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Peer review on the implementation of the European Statistics Code of Practice

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1. Executive Summary	3
2. Introduction	4
3. Findings per Principle	5
Principle 1: Professional Independence	5
Principle 2: Mandate for Data Collection	7
Principle 3: Adequacy of Resources	9
Principle 4: Quality commitment	10
Principle 5: Statistical confidentiality	12
Principle 6: Impartiality and objectivity	13
Principle 15: Accessibility and clarity	15
4. Co-ordination role of the National Statistical Institute	17
5. Good practices to be highlighted	18
6. Recommendations of the peer review team	19
7. List of improvement actions by principle of the Code	19
8. Annex A: Programme of the visit	21
9. Annex B: List of participants	22

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Main findings (including an assessment of the co-ordination role of the National Statistical Institute):

- (1) As a general result the Peer Review team came to a positive assessment of the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (SO SR). From the discussion with the Management of the Office, the discussion with junior staff, with representatives of other data producers of official statistics and of the Statistical Council and with several user groups the Peer Review team has got the impression, that the SO SR is, with regard to the principles of the Code of Practice that were reviewed, a professionally working and well performing institution. This is a significant achievement, not least in view of the fact that the SO SR has only been functioning as an autonomous institution only since 1993. Moreover the European Statistical Programme had to be implemented over a relatively short period of time, a task which has kept the statistical offices in the old member states occupied for decades. Slovak statistics already complies rather well with European legislation.
- (2) In 2001 the new Act on State Statistics was passed which constitutes, together with the European Regulation on Community Statistics, the legal basis for the production and dissemination of European Statistics in the Slovak Republic. The Act gives the SO SR a strong role in regard to the co-ordination of the National Statistical System which consists, apart from the SO SR, of Ministries (including the National Bank) and State Agencies producing official statistics. Decisions on the Survey Schedule, which is a multi-annual Statistical Programme, on classifications and on statistical registers are decisively taken by the SO SR, the Office has a leading position in methodological questions and in questions of quality management. The representatives from other data producers interviewed during the Peer Review confirmed the good cooperation with the SO SR.
- (3) In compliance with the Act on State Statistics, the principles of professional independence, mandate for data collection, impartiality and objectivity and statistical confidentiality are, in practice, already either fully or largely met. Because the Act on State Statistics does not explicitly provide for the independence of the SO SR in the field of dissemination, an amendment of the Act in this respect is recommended. Regarding data collection it is recommended to increase the legal power of the SO SR to use administrative data. In particular the SO SR should be given more influence on the content of administrative registers so that they can be used better for statistical purposes. In the area of statistical confidentiality there seems to be a necessity to promote knowledge and skills regarding the protection of individual data in the whole National Statistical System.
- (4) The resources currently available to the SO SR are considered to be sufficient to meet current European Statistics requirements. There are, however, strong indications that additional resources will be needed to carry out necessary development actions concerning new requirements from the side of European and national users. In particular an increase of the wage level of the SO SR and the improvement and modernization of the technical infrastructure is required.
- (5) The SO SR is highly committed to promote the quality of its products. It has implemented a Total Quality Management approach with certification ISO 9001:2000, it

adopted already in 2003 a quality declaration and it appointed a Quality Council and a Quality Manager. The Peer Review team assessed all the indicators of the Principle "Quality commitment" as either fully or largely met. Main users of the products of the SO SR stressed that the efforts of the Office have resulted in an improvement of the product quality over time.

- (6) As a customer oriented institution the SO SR disseminates its statistical information in a clear and understandable form. In particular the new website of the Office was mentioned by most of the users interviewed as a considerable improvement. Users also emphasized that, for a better understanding of the data disseminated, a further development is needed in the availability and standardization of metadata in the website.
- (7) The management of the SO SR expressed its clear resolve to further improve compliance with the Code of Practice. The ambitious list of improvement actions described in chapter 7 of this report was discussed and agreed by both the management of the SO SR and the Peer Review team. Moreover the SO SR decided that the Code of Practice should be applied not only for European but also for national statistics and have already undertaken steps to implement the Code of Practice in the whole National Statistical System.

2. INTRODUCTION

With the adoption of the European Statistics Code of Practice, the Statistical Programme Committee (SPC) committed itself to adhering to its principles. At its meeting on 25 May 2005, the SPC endorsed a stepwise monitoring procedure for the implementation of the Code over three years during which countries' self-assessments should be combined with elements of peer review, benchmarking and monitoring on the basis of the explanatory indicators added to each principle of the Code.

During December 2005 / January 2006 the National Statistical Institutes and Eurostat have completed their self-assessments, the results have been summarised by Eurostat in a report submitted to the Economic and Financial Committee in May 2006 which has been published on the Eurostat website.

As a next step towards implementation of the Code, the European Statistical System is organising peer reviews to complement the self-assessments starting with 2006. They are considered a vital element for the implementation of the Code of Practice given their capacity to encourage the sharing of best practice and to contribute to transparency in what is, essentially, a self-regulatory approach. This approach is designed to enhance accountability and to help building trust in the integrity of the European Statistical System, its processes and outputs.

The Code of Practice peer reviews follow a common methodology focusing on the institutional environment and dissemination part of the Code comprising the following principles:

(1) Professional independence, (2) Mandate for data collection, (3) Adequacy of resources, (4) Quality commitment, (5) Statistical confidentiality, (6) Impartiality and Objectivity and (15) Accessibility and Clarity. In principle, the peer review is limited to the National Statistical Institute and its co-ordination role within a dispersed national statistical system. A short document provided by the National Statistical Institute which summarises key aspects of the functioning of the national statistical system is published together with this report.

