

Peer Review on the Implementation of the  
European Statistics Code of Practice in the  
Republic of Macedonia, and the  
coordination role of the State Statistical  
Office

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May 2017

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## Abbreviations

CoP	European statistics Code of Practice
EDP	Excessive Deficit Procedure
ESS	European Statistical System
EU	European Union
IPA	Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance
LSS	Law on State Statistics
NSI	National Statistical Institute
NSS	National Statistical System
ONAs	Other National Authorities
PR	Peer Review
SSO	State Statistical Office

## Executive summary

The national statistical system (NSS) of the Republic of Macedonia is developing rapidly within a relatively compact public administration, that is itself evolving rapidly and focused on achieving the standards expected of an EU candidate country. The energy, innovation and optimism that drive rapid progress are notable features of the State Statistical Office (SSO).

The role of the SSO is set out in legislation, primarily the Law on State Statistics (dating from 1997 but extensively updated). The legislation also refers to the activities of the other national authorities (ONA) of the statistical system (NSS), and the coordination role of the SSO. The eight other national authorities currently include: National Bank, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Justice, Hydrometeorological Service, Institute of Public Health, Pension and Disability Insurance Fund, and the Employment Agency. The SSO is described in the legislation as an independent, professional administrative organisation with legal personality and powers. There is an advisory Statistical Council, of 15 members appointed by a parliamentary body, whose membership and role are regulated by legislation.

More generally, the legislation is comprehensive and well aligned with the European statistics Code of Practice (CoP). It contains robust definitions of professional independence, neutrality, objectivity, reliability and statistical confidentiality. It also requires that the SSO, in performing international obligations, must observe and apply international standards including the CoP. However, in practice, the CoP is treated as applying universally to the production of all official statistics by all relevant national authorities. The staff of the SSO are not only fully aware of the CoP but see it as the central guidance on their particular role within the public administration. A twinning project with the Italian and Slovenian statistical offices has recently been launched which will help to guide future developments including the next census of population which will be particularly challenging.

The SSO prepares a five-year Programme of Statistical Surveys in cooperation with the other national authorities. The current Programme of Statistical Surveys relates to 2013-2017. It aims to ensure the consistency of the statistical system, based on strong national and international standards.

Overall, the Peer Review team concluded that the SSO is in most respects already compliant with the CoP and compares closely to many EU Member States. However, it is a relatively young and developing organisation in its current form. It faces many challenges and still has some way to go towards developing the NSS into a coherent, centrally coordinated service aiming (in the words of the twinning project) *“to improve decision making by government institutions, businesses and citizens in the country, through the production of exhaustive and comparable statistics in line with EU and international standards, aiming at further advancing democracy and the market oriented economy.”* In particular, there is a need to begin to focus on expanding and developing the service provided to users to maximise the public benefit that can be derived from the use of official statistics.

The Peer Review team identified a number of issues that if addressed would, in its opinion, enhance the level of compliance with the CoP. These issues are discussed under two headings:

- Strengthening standards and accountability across the statistical system;
- Developing a more outward facing approach.

The recommendations put forward by the Peer Review team are listed below. In most cases, they are addressed to the SSO but in some cases propose action on the part of other authorities.

