

Increasing trust in official statistics in the Republic of North Macedonia

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Abstract

For decades, official statistics have been perceived as a synonym of trust in our society. They have been trustworthy source of facts and numbers supporting evidence-based policy making. However, in recent years, official statistics have faced many challenges. Society is changing, there is rapid digitalization which leads to having a variety of data and data providers whose quality can (often) be questioned and, usually, these data are provided to the public faster and are more interesting to the public. Producers of official statistics, on the other hand, have to follow strict methodological rules and guidelines thus making official statistics “slower” and abstract (less relatable) compared to the aforementioned data.

The Macedonian official statistics has not been immune to these challenges, as well. There is a general mistrust in state institutions in the country and the State Statistical Office of the Republic of North Macedonia (SSO), as producer of official statistics and coordinator of the National Statistical System (NSS) is faced with the difficult task to maintain the necessary level of trust among the data providers and the public in order to be able to produce official statistics, especially having in mind the inadequate quality of administrative data sources.

The paper is focusing on the activities that the SSO is undertaking to increase the trust in official statistics, especially in terms of increasing statistical literacy, promoting the importance of official statistics, creating the brand of SSO as producer of official statistics and coordinator of the NSS, implementing the communication strategy etc.

1. What is trust?

Before we start discussing trust in statistics, let’s first elaborate what “trust” is. The meaning of the word “trust” has evolved through the centuries:

"Reliance on the veracity, integrity, or other virtues of someone or something; religious faith" (c. 1200),

"Reliability, trustworthiness; trustiness, fidelity, faithfulness" (c. 1300),

"Confident expectation" and "that on which one relies" (late 14 c)

"Confidence placed in a one who holds or enjoys the use of property entrusted to him by its legal owner" (early 15 c.)

"Condition of being legally entrusted" (mid-15 c.)

Modern-day dictionaries define it as:

“Firm belief in the reliability, truth, or ability of someone or something”

“Acceptance of the truth of a statement without evidence or investigation”,

“The state of being responsible for someone or something”,

“Believe in the reliability, truth, or ability of someone or something”,

“Allow someone to have, use, or look after (someone or something of importance or value) with confidence”,

“Commit someone or something to the safekeeping of...”.

All the abovementioned meanings relate to statistics and the work National Statistical Institutes (NSIs) do. All our work is based on the trust that the data we (NSIs) obtain from citizens and businesses are dealt with care and responsibility, and the data we produce are trustworthy and reliable, and NSIs are the “gatekeepers” of official numbers as opposed to other data whose quality cannot be confirmed.

In the past, official statistics was the ultimate trusted source of information, but today, with the development of modern technologies, artificial intelligence, internet etc. official statistics are facing many threats, fighting fake information being probably the most challenging one.

However, as statisticians we, quite often, find it difficult to explain something in plain language, without using complicated and technical vocabulary. It is especially important to know that the statistics we produce are for the benefit of the users, decision makers and, ultimately, the whole society, and if we want our data to serve this purpose, they must be presented and communicated in a simple language, with more visual means, because sometimes a picture can replace 1000 words. If our statistics are presented in this way, they would be more relatable, and people would find it easier and trustworthy to use them.

If data are presented only in a raw format, without any context, without a story behind them they are useless. We want our data to reach the general public and to contribute to the public discourse. To achieve this, we need to be able to see beyond the production of the data; we need to perceive the influence our data have over our development as a society and present it in a comprehensive way.

As the times change and the society is evolving, new technologies emerge, people have faster and easier access to an abundance of information. Quite often, this information is of a suspicious quality or biased, but people are not always aware of that. There are many data sources that produce data faster and for the present, and they have become serious competition to official statistics. People need information now, at the same moment, and they need it *prêt-à-porter* – ready-made to be used immediately. In this race, it seems that official statistics is losing the momentum in the present but, on the long run, official statistics have the advantage that they are sustainable and based on facts.