During a three days visit on-site and on the basis of information material provided by the National Statistical Institute and Eurostat prior to the review, peer reviews yield a report assessing compliance with the Code of Practice at indicator level and by principle following a four point assessment scale. The report includes a refined set of improvement actions covering all principles of the Code which are being used to feed the monitoring process of the implementation of the Code in the European Statistical System.

While the peer reviewers will undertake to base their assessment to the extent possible on factual information, it is worth noting some of the limitations of the peer review process. For example, peer reviewers are dependent upon the resources made available to them (though experienced reviewers can be expected to identify where appropriate information is not forthcoming). In addition these reviews are conducted on a strategic, organisation-wide and system wide basis. Accordingly it is not straightforward to ascertain that certain practices or behaviours or systems operate in all statistical domains.

3. FINDINGS PER PRINCIPLE

Principle 1: Professional Independence

The professional independence of statistical authorities from other policy, regulatory or administrative departments and bodies, as well as from private sector operators, ensures the credibility of European Statistics.

Overall assessment: The SO SR is an independent institution within the Slovak state administration. It is not accountable to a single ministry but to the government of the Slovak Republic. The professional independence of the SO SR is legally based on the Act of November 29, 2001 on State Statistics. An amendment of the Act on State Statistics with regard to the dissemination of statistical information will be recommended. From the interviews with representatives of the Statistical Council and with several user groups it became obvious for the Peer Review team that the professional independence of the SO SR is highly recognized by the public and in practice has not been questioned.

Indicator 1.1: The independence of the statistical authority from political and other external interference in producing and disseminating official statistics is specified in law.

Assessment: **Largely met**

Comments: The Act on State Statistics of the Slovak Republic grants, in Article 3, the SO SR and the Ministries or State Agencies also producing official statistics, independence and impartiality in their collecting, processing and evaluating statistical information. They shall be guided in their work by the principles of reliability, objectivity, transparency, openness and protection of confidential data. However, the Act does not explicitly provide for another major aspect of the professional independence of the SS SR: the independence in the content, form and timing of statistical releases. An amendment of the Act on State Statistics in that respect is recommended and is agreed by the Office as an improvement action.

Indicator 1.2: The head of the statistical authority has sufficiently high hierarchical standing to ensure senior level access to policy authorities and administrative public bodies. He/She should be of the highest professional calibre.

Assessment: **Fully met**

Comments: The President of the SO SR has a high hierarchical status within the Slovak public administration. He/she regularly takes part in government sessions as a non-member participant and has the right to submit materials for these sessions.

The President of the Office is appointed for a fixed term (for a period of 5 years, limited to two mandates) by the President of the Slovak Republic based on a proposal of the government with specific conditions for his/her dismissing (Art. 6 and 7 of the Act on State Statistics). The term of office of the former President expired in January 2007 after five years in office and a new President was appointed as of February 2007.

The nomination process and the qualification of candidates for this position are not specifically addressed in the Act on State Statistics.

Indicator 1.3: The head of the statistical authority and, where appropriate, the heads of its statistical bodies have responsibility for ensuring that European Statistics are produced and disseminated in an independent manner.

Assessment: **Fully met**

Comments: All interviewed partners during the peer review underlined that the SO SR, which is headed by the President, produces and disseminates its statistics in practice in a professionally independent manner.

Indicator 1.4: The head of the statistical authority and, where appropriate, the heads of its statistical bodies have the sole responsibility for deciding on statistical methods, standards and procedures, and on the content and timing of statistical releases.

Assessment: **Fully met**

Comments: All interviewed partners during the peer review underlined that the SO SR in practice can decide independently on the choice of statistical methods, standards and procedures as well as on the content, form and timing of statistical releases.

Indicator 1.5: The statistical work programmes are published and periodic reports describe progress made.

Assessment: **Largely met**

Comments: The SO SR develops, in cooperation with Ministries and other State Agencies also producing official statistics, a Survey Schedule (Programme of official statistical surveys) for a period of three years. The Statistical Council, as an advisory body to the President of the Office, discusses a draft of the Survey Schedule and gives a recommendation to the President of the SO SR who decides on the Survey Schedule. It is then published by the SO SR in a decree. The decree can be amended by the Office during its period of validity.

The Survey Schedule includes a few surveys carried out by Ministries that are not used for statistical purposes only, which is not acceptable in particular with regard to statistical confidentiality. The number of such survey seems to be decreasing but the problem still exists and should be solved very soon.

On the basis of its Development Strategy the SO SR develops and publishes moreover a multi-annual Programme of Statistical Activities and in each year, for the year to come, a more detailed Plan of Statistical Activities. The Annual Report of the SO SR describes the progress made.

Indicator 1.6: Statistical releases are clearly distinguished and issued separately from political/policy statements.

Assessment: **Fully met**

Comments: The SO SR publishes its own press releases which are clearly labelled as coming from the Office. They are purely statistical in their nature and never mixed with any political statements. Representatives of the media who were interviewed during the peer review confirmed the absolute objectivity and transparency of the reporting by the SO SR.

Indicator 1.7: The statistical authority, when appropriate, comments publicly on statistical issues, including criticisms and misuses of official statistics.

Assessment: **Fully met**

Comments: The SO SR comments publicly in case of misuse or misinterpretations of its statistics. The Directive of the External Communication with the media of the SO SR includes a formalised policy on how to react in case of criticisms, misuse or misinterpretations of the Office's statistics.

Principle 2: Mandate for Data Collection

Statistical authorities must have a clear legal mandate to collect information for European statistical purposes. Administrations, enterprises and households, and the public at large may be compelled by law to allow access to or deliver data for European statistical purposes at the request of statistical authorities.

