html>)

### **Further information**

The 2016 report with a short executive summary is available on ESGAB's homepage (<http://ec.europa.eu/esgab/>).

### **Contact for media assistance**

To arrange an interview with the ESGAB Chair, Mr Martti Hetemäki, please contact the ESGAB Secretariat: Steve Clarke ([estat-esgab@ec.europa.eu](mailto:estat-esgab@ec.europa.eu)), tel. +352 4301-32527.

### **About ESGAB**

ESGAB<sup>3</sup> provides an independent overview of the implementation of the Code of Practice. It seeks to enhance the professional independence, integrity and accountability of the European Statistical System key elements of the Code, and the quality of European statistics. ESGAB has seven members. Its tasks include the preparation of an annual report to the European Parliament and the Council on the implementation of the Code by Eurostat and the European Statistical System as a whole. ESGAB also advises the Commission (Eurostat) on appropriate measures to facilitate implementation.

### **European Statistics Code of Practice (the Code)**

The European Statistics Code of Practice<sup>4</sup> sets the standards for developing, producing and disseminating European statistics. It builds on a common definition of quality in statistics used in the European Statistical System (ESS, composed of national statistical authorities and Eurostat). The Code is a self-regulatory instrument containing 15 principles which address the institutional environment in which national and EU statistical authorities operate, and the production and dissemination of European statistics. Its implementation is supported by a set of indicators of good practice for each principle.

The **European Statistical System**<sup>5</sup> (ESS) is a partnership between the European Union's statistical authority, i.e. the Commission (Eurostat), and the national statistical institutes (NSIs) and other national authorities (ONAs) responsible in each Member State for the development, production and dissemination of European statistics.

### **Peer reviews**

Peer reviews<sup>6</sup> are part of the European Statistical System strategy to implement the Code of Practice. The objective is to enhance the integrity, independence and accountability of ESS statistical authorities. The first round of peer reviews was carried out in 2006-2008, followed by a second round in 2013-2015. Both rounds cover all EU Member States and EFTA countries. The European Statistical Governance Advisory Board (ESGAB) carried out a peer review of Eurostat using the methodology developed for National Statistical Institute peer reviews with some adaptations reflecting Eurostat's specificities.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/esgab/>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/quality/european-statistics-code-of-practice>.

<sup>5</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/european-statistical-system/overview>.

<sup>6</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/quality/peer-reviews>.