2. Position of the State Statistical Office in the national setting

The State Statistical Office (SSO) is part of the public administration in the Republic of North Macedonia. It is an independent institution, responsible to the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia. Regarding budget and recruitments, SSO depends on the final approval by the Ministry of Finance.

SSO is coordinator of the National Statistical System (NSS) of the country. As such, it is responsible not only for collecting, producing and disseminating official statistics in the area of its competence, but also it is responsible for cooperating with the Other National Authorities (ONAs) that conduct statistical surveys and provides them with opinion about the methodologies they introduce for the surveys under their competence.

In the process of joining the EU, the country started the preparatory stage of negotiations, which entails the EU screening process. Activities related to this process started on a national level and as statistics is a crucial part of the EU acquis, it is included in the first cluster of fundamental screening areas. Also, SSO has obligations and representatives in the screening processes of other areas and has designated a specific working group to coordinate its participation in the screening process. During 2022, there were two screening meetings with the European Commission (EC) related to statistics, where SSO and other representatives of the national statistical system presented the state of play in North Macedonia.

3. Institutional environment

The work of the Office is organized around the Law on State Statistics. The second most important document is the Five-Year Programme for Statistical Surveys (2023-2027), which comprises all surveys to be conducted in the next five-year period by all members of the national statistical system. In its daily work, SSO is following and implementing internationally recognized statistical standards, international

recommendations and guidelines, especially the UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and Eurostat Code of Practice.

The organizational unit responsible for dissemination and communication of statistics is the Sector for Dissemination. There is no separate sector for communication, so this activity is under the responsibility of this sector. The head of the Sector for Dissemination is also a public relations officer. The lack of separate sector for communication is a drawback, because there is no staff dedicated to work only on communication of statistics, but it is done mainly by the PR officer, together with several other volunteers from the rank of employees in SSO

4. Building trust in official statistics in North Macedonia

“Official Statistics are a marker, a reference point for what we are and where we come from, a compass allowing us to observe, assess and find our bearings.”

Walter J. Radermacher

SSO is a professional institution that follows international standards when producing statistics. The SSO is well aware of the importance of trusting official statistics and how difficult it is to get it and to keep it. In order for statistics to be used for development and policy-making purposes it was imperative to start thinking about activities that will lead to an increase of trust in our data. SSO regularly follows the development of statistics on international level, which on the other hand follows the development of the society. In order to bring its products closer to the public and to “make” it use them, as well as to escape the image of an ordinary civil service institution, SSO decided to take actions that will eventually lead to an increased trust in official statistics.

First of all, the Strategic Plan of SSO conveys the message that our intention is to increase trust in official statistics. The Strategic Plan stipulates that:

- Our mission is:
The State Statistical Office produces and disseminates official statistical data on the Macedonian economy and society as a basis for the process of decision making based on relevant information.
- Our vision is:
To be recognised as a professional and efficient institution that provides high-quality and internationally comparable statistics in line with user needs.
- Our values are:
Professional independence
Competence and professionalism
Impartiality and objectivity

Commitment to quality
User orientation
Statistical confidentiality
Continuous professional development of employees

Practically, all the priorities and objectives defined for the period 2023-2025 impact the trust in official statistics:

1. Integration in the European Statistical System

Objectives:

- Alignment of official statistics with the Statistical Requirements Compendium;
- Providing statistical data to support the process of negotiations of the Republic of North Macedonia for EU membership;
- Producing high-quality statistics in line with the principles of the European Statistics Code of Practice.

2. Strengthening the institutional environment and statistical infrastructure

Objectives:

- Strengthening professional independence;
- Strengthening the coordinating role of the Office in the statistical system;
- Improving teamwork, internal communications and knowledge transfer;
- Innovation and development.

3. Developing strategic partnerships

Objectives:

- Maintaining established strategic partnerships
- Developing cooperation and partnerships at all levels and with different stakeholders.