Overall assessment: Articles 14 to 18 of the Act on State Statistics provide the SO SR with a clear legal mandate for the collection of data from legal and natural persons on the basis of the Survey Schedule. Moreover the Act grants the SO SR in Article 13 a broad access to administrative data. The scope and utilisation of administrative sources for purposes of official statistics is regulated in a separate part of the Survey Schedule. In addition, bilateral agreements are concluded with several public institutions. However, in practice, there are still problems to obtain access to these data in an adequate form and way. Therefore, the legal power to use administrative data should be increased together with giving the SO SR more influence on the content of administrative registers so that they can be used better for statistical purposes.

Indicator 2.1: The mandate to collect information for the production and dissemination of official statistics is specified in law.

Assessment: **Fully met**

Comments: The Act on State Statistics, in particular Articles 14 to 18, together with the Survey Schedule, provide the SO SR with a clear legal mandate to collect the data needed for the production of official statistics from legal and natural persons. In Article 18 of the Act on State Statistics it is laid down that all reporting units shall be obliged to provide complete and accurate data required for statistical surveys included in the Survey Schedule within the deadlines laid down and free of charge. In Article 14 a limited list of characteristics is given for which data may be collected within statistical surveys where natural persons are obliged to report. Censuses of population, houses and apartments are regulated by special laws.

However, the SO SR reported problems in regard to response rates especially from small business units. It is planned to intensify, as an improvement action, an explanatory campaign with the aim to strengthen the acceptance of reporting duties.

Moreover the use of electronic questionnaires and electronic data transmission in business surveys is not sufficiently supported by the SO SR. An improvement action was agreed under Principle 9: Improve electronic data collection – promote among respondents the mutual advantages of electronic data collection.

Indicator 2.2: The statistical authority is allowed by national legislation to use administrative records for statistical purposes.

Assessment: **Largely met**

Comments: The Act on State Statistics (Article 13) gives the SO SR the clear right to request administrative data for the purpose of execution of State Statistics from any Ministry, State Agency, self-governing municipal body or other public institution. All these institutions are obliged to provide the data listed in a separate part of the Survey Schedule respecting a deadline laid down and free of charge.

The SO SR already uses in practice a wide range of administrative data. Bilateral agreements on the exchange of data between the SO SR and several Ministries and other State Organisations exist. Subject of the agreements is the provision of data files from administrative sources to the SO SR. The Office, on the other hand, provides the Ministries and other State Organisations with data from its public registers. Nevertheless, the existing legislation does not give the SO SR enough authority to carry through all its information requirements. In particular, the SO SR does not have the clear legal power to influence the content of existing and new administrative sources so that they can be used for statistical purposes in an efficient manner. Up to now, progress can only be achieved by agreement. An improvement action is formulated that shall lead to the necessary legal authorization of the Office and to more clarity of the duties of the Ministries and other public bodies.

Indicator 2.3: On the basis of a legal act, the statistical authority may compel response to statistical surveys.

Assessment: **Fully met**

Comments: In Slovakia respondents are obliged to provide data in all statistical surveys included in the Survey Schedule (Article 18 of the Act on State Statistics) and the SO SR may compel response. Respondents who fail to meet their reporting obligations are liable to fines (Article 32). In practice, the SO SR uses the possibility to fine respondents only in the case of enterprises. Private households are not fined.

As already commented under indicator 1.5 the Survey Schedule includes a few surveys carried out by Ministries that are used for administrative purposes. The main reason for that is that the Ministries can compel response for surveys included in the Survey Schedule, for others they cannot.

Principle 3: Adequacy of Resources

The resources available to statistical authorities must be sufficient to meet European Statistics requirements.

Overall assessment: Giving first priority to the fulfilment of European statistical requirements the SO SR complies rather well with the European legislation so that the resources available at present to the SO SR can be considered to be sufficient to meet the current European requirements. However, there are strong indications that resources of the SO SR are too small to carry out development actions necessary to meet new requirements from the side of national and European users as well as the urgent improvement and modernization of the technical infrastructure of the SO SR.

Indicator 3.1: Staff, financial, and computing resources, adequate both in magnitude and in quality, are available to meet current European Statistics needs.

Assessment: **Partly met**

Comments: Due to the limited financial resources for the remuneration of staff which are strictly defined by the budget, the level of salaries in the SO SR is very low, not only in comparison to the private sector of the economy but also compared to other public services. Therefore, the SO SR has severe problems to recruit and retain well-qualified staff. Although the turnover in skilled staff decreased in the course of the last five years it still appears to be too high especially for young highly qualified specialists. This is the case, in particular, in the areas of Information Technology and National Accounts. If not addressed, this could lead to problems for the Office in accomplishing its tasks. An increase of the wage level of the SO SR and with that an increase of the financial resources usable for staff remuneration appears to be necessary.

To further improve labour productivity and to rationalize production processes the SO SR will intensify its training activities and implement its plan for the development of Information Technology (see list of improvement actions).

Indicator 3.2: The scope, detail and cost of European Statistics are commensurate with needs.

For European level reply

Indicator 3.3: Procedures exist to assess and justify demands for new European Statistics against their cost.

For European level reply

Indicator 3.4: Procedures exist to assess the continuing need for all European Statistics, to see if any can be discontinued or curtailed to free up resources.

For European level reply

Principle 4: Quality commitment

All ESS members commit themselves to work and co-operate according to the principles fixed in the Quality Declaration of the European Statistical System.