## **Recommendations**

### **Strengthening standards and accountability across the statistical system**

1. The SSO should establish and chair a Coordination Committee for the NSS responsible for promoting a shared interpretation of the CoP as it applies to all relevant national authorities and in particular of its principle of professional independence (CoP, Principle 1 and Coordination)
2. Within the context of the Coordination Committee, the SSO should agree arrangements to assess systematically, and record, compliance with the CoP by all relevant national authorities. (CoP, Principle 1 and Coordination)
3. The Ministry of Finance should appoint a head of statistics at a senior level with responsibility and authority in relation to all official statistics for which the Ministry is responsible. (CoP, Principle 1)
4. The SSO, supported by the Statistical Council, should promote a shared brand name or logo for the whole of the NSS so that users can identify statistics as being official statistics produced in accordance with the CoP. (CoP, Principles 6 and 15)
5. The SSO should take further steps to ensure that the meaning and importance of the requirements in the CoP, particularly Principle 1 on professional independence, are fully understood at the top levels of government. (CoP, Principle 1 and others)
6. The relevant authorities should give high priority to supporting the SSO in planning and delivering the next population and housing census to be conducted as a statistical operation in full compliance with the CoP and European statistical standards. (CoP, Principles 1, 11 and 12)
7. The SSO should prioritise the ongoing transition from reliance on survey data to the exploitation of administrative data sources wherever possible, including in the design of the next population and housing census. (CoP, indicators 8.7-8.9 and 10.3)
8. The SSO should develop procedures and agreements to enable it better to assess the quality of the administrative data from which official statistics are produced. (CoP, indicators 4.2 and 8.7-8.9)
9. The role of the Statistical Council should be extended to support actively the proposed Coordination Committee in ensuring that all parts of the NSS are engaging effectively with, and responding to, all beneficial uses of official statistics. (CoP, Principle 11)

### **Developing a more outward facing approach**

10. To stimulate further use and user engagement, the SSO should systematically document and publish on its website the requests and comments it receives from users and potential users; and similarly document and publish information on the use made of official statistics. (CoP, indicators 11.1 and 11.2)
11. To better meet the demand for detailed data, the SSO should make available via its website any disaggregated data or tables it produces to meet requests from specific users. (CoP, Principle 6 and indicator 15.3)
12. The SSO should promote a broad concept of official statistics based on the potential value of the data to support decision making. (CoP, Principle 11)
13. The SSO should engage constructively with statistical data from non-official sources to better support users. (CoP, Principle 11 and indicator 14.4)
14. The SSO should develop its news releases, statistical releases and other products so as to provide

more explanation to support the informed use of statistics. (CoP, indicator 15.1)

15. Drawing on international best practice, the SSO should develop new solutions over time to allow academic researchers and other approved users, more flexible access to microdata than the current arrangements permit. (CoP, Principle 11 and indicator 15.4)
16. When a pre-announced date or time in the advance release calendar is changed, the SSO should publish the reason for the change in order to maintain confidence in its impartiality; it should also allow users to assess punctuality by keeping track of the changes made in the original version. (CoP, indicators 6.5 and 13.4)

## Introduction

This peer review report is part of a series of assessments, the objective of which is to evaluate the extent to which National Statistical Institutes (NSIs) of the enlargement countries comply with the European statistics Code of Practice (CoP). This series of assessments is based on a similar round of peer reviews carried out in EU Member States, and follows, as much as possible, the same methodology, slightly adapted to the context of the enlargement countries.

The CoP, which sets out a common quality framework for the ESS, was first adopted in 2005 by the Statistical Programme Committee and updated in 2011 by its successor, the European Statistical System Committee. The CoP – 15 principles and related indicators of good practice – covers the institutional environment, the statistical production processes and the output of European statistics. The ESS is committed to fully complying with the CoP and is working towards its full implementation. Periodic assessments review progress towards reaching this goal.

The first round of peer reviews in the EU Member States in 2006-2008 was followed by a round of 'light' peer reviews and adapted global assessments in the enlargement countries in 2010-2012. The light peer reviews explored how the NSIs were progressing in implementing the parts of the CoP relating to the institutional environment and dissemination of statistics (principles 1-6 and 15). This resulted in reports for each reviewed NSI, available on the Eurostat website<sup>1</sup>. These reports also include a set of improvement actions covering all the principles of the CoP; these formed the basis of the annual monitoring of the implementation of the CoP in the enlargement countries in the period 2011-2015.