4. Quality management

Objectives:

- Implementation of a quality management system based on the European Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) and the principles of the European Statistics Code of Practice.

In this paper, the focus is on several aspects of building trust in official statistics in the republic of North Macedonia.

In an environment in which we are bombarded daily with a multitude of misinformation and fake news, our role as producers of official data becomes even more important and valuable. This increases our responsibility to the public and our users to always be as professional and efficient as possible in fulfilling our basic obligation – producing quality and timely statistical data that meet the needs of users.

Official statistical data are the basis of every development policy, every strategy, but also the basis for

making everyday decisions of each one of us. Increasing the availability and use of official statistics is essential in today's environment filled with vast amounts of data of all kinds that often lead to misconceptions, misinterpretations and, ultimately, wrong decisions. From there, building trust and increasing awareness of the use of official statistics will contribute to the acceleration of democratic processes in the country, but will also help in creating inclusive policies at all levels of government in the country.

For the past two years, SSO has been working on a project together with Statistics Sweden, funded by Sida. The project's development objective is increased user confidence in official statistics in North Macedonia society. In terms of impact, the project should result in the statistics produced by SSO more often being used by decision-makers, researchers and other stakeholders to make policy changes. That means that they will contribute to a positive change for the people of North Macedonia.

One of the project's components is Improved communications. This component regards the interaction between the users and producers (external communications). SSO is relatively new to developing modern platforms for external communication and struggles in a few aspects. Challenges in the communication area include broad issues such as:

- Communication with users
- Web and dissemination practices
- Communication with producers and holders of administrative data in society
- Communication and information to the media
- Strategic communication policies for major events

Given this background, it was more than obvious that it is necessary to improve communication in order to strengthen confidence in official statistics with all users. This would come about as a consequence of more timely, transparent, coherent practices, along with effective communication within the NSS and with the prioritised user groups and the public. The required change in SSO's communication procedures is rather comprehensive and includes several internal stakeholders, including not just the dissemination sector but also managers and subject matter experts from other parts of the organisation.

Below, I am describing the specific steps SSO is taking to increase the trust in official statistics in the Republic of North Macedonia.

Communication strategy

A communication strategy was developed in 2021, setting the overall frame of SSO's external communication and serving as a tool and as support to define communication towards different target groups. It also defines the channels for communication to disseminate and promote official statistics. The priorities of the strategy contribute to change the perception about the State Statistical Office as a

professional, independent and reliable institution, where the interest of the users is put first. That will be achieved by:



- Proactive cooperation, dialogue and interaction with our users in order to learn about their needs and how to meet them.
- Creating of clear and transparent image about the State Statistical Office and the National Statistical System by constant promotion of the importance of official statistics by regular presence in the public, drawing attention to both regular and potential users offering interesting statistical products that are in line with the new trends and living conditions.
- Improving data dissemination by using modern digital tools and communication of statistical products “packed” in accordance with the needs of the different target groups.

The target groups are divided into several categories depending on the level of knowledge and interest in statistics:

Low statistical interest/knowledge

Medium statistical interest/knowledge

High statistical interest/knowledge

This categorization allows creation of adequate approach and communication activities directed to a specific target group.

The communication strategy gives the way forward in disseminating and communicating official statistics and it also defines the channels to do so. The main channel of communication with the users is the website. Then come the Makstat database; social media; workshops/seminars/press conferences; e-mail.

New website

As the communication strategy defines the website as the main channel of external communication, SSO together with Statistics Sweden is working on developing a completely new website, instead of redesigning the current one. The new website will be based on an open-source system, Umbraco, and the publication process will also be changed, involving statisticians in content creation. The website will be much user-friendlier with a simplified main menu and footer, improved themes and topics tree with better usability, improved structure for content areas, guidelines for news releases, and a plan for how to optimize search traffic. The new website is expected to be released by the end of 2023.