Overall assessment: The SO SR is highly committed to promote the quality of its products and has taken important initiatives for quality reinforcements, such as the implementation of a Total Quality Management approach (Quality Management System (QMS)) with certification ISO 9001:2000 obtained in November 2006. Furthermore a Quality Declaration was adopted in 2003 as a leading element to guide sustainable quality improvement and a Quality Council was created in 2004 as an advisory body to the President of the Office. The Quality Council overlooks quality issues within the organisation and is supported by the Quality Manager who has the role of co-ordinating the implementation of all quality programmes and actions adopted by the top management and in particular of the QMS. All these investments of the SO SR have resulted in an improvement of the quality of its products disseminated. This was recognized by main users who have also identified substantial progress in quality over time. At the same time, however, the introduction of QMS has implied a substantial workload for the staff in documenting processes, monitoring indicators and conducting internal audits.

Indicator 4.1 Product quality is regularly monitored according to the ESS quality components.

Assessment: **Largely met**

Comments: Quality in accordance with ESS quality components is regularly monitored for those domains required by EU legislation and, more specifically, for economic statistics. Timeliness is the quality dimension monitored more often while data coherence needs further monitoring. The results are made available to the top management as synthetic information in the form of indicators and corrective/improvement actions, when necessary. Quality reporting is a practice extended in the SO SR, and in some cases quality reports are produced more frequently than what is requested by EU legislation.

Indicator 4.2 Processes are in place to monitor the quality of the collection, processing and dissemination of statistics.

Assessment: **Fully met**

Comments: Following the implementation of the QMS by the SO SR the collection, processing and dissemination of all statistics is now organized according to processes with complete documentation available. Quality monitoring is complemented with internal audits. The QMS has also been implemented in the regional offices focussing on processes for data collection and validation and with its own indicators and internal audits. Data coming from administrative sources are checked in the Office. In some specific domains, such as price statistics and foreign trade statistics, the DESAP checklist was used.

Indicator 4.3 Processes are in place to deal with quality considerations, including trade-offs within quality, and to guide planning for existing and emerging surveys.

Assessment: **Largely met**

Comments: In the context of QMS, processes are in place to deal with quality considerations and general guidelines are available on how to proceed with different trade-offs within quality (timeliness/accuracy, timeliness/frequency of revisions, etc.). (Directive of SO SR on Value-adding processes 2006). However, these guidelines cover only general principles at the process level; a more detailed specification for sub-processes and activities would be desirable. The SO SR has a formal policy to guide the planning of new surveys which includes pilot/feasibility considerations as well as the test of questionnaires, before any definite data collection is launched.

Indicator 4.4 Quality guidelines are documented and staff are well trained. These guidelines are spelled out in writing and made known to the public.

Assessment: **Largely met**

Comments: The SO SR has produced quality guidelines for all the statistical processes and sub-processes that further refer to existing more detailed descriptions of statistical activities. These guidelines have been accessible to the public on the website since 2005. In the context of the introduction of the QMS in 2005, managers and auditors received training in quality. In the current training plan, a course focussing on quality is offered.

Indicator 4.5 There is a regular and thorough review of the key statistical outputs using external experts where appropriate.

Assessment: **Fully met**

Comments: With the implementation of the QMS systematic quality reviews conducted in the form of internal audits according to the requirements of ISO 9001:2000 were introduced. The programme of audits was already implemented during 2006-2007 for all the statistical processes including sub-processes and activities. The interrelations with other statistical processes were also analyzed. The outcome from these reviews is monitored by the management of the SO SR in a systematic way and corrective actions are introduced, when necessary. External audits have been conducted by the IMF (2005 Data ROSC Report).

Principle 5: Statistical confidentiality

The privacy of data providers (households, enterprises, administrations and other respondents), the confidentiality of the information they provide and its use only for statistical purposes must be absolutely guaranteed.

Overall assessment: The practices of the SO SR in the area of statistical confidentiality comply well with this principle. The Act on State Statistics and the Act on Protection of Personal Data in Information Systems grant legal provisions to protect confidentiality of statistical data. Organisational and technical provisions are in place to protect the integrity and security of the statistical databases. During the discussions with the management of the SO SR it became clear, however, that the entity responsible for statistical confidentiality matters should be strengthened. The necessity to promote knowledge and skills regarding the protection of statistical confidentiality in the whole National Statistical System was also emphasized.

Indicator 5.1 Statistical confidentiality is guaranteed in law.

Assessment: **Fully met**

Comments: Statistical confidentiality is comprehensively guaranteed in Articles 29 and 30 of the Act on State Statistics. Article 29 states that all persons involved in the production process of official statistics shall be obliged to maintain confidentiality regarding confidential data they know.

Indicator 5.2 Statistical authority staff sign legal confidentiality commitments on appointment.

Assessment: **Fully met**

Comments: Legal confidentiality commitments are signed by the staff of the SO SR on appointment. The Office reported that none of its staff has ever breached confidentiality rules.

Indicator 5.3 Substantial penalties are prescribed for any wilful breaches of statistical confidentiality.

Assessment: **Fully met**

Comments: Substantial penalties (up to 100 000 Slovak crowns) are prescribed for any wilful breaches of statistical confidentiality – Articles 32 and 33 of the Act on State Statistics.

Indicator 5.4 Instructions and guidelines are provided on the protection of statistical confidentiality in the production and dissemination processes. These guidelines are spelled out in writing and made known to the public.

Assessment: **Fully met**

Comments: The Directive of the Slovak Statistical Office on the Protection of Confidential Statistical Data provides guidelines for the protection of statistical confidentiality in the production and dissemination processes. It is made known to the public and addressed to the employees of the SO SR, other data producers and the scientific community.