In line with the reviews carried out in EU Member States in 2014-2015, the scope of this second round of peer reviews is broader: the assessment of CoP compliance covers all principles; the CoP compliance of selected other national producers of official statistics (as well as the NSI) in each country is assessed; and the way in which statistical authorities coordinate the production and dissemination of official statistics within their statistical systems is explored.

In order to gain an independent view, the peer reviews have been externalised and an audit-like approach, where all the answers to the self-assessment questionnaires have to be supported by evidence, has been applied. Each peer review in the enlargement countries is conducted by three reviewers and has four phases: completion of self-assessment questionnaires by a country; their assessment by Peer Reviewers; a peer review visit; and the preparation of reports on the outcomes.

The peer review of the Republic of Macedonia was conducted by Mr Richard Alldritt, Ms Isabelle de Pourbaix and Mr Torbioern Carlquist (representative of Eurostat), who conducted a peer review visit to Skopje on 13-16 February 2017.

This report focuses on compliance with the CoP and the coordination of official statistics within the national statistical system. It is forward looking and does not discuss events in the past. Instead, the report highlights some of the current strengths of the statistical system and contains recommendations for improvement. Improvement actions developed by the State Statistical Office on the basis of this report will be published within the four-week period starting when the final report is sent to the NSI.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/enlargement-countries/publications/reports>

# **1. Brief description of the National Statistical System**

## **Legislation**

The role of the State Statistical Office (SSO) is set out in the Law on Organisation and Operation of State Administrative Bodies and the Law on State Statistics (dating from 1997 but substantially amended subsequently). The legislation also refers to the activities of the other national authorities of the national statistical system (NSS), and the coordination role of the SSO in the NSS. The SSO is described in the Law on State Statistics as an independent, professional administrative organisation with legal personality and powers.

## **Mission and vision**

The Strategic Plan 2017-2019 of the SSO sets out objectives, programmes and activities, which the Office plans to accomplish. It states the mission of the SSO as being to produce and disseminate official statistical data on the national economy and society as a basis for the process of decision-making based on relevant information. The vision of the SSO is to be recognised as an institution that provides quality, timely and internationally comparable statistical data.

## **Structure of the NSI and the National Statistical System**

The SSO adopted a new Rulebook on Internal Organisation in December 2015. Under this, the Office operates through seven Departments (or Sectors) and 36 units, of which 8 are regional offices. The Office is managed by a Director appointed by the Government following public advertisement. It currently has the equivalent of 300 full time staff and 166 temporary interviewers. The SSO considers the staff level to be satisfactory at present, but noted that it is a constraint in relation to development work and new technology. A number of staff training initiatives are underway currently.

There is an advisory Statistical Council, composed of 15 members, of which 14 are appointed by the National Assembly, while the Director of the SSO is an ex-officio member. Some of the members of the Statistical Council are representatives from the other national authorities (National Bank, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Interior, Pension and Disability Insurance Fund, Employment Agency). Members of the Council are appointed for a term of four years. Among the topics on which the Council makes suggestions and proposals are: the methodological basis for statistical surveys; amendments to the Programme; amending legislation and regulations; the modernisation and rationalisation of state statistics; and international cooperation;

Under the relevant legislation, the SSO is required to: coordinate the activities of state statistics, prepare and prescribe the instruments for statistical surveys (methodologies, guidelines, forms, etc.), prepare national statistical standards, collect and process statistical data, analyse statistical data, prepare statistical forecasts and models, meet international obligations in the field of statistics, determine the needs for statistical data, store and disseminate statistical data, coordinate the transmission of statistical data to international organisations, and perform other tasks prescribed in law.