New news releases

In addition to the new website, new templates for news releases were also created, which give a totally different structure of the news releases focusing more on key indicators and key lines/take-away messages that will have to be picked by the person responsible for producing the data. All other data will be directly uploaded to the Makstat database. The main reason for changing the layout of the news releases is that the current one is too technical, using specialized vocabulary thus making the news releases difficult to understand and not really interesting for the users/the public to use/consult them.

Makstat database redesigned

The Makstat database is a real treasure chest which contains tables from all statistical areas for which SSO is producing data. The data are on a different territorial level in accordance with the the NUTS nomenclature. Makstat offers many ways of re-using the data, from simple downloads in various formats (PC Axis, Excel, txt, HTML, JSON), as well as charts in png, gif or jpg. For more advanced users access is allowed via API.

In the new publication process, Makstat database will be used as the data source for visualisations and tables. It was modernized and with support from Statistics Sweden the software PXWeb was updated to the latest version. SSO released an updated version of the Makstat in March 2023. As a result of the modernization, the database became more user-friendly and easier to navigate, and SSO received a lot of positive feedback from the users.

Social media

As the modern times require, social media are becoming more and more important for sharing of information. SSO is aware of this fact and we are present on social media, but as a result of low experience and lack of resources our presence is not very visible. So, together with colleagues from Statistics Sweden, we developed a social media strategy in which we defined the main social media channels, taking in account the national context and our capacity. In discussions with domestic experts in communication, it was decided that in North Macedonia Facebook is still the predominant social media channel, while other channels are also present, but not that influential for our needs. SSO's Facebook page will continue to function, and it will be the primary social media platform for SSO for communication with the general public. On the other hand, SSO opened a LinkedIn account that serves the need to promote SSO as a brand and it is directed towards the professional community in the country. Twitter will be used more when the new news releases become official. For the purposes of social media presence, with Swedish colleagues we have developed annual action plans for producing infographs and other visualisations, which is something that we didn't have before.

After we started working more on communication, especially within the project with Statistics Sweden, there have been positive movements regarding increased use of statistics produced by SSO. For example, the number of visits to the SSO website has increased from 1 213 335 in 2020 to 1 388 123 in 2022. The number of tables downloaded from the Makstat database in 2020 was 82 581, while in 2022 it was 133 620. As a result of that, the number of written requests of data submitted to SSO has decreased from 889 in 2020 to 654 in 2022, which is the expected and wanted trend.

Increasing statistical literacy

Promoting statistical literacy is another aspect of increasing trust in official statistics. Within the project with Statistics Sweden, SSO is developing training materials that will be used for training of staff both in SSO and in other institutions. The training materials cover topics such as general information about SSO and the work it does, statistical production, sampling, dissemination of data etc. Trainers are young colleagues, but who are already experienced in the topics they teach. Training of trainers was organized for them in order to improve their presentation skills and to prepare them for speaking in public. In the frames of the new Public Administration Reform Strategy (2023-2030), SSO is included with activities whose aim is to increase the statistical literacy among the members of the public administration in the country. We have planned 6 trainings per year, 20 persons per training. In support of increasing statistical literacy in the country, SSO is working on establishing a training center where all statistical trainings will be conducted on a regular basis. The training premises are located within SSO headquarters.

Building of partnerships

Building of partnerships is in a close relationship with statistical literacy and trust. SSO is perceived by the professional community and international organisations as a reliable and trustworthy partner, and often our staff are invited to give lectures to specific audiences on specific topics (SDGs, Census, gender statistics, etc.)



Workshop on SDGs and Census of Population



Workshop on SDGs and Census of Population

We have good cooperation with education institutions, especially tertiary education institutions, where students come to trainings. SSO has signed Memoranda of Understanding with several faculties, such as: Faculty of Economics and Faculty of Philosophy (as part of the University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius), University St. Clement of Ohrid and International Balkan University. Among other things, these Memoranda include organizing of workshops and exchange of knowledge. Apart from educational institutions, SSO also has Memoranda signed with the Chambers of Commerce in the country and regular workshops are being organized with them.