The peer review team, however, was informed of a possible breach of statistical confidentiality, not in the SO SR but in the Ministry of Agriculture. The Ministry published the list of forestry owners which included individual data. After an enquiry of the SO SR the Ministry presented

the owners' consent for publishing their data. Nevertheless, there seems to be a need for developing the co-ordinating role of the SO SR in the field of statistical confidentiality. An improvement action was agreed to promote knowledge and skills regarding statistical confidentiality within the whole National Statistical System.

Indicator 5.5 Physical and technological provisions are in place to protect the security and integrity of statistical databases

Assessment: **Largely met**

Comments: Technical and organizational provisions are in place to protect security and integrity of statistical databases. The SO SR regularly monitors confidentiality protection policy and practices to take into account technological development. It reviews the safety of statistical data using external audits. At the same time, the SO SR is nevertheless aware of problems to meet the requirements of the latest technology due to shortages with regard to financial resources and highly qualified IT staff. It is also aware of the need to develop capacities in the area of statistical confidentiality by strengthening the responsible entity. This entity should intensify its activities including better training and the promotion of knowledge and expertise on statistical confidentiality of other authorities producing statistics.

Indicator 5.6 Strict protocols apply to external users accessing statistical microdata for research purposes.

Assessment: **Fully met**

Comments: The SO SR guarantees access to statistical micro data for research purposes on the basis of legal provisions, protocols and mutual agreements between the SO SR and the researcher on the basis of a formal and written request. The demand for micro data is rapidly growing (especially during the last year). The research community representatives did not complain about any problems.

Principle 6: Impartiality and objectivity.

Statistical authorities must produce and disseminate European Statistics respecting scientific independence and in an objective, professional and transparent manner in which all users are treated equitably.

Overall assessment: In producing European Statistics the SO SR respects scientific independence and carries out its tasks in an objective manner. The Total Quality Management policy implemented in the SO SR is one of the main factors ensuring this principle. Impartiality and objectivity of the Office were not questioned at any stage of the peer review but rather confirmed by all groups of data users. From the discussions, in particular with users, it became clear, however, that the information provided to users on methodological issues needs improvement.

Indicator 6.1: Statistics are compiled on an objective basis determined by statistical considerations.

Assessment: **Fully met**

Comments: The Act on State Statistics states in Article 3 that the SO SR and other authorities or bodies executing statistics shall apply the required expertise and professional ethics, while using scientific methods of statistical work. They shall be independent and impartial in their collecting, processing and evaluating of the statistical information and shall be guided by the principles of reliability, objectivity and transparency. This policy is backed by the implementation of Total Quality Management. The statistical outputs are assessed during quarterly discussions with experts, analysts and other important users. The objectivity of official statistics in Slovakia was confirmed in all interviews.

Indicator 6.2: Choices of sources and statistical techniques are informed by statistical considerations.

Assessment: **Fully met**

Comments: The SO SR applies a clear policy to select data sources and statistical techniques using statistical considerations. This policy is based on the Act on State Statistics, Development Strategy, Declaration on Quality Policy and Quality Management and the cooperation within the Statistical Council.

Indicator 6.3: Errors discovered in published statistics are corrected at the earliest possible date and publicised.

Assessment: **Fully met**

Comments: The Principles of Release and Provision of Statistical Information describe the procedure for dealing with errors discovered in published statistics and states how corrected data should be announced to users. The peer review team did not obtain any information about major errors discovered in statistics published by the SO SR, probably because no serious errors have occurred during the last few years. So far it has not been possible to assess whether and how the Principles are applied in practice.

Indicator 6.4: Information on the methods and procedures used by the statistical authority are publicly available.

Assessment: **Largely met**

Comments: According to the Principles of Release and Provision of Statistical Information each publication issued by the SO SR is backed up with methodological explanations containing basic characteristics of published data and definitions of basic indicators. Basic characteristics include all necessary information for correct interpretation of data and their assessment. As regards statistical data published on the website 75% of statistical outputs are accompanied by information on the methods and procedures used by the statistical authority. This information is presented mainly in Slovak; the scope of available information in English is significantly smaller. There is a general agreement, that the provision of metadata needs improvement. The Program of Statistical Activities by the year 2007 includes the provision of statistical data with relevant metadata in an accessible and understandable form for the users of statistics as a long-term goal of the SO SR.

Indicator 6.5: Statistical release dates and times are pre -announced.

Assessment: **Fully met**

Comments: The SO SR publishes the Calendar of the First Data Release containing the release dates and times of selected data categories for the forthcoming four months. The Principles of Release and Provision of Statistical Information describe the procedure for possible revisions of this calendar. A change of pre-announced publication dates happens only exceptionally in case of unexpected serious problems.

Indicator 6.6: All users have equal access to statistical releases at the same time and any privileged pre-release access to any outside user is limited, controlled and publicised. In the event that leaks occur, pre-release arrangements should be revised so as to ensure impartiality.

Assessment: **Fully met**

Comments: The SO SR provides some selected data (GDP, prices and foreign trade) 24 hours before release under embargo to the Prime Minister of the Slovak Government, Ministry of Finance of the Slovak Republic and National Bank of Slovakia. The information about this pre-release access is defined and published on the new SO SR website.

Indicator 6.7: Statistical releases and statements made in Press Conferences are objective and non-partisan.

Assessment: **Fully met**

Comments: The Principles of Release and Provision of Statistical Information and the Directive on Principles of External Communication to the Media guarantee procedures ensuring objectivity in the content of statistical releases and statements made in press conferences and similar events. Subjective political statements are never included in statistical releases. The SO SR has a clear policy to communicate with the media and provides proper training for employees dealing with the media. The objectivity of the Office was confirmed by all groups of statistical information users met by the peer review team.