The SSO describes its basic role as carrying out statistical surveys in cooperation with the reporting units and obtaining data from the holders of data sets. The SSO is also required to coordinate state statistics, to cooperate with ONAs performing statistical surveys, to advise ONAs on the methodology, to prescribe organisational and technical measures to protect confidential data, to advise on introducing new, and improving existing, data sets, to take initiatives and make suggestions for improving the content of existing and new data sets used for statistical surveys, and to implement projects in the field of state statistics, independently and in cooperation with ONAs. The SSO also has a coordinating role in the frames of international statistical cooperation. In meeting international

obligations, the SSO, in cooperation with ONAs, must ensure comparability of data with other European countries, observe and apply international standards including the European statistics Code of Practice, and actively participate in the development of official statistics at the international level.

The other national authorities in the NSS are identified in the five-year Programme of Statistical Surveys and include: National Bank, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Justice, Hydrometeorological Service, Institute of Public Health, Pension and Disability Insurance Fund, and the Employment Agency.

### **Statistical programme**

The SSO prepares the five-year Programme of Statistical Surveys in cooperation with the ONAs. The current Programme relates to 2013-2017 and is updated annually. The Law on State Statistics defines “*official statistical data*” as data published by the SSO and the ONAs in accordance with the Programme. The Programme aims to ensure the consistency of the statistical system, based on national and international standards. The Programme also aims to integrate the relevant statistical work of all ONAs and prevent production of official statistics outside of the system of state statistics. The SSO prepares an Annual Report on the implementation of the Programme each year. The report covers aspects of the operation of the ONAs regarding the exercise of their competence but mostly refers to the activities of the SSO. One of the main priorities of the State Statistical Office described in the Strategic Plan, 2017-2019 is strengthening the coordinating role of the SSO in the national statistical system.

### **Statistical products**

According to the SSO’s Dissemination Policy, the main products of the SSO are: news releases, publications and the MakStat database. The website is the main channel for dissemination of statistical data and information where users can find statistical products in the official language of the country as well as in English. The MakStat database based on the PC-Axis retrieving software allows users to access tables with time series of data from different areas. The results of statistical surveys are presented to users through news releases, and detailed tables with data from the statistical surveys are published in Statistical Reviews. The SSO also prepares multi-domain publications: Statistical Yearbook, Monthly Statistical Bulletin, various annual publications, a regional yearbook, Environmental Statistics, etc. The website contains data by theme, the Advance Release Calendar, metadata, visualisation tools, infographics, and other information.

Dissemination of statistics is announced in advance through the Advance Release Calendar where the exact date of publishing of news releases is set out in the last quarter of the year for the next year. For publications, the month of release is defined in the Calendar. The development of the Advance Release Calendar was a requirement for SSO’s subscription to the Special Data Dissemination Standard of the International Monetary Fund. All users have equal access to statistical data at the same time and there is no privileged access before the release time. Users can submit requests for data and information via e-mail and through the website or use the services of the library.

## **2. Compliance with the Code of Practice and the coordination role within the National Statistical System**

### **2.1. Strengths of the National Statistical Institute in relation to its compliance with the Code of Practice and to its coordination role**

One strength of the national statistical system in the Republic of Macedonia is that the statistical legislation – primarily the Law on State Statistics (LSS) – is modern, comprehensive and well aligned with the CoP. It has benefited from drawing on other national and international models and has been updated and extended with the advice of international experts since it was first introduced in 1997. The LSS is written in clear and straightforward language. It states at Article 4a that professional independence “*shall mean that matters of official statistics must be carried out based on expert and scientific methods and findings, and must be protected from any kind of influence, as well as the timing and content of all forms of dissemination*”. The same Article goes on to give further robust definitions of what is meant by neutrality, objectivity, reliability and statistical confidentiality.

Article 24 of the LSS allows the SSO to use administrative data sets held elsewhere in government. It states that “*Holders of data sets, prior to establishing or amending data sets, are obliged to obtain a written opinion from the Office*”. This gives the SSO a potentially influential central position in relation to administrative data and the PR team was assured that the Office has full cooperation from other public bodies in obtaining administrative data for statistical purposes. This was confirmed by representatives of the data suppliers who, without exception, spoke positively of the close working relationship with the SSO and their support for its work and professional independence.