Visit of students from the International Balkan University



Visit of students from the Tourism and Management University

Another important form of partnership is cooperation with the media. SSO's reputation in the media has significantly improved over the past 5 years. The cooperation with them is based on openness and sincerity. This was especially evident before and during the Census of Population, Households and Dwellings, 2021, because the Census in North Macedonia is an extraordinary event which some social actors tried to give it a political connotation. The cooperation with the media was excellent and professional, and we were in contact with the media daily. We consider them as advocates for statistics and they are very important part of the puzzle called increasing trust in statistics. They are the link between SSO and the general population, and it is very important to have journalists that are statistically literate and who can understand and communicate statistics in a proper way.



Press conference on the first day of Census of Population, Households and Dwellings, 2021

Strengthened NSS

As mentioned before, SSO is coordinator of the NSS in the Republic of North Macedonia. The national statistical system, in addition to the SSO, also includes other producers of official statistics that are authorised to carry out statistical surveys:

- National Bank of the Republic of North Macedonia
- Ministry of Finance
- Ministry of Interior
- Ministry of Justice/Judicial Council
- Employment Agency of the Republic of North Macedonia
- Institute of Public Health of the Republic of North Macedonia

When speaking about trust in statistics, it does not refer only to the SSO, but it refers to the whole NSS. The members of the NSS should understand the role they have as other official authorities in producing statistics. It means that when producing official statistics, they have to respect and follow European standards and have a uniform approach in interpreting the principles of the European Statistics Code of Practice (CoP). The role of SSO is to lead the process and help ONAs build their internal statistical capacities. During the preparation for the Peer Review in 2017, it became evident that not all members of the NSS are on the same level of statistical knowledge and even in knowledge in the CoP. As a result of that, during the preparation of the Five-Year Programme of statistical surveys (2023-2027), SSO made a revision of the members of the NSS and in the coming period it will start training staff from ONAs and build a solid statistical network that will be able to take over the responsibilities that come with the negotiation process.

5. Challenges for official statistics in the Republic of North Macedonia

Despite all the efforts SSO is investing not only to maintain a sufficient level of trust in official statistics but, also, to increase it, there are some serious factors that influence those actions and could, to a certain extent, hamper the process.

The Covid-19 pandemics caught us completely unprepared and even though it is not that present now, its shadow is still around the corner.

In recent years, SSO has lost a lot of staff. One analysis showed that in the period between 2015 and 2021, over 100 people left the SSO, while there were no new recruitments. This seriously undermined all our efforts to respond to all tasks and obligations. In the coming period, SSO will be actively involved in the screening process, which is an additional burden aside from the regular work as planned with the Five-Year Programme of statistical surveys. This has led the SSO to adapt to the new reality and to start thinking about solutions for how to do more with less. These include transition to open source technologies, investing in IT trainings for non-IT statisticians, introducing a planning and monitoring system for better utilization of existing human capacities, etc.

Obscure financial capacities are another serious risk that affects not only dissemination and communication, but the whole functioning of SSO.

A challenge that directly influences dissemination and communication of statistics is the reluctance to change the mindset, especially regarding dissemination and communication. The traditional view is that SSO is only producing statistics (using standard, technical language) and it is not in our authority to think about how and if users and general public understand and use our data. Modern times require more engagement by communication staff, proactivity and creative solutions.

6. Conclusion

Trust is the basis for the normal functioning of society. The lesser the trust, the bigger the decline of the society. Official statistics, as “gatekeeper” of official numbers and facts should be in line with the changes that occur in society and should stand up to the challenge.

High-quality statistics strengthen democracy by allowing citizen access to key information that enhances accountability. Access to solid statistics is a fundamental ‘right’ that permits choices and decision based on information. Without statistics there cannot be a well-grounded and participated democracy (Walter J. Radermacher, 2018).

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