Principle 15: Accessibility and clarity

European Statistics should be presented in a clear and understandable form, disseminated in a suitable and convenient manner, available and accessible on an impartial basis with supporting metadata and guidance.

Overall assessment: The SO SR compliance with this principle is, to a large extent, satisfactory. A new website with information in Slovak and in English is now tested and incorporates new functionalities, such as search engine and graphic facilities, and the accessible information is structured better in relation to users' needs. The general improvement of the new website was mentioned by most of the users interviewed who judged the coverage and presentation of statistics as adequate. The availability and management of metadata still needs further development in particular for non economic data and an improvement action has

been agreed in this domain. Users confirmed that a better harmonisation and coverage of metadata in the website is important for a better understanding of the data disseminated. A lack of information on revisions and methodological changes was expressed by many users.

Indicator 15.1: Statistics are presented in a form that facilitates proper interpretation and meaningful comparisons.

Assessment: **Largely met**

Comments: The SO SR has a user service culture, now embedded in its overall approach to quality. In this context important efforts and resources are mobilized to ensure that the information disseminated is presented to users in a clear and understandable form. This view was confirmed by the users interviewed who found that the statistics presented in the website, publications, press releases etc. are adequate and easy to understand. Several users pointed out the improvement in the presentation of statistics in the new website. However, the experience with the new website, now being piloted and run in parallel with the former site, needs to be evaluated and consolidated. Users' opinions on the presentation of data are usually taken into account when formulated.

Indicator 15.2: Dissemination services use modern information and communication technology and, if appropriate, traditional hard copy.

Assessment: **Largely met**

Comments: The coverage of statistics disseminated on the new website has substantially increased compared to the past, also providing regional data to a much larger extent. It incorporates new functionalities such as a search engine allowing users easier access to the data available. Graphics are now incorporated for most of the statistical domains. The website is now running in parallel with the former version and the experience needs to be evaluated by the SO SR. Only after this task is accomplished will decisions be taken on its final shape and the former website will be fully replaced. The SO SR maintains some paper publications such as yearbooks, press releases and other publications, requested by different types of users for ensuring better accessibility of the statistical information.

Indicator 15.3: Custom-designed analyses are provided when feasible and are made public.

Assessment: **Largely met**

Comments: The SO SR dissemination policy includes the production of customized analysis on request and users are charged for this service. However, there is not a general policy to offer such analysis to all users neither to make them publicly available to other potentially interested users (announcing the availability in the website). From the users survey it came out that this is an area to be reinforced and the SO SR plans to dedicate more resources to this activity.

Indicator 15.4: Access to micro data can be allowed for research purposes. This access is subject to strict protocols.

Assessment: **Fully met**

Comments: This indicator which is also included in Principle 5 is related to the utility of data for users, while still respecting the established confidentiality rules (Act of State Statistics, Articles

29 and 30), in particular with the anonymisation of micro data. The SO SR seems to have reached a good equilibrium in dealing with this issue. This was confirmed by the users interviewed who are satisfied with the information provided in the micro data files disseminated.

Indicator 15.5: Metadata are documented according to standardised metadata systems.

Assessment: **Partly met**

Comments: At present the SO SR applies SDDS standards for statistical metadata. Some tables on economic indicators on its website offer links to the metadata from the IMF website both on the new and on the former website. The content and coverage of metadata files is incomplete and not harmonized for statistical domains outside economic indicators and needs to be extended to facilitate the interpretation of statistics. Several users interviewed mentioned this limitation. For the time being, no evaluation of the quality of metadata is conducted by the SO SR.

Indicator 15.6: Users are kept informed on the methodology of statistical processes and the quality of statistical outputs with respect to the ESS quality criteria.

Assessment: **Largely met**

Comments: The SO SR has a fluid communication with main users and the media which includes information on methodology and quality aspects of the data disseminated. Concepts and definitions for most of the statistics are included in the new website as well as the FAQ website facility, which helps users to clarify or to get additional information on the data disseminated. Information on quality is complimented with quality reports which should be made available to the public. However, only some previous consultations to users are organized before methodological changes are applied. In particular, advance information about revisions is not publicly available. This last element was signalled by several users interviewed.

4. CO-ORDINATION ROLE OF THE NATIONAL STATISTICAL INSTITUTE

The National Statistical System (NSS) of the Slovak Republic comprises the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (SO SR) with its 8 regional offices and in addition Ministries (including the National Bank) and State Agencies producing official statistics. The Slovak NSS can be described as a semi-centralised system with the SO SR as the central body and co-ordinator of official statistics. It is important to emphasize that nearly all European Statistics are produced by the SO SR.

Because the Act on State Statistics regulates that not only the SO SR but also all Ministries and State Agencies producing official statistics shall be independent and impartial in their statistical work, a high compliance with the Code of Practice also for the statistical work of these institutions can be assumed. This is supported by the fact that the SO SR decided to involve, in the activities regarding the implementation of the Code of Practice, not only the Community statistics providers, but also the national statistics providers. The SO SR has already organised seminars to promote the Code of Practice and developed a national version of the European Statistics Code of Practice Questionnaire for other data producers than SO SR, which was explained in a special workshop. On the basis of the completed questionnaires received the SO SR has already worked out a general summary in form of a presentation prepared for the peer review.

The most important instrument for the co-ordination of official statistics is the Survey Schedule which is developed by the SO SR in collaboration with Ministries and State Agencies for a three year period. Requirements for statistical surveys are submitted to the SO SR by the Ministries and State Agencies. A draft of the Survey Schedule is then discussed in the Statistical Council, which makes a recommendation of a Survey Schedule to the President of the SO SR. The decision on the Survey Schedule rests with the President of the SO SR; the Survey Schedule is published as a decree by the Statistical Office.