Article 48a of the LSS states that the office, in performing international obligations, must “*...observe and apply international standards including the European statistics Code of Practice*”. The PR team was assured that, in practice, this requirement to observe the CoP is treated as applying universally to the production of all official statistics by all relevant national authorities.

All the staff of the SSO to whom the Peer Review team spoke were not only fully aware of the CoP but saw it as central to their work and their role within the public administration. It was seen not just as a set of European standards to which there was a formal obligation, but rather as being fundamental guidance on how an NSI, and all its staff, should operate.

The SSO benefits from being part of a public administration that is collectively supported by programmes of the EU to modernise and achieve the standards expected of the EU candidate countries. Within the SSO, communications and relations with Eurostat and with NSIs in other countries are regarded as a major source of insight and support. A twinning project with the Italian and Slovenian statistical offices is one example of how this is being implemented. The twinning project is intended “*to enhance the capacity of the SSO in order to further improve compliance with EU acquis in the three main pillars of the National Statistical System: National Accounts, Economic statistics and Social Statistics*”.

Junior staff of the SSO are not only well qualified and committed to their work, they also see a positive future for the SSO, with ongoing innovation and development in all its functions and activities.

The Peer Review team concluded that the senior management in the SSO were open, confident in the value and viability of the development path they were pursuing, and fully committed to ongoing innovation and improvement. The desire to equal the highest standards of NSIs internationally was

repeatedly stated. Senior managers saw the 2010 Light Peer Review<sup>2</sup> as a helpful exercise and had made substantial efforts to meet all its recommendations; and were now keen to use the current Peer Review as an incentive and guide for future development.

Many new arrangements, strategies, policies and procedures, in the fields of quality, methodology (including a Methodological Council), dissemination, and user engagement had been put in place in recent years and SSO staff were confident that these were delivering improvements in their statistical products. Although the development of some of these policies and practices still has some way to go to meet the best international standards, the enthusiasm and commitment of the SSO to achieve those standards is not in doubt.

There are currently eight other national authorities (ONAs) that produce official statistics in the country and the SSO recognises the importance, and need for further development, of its coordination function. In meetings with the PR team, the ONAs spoke of their close cooperation with the SSO and the excellent working relationships. The National Bank in particular has substantial statistical functions organised under managers who expressed full commitment to both close cooperation within the statistical system and also to the standards of the CoP – whilst noting that the Bank is also bound by various other sets of standards as part of the community of central banks internationally.

The budget of SSO has increased (by some 23% between 2012 and 2017) and although resource constraints are still a concern in respect of fully meeting EU requirements, the overall position seems to be one in which financial or staff resources are rarely cited by SSO staff as a major constraint on progress. It might be noted here however, that the extent to which resources are a constraint depends very much on the broader aims and future path of the statistical system. This Peer Review report proposes in its recommendations that the aims of the statistical system should be extended to focus increasingly on meeting a broad range of user requirements, and this might change the future perspective on the adequacy of resources.

Overall, the Peer Review team concluded that the SSO is in most respects already compliant with the CoP and compares closely with many EU NSIs in this respect. The areas where compliance is weaker relate to coordination of the wider statistical system and the range and quality of statistical outputs, in particular concerning the relevance and utility of outputs for a wide range of users. The SSO faces real challenges in leading the development of the NSS to create a statistical service that seeks to do more than meet international standards and focuses instead on maximising the public benefit that can be derived through the use of official statistics, both nationally and internationally. However, SSO is a comparatively young NSI in its current form and is making rapid progress.

## **2.2. Issues and recommendations**

The Peer Review team identified a number of issues and challenges that if addressed would, in its opinion, improve or enhance the level of compliance with the CoP. These issues, together with related recommendations, are discussed below under two headings:

- Strengthening standards and accountability across the statistical system;
- Developing a more outward facing approach.