The right to decide on the Survey Schedule gives the President of the SO SR a strong role in determining the Statistical Programme and the division of work in the NSS. On the other hand, the peers were informed, during their visit, that a few surveys carried out by Ministries are used not only for statistical purposes. For the Ministries it is an advantage to include surveys in the Survey Schedule because it allows them to compel response from the reporting units. The President of the SO SR should refuse, in future, the inclusion of such surveys in the Survey Schedule.

Further instruments given by the Act on State Statistics to the SO SR for the co-ordination of the NSS are its responsibility for statistical classifications and statistical registers which can be called the basic infrastructure of official statistics. The Office keeps, inter alia, the register of organisations and the agricultural register.

The collaboration of the SO SR with the Ministries and State Agencies in methodological questions seems to be rather good. The representatives of the other data producers who were interviewed during the peer review confirmed that they rely very much on the advice of the SO SR in methodological questions and that the cooperation works well.

In the field of statistical confidentiality the protection in the Ministries and State Agencies is in principle ensured according to the Act on State Statistics. Internal guidelines which are developed in consultation with the SO SR exist. However, it seems necessary to improve the knowledge and skills on statistical confidentiality in the Ministries and State Agencies and the SO SR agreed on a corresponding improvement action.

The SO SR plays a role of coordinator by offering its expertise in regard to quality monitoring and assurance for other producers of official statistics and providing training in these domains if necessary. When data from other producers are incorporated into the production databases of the SO SR, these data must comply with the standards of the database and are submitted to quality controls and tests of plausibility as any other data under the responsibility of the Office. Although desirable, the role of the SO SR for co-ordinating the websites of other producers of official statistics is limited and no plans to have a common website are envisaged due to the constraints in this area of the e-government policy now being developed.

5. GOOD PRACTICES TO BE HIGHLIGHTED

The SO SR has successfully adapted the Quality Management System (QMS) methodology – according to ISO 9001:2000 – to the management of a public institution producing statistics, showing that QMS is also suitable for the management of a National Statistical Institute. Customer orientation, process approach (managerial, value adding, supporting processes) and systematic management are the leading principles of this initiative. Value added processes include National Accounts and Macroeconomic Statistics, Business Statistics, Social Statistics

and Demography and Regional Statistics. Each of these processes has been decomposed into sub-processes and activities in order to properly cover the production and dissemination of all the specific domains. From 2005 to 2007 all processes have been documented and quality audits conducted to identify areas for improvements. The SO SR received the ISO 9001:2000 certification in November 2006 and a re-certification is planned for 2009.

The SO SR uses its website for a fluent communication with users. In the Frequently Asked Questions section (FAQ), a facility has been included where users can communicate with the Office and clarify different aspects of the data disseminated, such as methodology, interpretation of data, complementary information etc. The website is also planned to be used to build relations with interested parties.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE PEER REVIEW TEAM

The Peer Review team fully supports the list of improvement actions in chapter 7.

7. LIST OF IMPROVEMENT ACTIONS BY PRINCIPLE OF THE CODE

	Principles	Improvement Actions (including timetable)
1.	Professional Independence	1. Amend the Act on State Statistics to include the independence in the field of dissemination (2009);
2.	Mandate for Data Collection	1. Intensify explanatory campaign focused on entrepreneurs with the aim to strengthen reporting duty of respondents (2007 and further); 2. Increase the SOSR's empowerment regarding the use of administrative data sources (2009);
3.	Adequacy of Resources	1. Implement fully the SOSR' Conception and respective annual plans for training; exchange, if possible, training courses with relevant state organisations (every year); 2. Implement measures formulated for ICT in the SOSR QMS assessment report 2006 (2007 - 2008);
4.	Quality Commitment	1. Perform internal audits of all processes - value-adding, supporting and managerial (2007 and further according to internal audits plan); 2. Continually develop the QMS in order to improve the quality (2009); 3. Achieve further progress by extending the monitored quality components and statistical domains - NA, social statistics and business statistics (2007 - 2009);
5.	Statistical Confidentiality	1. Strengthen the entity responsible for statistical confidentiality matters in SOSR (2008); 2. Promote knowledge and skills regarding statistical

		confidentiality within the NSS (2008 - 2009 and further);
6.	Impartiality and Objectivity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Implement in a consistent manner the SOSR' Directive on External Communication to the media, extend the directive to the public in general (2007 and further); <p>Note: for more see P15</p>
7.	Sound Methodology	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Prepare and implement the methodological principles for the conversion to Euro (2008 - 2009); 2. Strengthen the existing methodology unit and create conditions also for monitoring of the methodological developments in order to comply with these developments (2008);
8.	Appropriate statistical procedures	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop further the Quality Management System – focus on processes (2007 and further); 2. Implement the project: Use of administrative sources for enhancement and improvement of the statistical information system (2007); 3. Elaborate internal directive on revisions (2007);
9.	Non-excessive burden on respondents	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduce a proper way of response burden assessment directly on respondent side (2007 and further); 2. Improve electronic collection of questionnaires and promote mutual advantages of electronic data collection among respondents (2007 and further)
10.	Cost effectiveness	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Review division of labour between different SOSR' branches. Introduce the additional cost indicators for individual surveys into annual programming (2008 - 2010);
11.	Relevance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. On the basis of the Marketing Conception of the SOSR develop and implement strategy and plans taking into account the relevant users' demands (2007 and further);
12.	Accuracy & reliability	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Improve further the measurement of this quality dimension in the concrete statistics within further development of the Quality management system (link with the P4.3) (2007 and further);
13.	Timeliness & punctuality	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Improve further the measurement of this quality dimension in the concrete statistics within further development of the Quality management system (link with the P4.3) (2007 and further);
14.	Coherence & comparability	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Achieve data comparability of selected indicators of social and economic statistics (2007 and further); 2. Improve further the measurement of this quality dimension in the concrete statistics within further development of the Quality management system (link with the P4.3) (2007 and further);

		further);
15.	Accessibility and Clarity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use the new SOSR' portal to improve communication about changes in statistical processes - methodology, revisions, related problems (2007 and further); 2. Use the new SOSR' portal also to built up relations with interested parties (2007-2009); 3. Increase the coverage of metadata for all domains on the SOSR' Portal and implement appropriate (realistic) measures on metadata quality (2008 and further).