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<sup>2</sup>[http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/45004/6182541/FYROM\\_LPR+of+SSO+in+MK++final+report\\_comple te.pdf/7d37b8dc-a7c0-44de-ab8d-ebed186858e2](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/45004/6182541/FYROM_LPR+of+SSO+in+MK++final+report_comple te.pdf/7d37b8dc-a7c0-44de-ab8d-ebed186858e2)

### 2.2.1. Strengthening standards and accountability across the statistical system

Overall, there seems to be a satisfactory institutional environment for official statistics in the Republic of Macedonia. This is due in part to the clarity of the statistical legislation and the general acceptance of SSO as a professionally independent NSI. And also to the positive cooperation with other national authorities that produce official statistics and with the public bodies that hold administrative data that can be used for statistical purposes. However, although the eight ONAs that produce official statistics are all positive about mutual cooperation in relation to official statistics, there is still some way to go towards developing the NSS as a coherent, centrally coordinated service that is actively working together to understand and respond to the real needs of decision-makers at all levels of society – national, local, individual and international.

The annual report on the country in the 2016 Communication on EU Enlargement policy<sup>3</sup> includes a chapter on the country's statistical system which contains a number of observations and assessments. Whilst it is important to recognise that the current Peer Review is an independent assessment in a different context, it should nonetheless take note of the assessments made by Commission experts. These include that: *“the country should... further strengthen human and financial resources of the State Statistical Office; further align statistics with the European System of Accounts 2010; transmit a full set of tables for the Excessive Deficit Procedure (EDP) to Eurostat. As regards statistical infrastructure, the legal framework is broadly in line with the European statistics Code of Practice. The State Statistical Office (SSO)'s professional independence is enshrined in law but needs to be strengthened in practice, including through adequate resourcing.”*

In addition, the 2016 Country Report points to a number of areas of statistics where more progress is needed to achieve a good alignment with the EU acquis. For example, it states that *“Labour market statistics are broadly aligned with the EU acquis but crime, education and public health statistics are not yet aligned. Statistics on agricultural production are partially produced according to the EU acquis.”*

The PR team recognises the importance of these observations but was satisfied that they are being actively addressed; and concluded that specific recommendations from the PR team in these areas would only duplicate advice that has already been formally and publicly stated, and has already been acknowledged in the planning of the SSO.

However, there are a number of practical steps that could be taken which, in the view of the PR team, would support and reinforce the progress already in train; and these additional steps are the main focus of the recommendations that follow. Moreover, whilst compliance with the EU acquis is currently the driving force behind much of the work of the SSO and the NSS, it cannot be the only goal. Official statistics are produced at public expense because they deliver public benefit. The statistical system must strive to serve all users whose use of official statistics is beneficial, including use by many local organisations and individual citizens, not just government and international bodies. Many of those users will need a service that goes beyond conformity to the EU acquis. It is fundamental to the CoP that meeting the EU acquis is required but is not, of itself, the ultimate aim.

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<sup>3</sup>[https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key\\_documents/2016/20161109\\_report\\_the\\_former\\_yugoslav\\_republic\\_of\\_macedonia.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2016/20161109_report_the_former_yugoslav_republic_of_macedonia.pdf)

## **Coordination of the national statistical system**

The current five-year Programme of Statistical Surveys relates to 2013-2017 and is updated annually. Articles 20-22 of the Law on State Statistics define the purpose and content of the Programme. Article 3 of the Law on State Statistics defines official statistics as those statistics covered by the Programme. So, the national statistical system has become closely identified with management of the Programme. However, this approach has some limitations. It encourages a narrow focus on production of a restricted set of statistics by specified national authorities. To a large extent these authorities produce their official statistics autonomously and simply include the details in the Programme. Whilst cooperation between the ONAs and the SSO is good, and underpinned by formal Memoranda of Understanding, this is largely in relation to the provision of data to the SSO in support of its internal production of statistics.