8. ANNEX A: PROGRAMME OF THE VISIT

July 2, 2007	Meeting with internal stakeholders
09.30-10.00	Welcome and introduction, organisational matters
10.00-11.30	Meeting with management and senior staff, Principle 1, 2, 3
11.30-12.15	Meeting with management and senior staff, Principle 5
12.15-12.45	Presentation of QMS (according to ISO 9001:2000)
12.45-14.15	<i>Lunch break</i>
14.15-15.00	Meeting with management and QM, Principle 4
15.00-15.15	<i>Coffee break</i>
15.15-17.00	Meeting with management and senior staff, Principle 6,15 incl.: Evaluation of users' satisfaction survey Evaluation of respondents' satisfaction survey
July 3, 2007	Meeting with juniors and external stakeholders
09.30-10.30	Meeting with junior staff, principles 1-6, 15
10.30-12.00	CoP - questionnaire, national version Meeting with other national data producers 1)
12.00-12.30	Meeting with representatives from Statistical Council 2)
12.30-14.00	<i>Lunch break</i>
14.00-15.00	Meeting with main users (public) 3)
15.00-15.15	<i>Coffee break</i>
15.15-16.15	Meeting with main users (UNI, R&D, business) 4)
16.15-17.15	Meeting with main users (media) 5)
July 4, 2007	Conclusion
09.30-11.30	Meeting with management – sum-up, review of list of improvement actions
11.30-13.00	Meeting with top management – recommendations, conclusions

9. ANNEX B: LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

The Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic

Ms. Ľudmila Benkovičová, President
Mr. Štefan Condík, Vice-President
Ms. Lýdia Sliacka, Head of the Civil Service Office
Ms. Mária Dologová, Department of Strategy and Integrated Management System
Ms. Magda Holubová, Director of Department of European Affairs and International Cooperation,
Mr. Vladimír Miroššay, Director of Methodology and Informatics Section
Mr. Pavol Baláž, Director of National Accounts and Prices Section
Mr. Ivan Škultéty, Director of Business Statistics Section
Mr. Milan Olexa, Director of Social Statistics and Demography Section
Ms. Mária Schwartzová, Director of Department of Comprehensive Analyses and Information
Mr. Ivan Chrappa, Director of Department of Labour and Wages Statistics
Ms. Mária Mindošová, Director of Comprehensive Methodology Department
Mr. Ján Pápol, Director of Department of Economic Affairs
Mr. Peter Smutný, Director of Personnel Office
Mr. Benjamín Berta, Director of Department of Projecting and Programming
Ms. Antónia Vojtičková, Projection and Programming Department
Mr. Štefan Velčický, President's Office
Ms. Marianna Štalmašková, Business Statistics Section
Ms. Elena Šťavová, Department of Analyses and Providing Information
Ms. Dagmar Blahová, Department of Production Statistics
Ms. Eva Kelemenová, President's Office
Mr. Karol Papaj, Department of General Methodology
Mr. Kamil Strelka, Department of Analyses and Providing Information
Mr. Marián Labaj, Department of General Methodology
Mr. Tomáš Hriň, Department of General Methodology
Mr. Branislav Neborásek, Department of Complex Publications and Regional Statistics
Mr. Jaroslav Dolinič, Department of Accumulation Accounts
Ms. Beáta Konvalinová, Department of Industry and Energetics Statistics
Ms. Ivana Hamanová, Department of Market Services Statistics

Ministry of Finance of the Slovak Republic

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Mr. P. Štefanec

Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic

Ms. M. Filová

The National Centre of Health Information

Mr. Ľubomír Vlčák
Ms. Jarmila Hajnaliová

Mr. Ján Čáp

Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic

Mr. Peter Berčík, Department of Public Administration

Mr. Anton Dubčák, Department of Public Administration

Ministry of Agriculture of the Slovak Republic

Ms. Aneta Novotná

Administration of State Material Reserves of the Slovak Republic

Mr. Jaroslav Kazimír

Ministry of Transport, Posts and Telecommunication of the Slovak Republic

Ms. Jela Kyseľová

Ministry of Construction and Regional Development of the Slovak Republic

Mr. Zoltán Asztalos

Ministry of Justice of the Slovak Republic

Mr. Ladislav Bodor

National Bank of Slovakia

Mr. Gregor Bajtay

Ms. Renáta Konečná

Ministry of Environment of the Slovak Republic

Ms. Mária Krajčová

ING Bank

Ms. Lucia Stekláčová

Social Insurance Agency

Ms. Hrubá

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Mr. Ján Haluška

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Ms. Viera Pacáková

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Mr. Milan Beličák

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Ms. Zuzana Štukovská, Slovak TV

Mr. Juraj Porubský, Daily Newspaper PRAVDA

Mr. Ján Kovalčík, Weekly Magazine TREND