The PR team had the benefit of detailed self-assessment questionnaires from the National Bank and the Ministry of Finance, and a more general discussion with representatives of the other ONAs. It concluded that whilst all were aware of the need to have regard to the CoP, they were mostly at an early stage in terms of interpreting and internalising the meaning of its principles and indicators. One notable exception was the National Bank, which seemed to be much more advanced in this respect.

It is not surprising that much of the CoP is difficult to translate into practical actions in ONAs that have small, organisationally scattered, statistical functions undertaken by staff who, in some cases, also have other responsibilities. Concepts such as professional independence, quality management, impartiality, relevance, coherence and accessibility all require careful and shared interpretation across all the ONAs. There are inevitable tensions between giving priority to the needs of the employer and attending to the additional or conflicting demands of external users; particularly where there are political sensitivities about some of the demands of external users.

In discussion with the representatives of international organisations, they noted their view that any requests they made for additional statistics by ethnic group or gender were seen as very sensitive and unlikely to be met. The SSO view is that there is only likely to be resistance to providing the data if there is a risk to the principle of confidentiality. Clearly, 'sensitivity', in itself, is not a statistical consideration. There is no provision in the CoP to reject requests to prepare statistics on the ground that they might exacerbate political controversy, although that might reasonably be seen as grounds to proceed with the utmost care.

The SSO and all the ONAs stated, without exception, that there were no problems of political influence in their work. In the view of the PR team, some tensions are likely to emerge when the statistical staff respond more fully to the external user requests, and those tensions will require coherent and principled management. The case of the 2011 census of population which was abandoned, for reasons that seem to have been essentially political, serves to illustrate how quickly such sensitivity can lead to major statistical challenges.

However, as it currently operates, the NSS functions with few strains or controversies. But if it is to develop both in terms of the range of the service it provides to users, and with a more informed and nuanced interpretation of the requirements of the CoP, it will need strong central leadership and a deep and shared understanding of how to handle the more challenging aspects of providing such a service. In its self-assessment questionnaire and strategic plan, the SSO recognised that further development of the coordination function is a priority.

Consideration also needs to be given to how best to minimise the risk of a serious failure of statistical integrity within an ONA – such as where statistics are altered, delayed, or finessed in some way to mislead public debate. The representatives of the SSO and ONAs who gave evidence to the PR team

were all confident that such a risk was very small. Accepting that, it remains the case that, were it to happen, the reputational damage to the SSO would likely be great, regardless of in which ONA such a failure occurred. Closer coordination of the NSS from the centre would both reduce the risks to statistical integrity and reduce the scope for the SSO to be held responsible for a failing outside its control - it could legitimately state that it had taken every step it reasonably could.

With that consideration in mind, it may not be sufficient for the SSO simply to promote understanding of, and respect for the CoP. The SSO is responsible for ensuring that a shared understanding of the CoP is closely observed by all the ONAs, including additional authorities that may in the future be identified as producers of official statistics. To give itself the assurance that the CoP is fully observed, and to allow it to extend that assurance to users and international bodies, the SSO will need to put in place arrangements to satisfy itself that practice in ONAs is in line with the CoP.

In order to better coordinate the ongoing development of the statistical system to meet the needs of all users, and to assure itself in relation to compliance with the CoP, **the Peer Review team recommends:**

- 1. The SSO should establish and chair a Coordination Committee for the NSS responsible for promoting a shared interpretation of the CoP as it applies to all relevant national authorities and in particular of its principle of professional independence. (CoP, Principle 1 and Coordination)**
- 2. Within the context of the Coordination Committee, the SSO should agree arrangements to assess systematically, and record, compliance with the CoP by all relevant national authorities. (CoP, Principle 1 and Coordination)**

### **Recognising the importance of Ministry of Finance statistics**

The National Bank has its official statistics functions organisationally together in a Statistics Department under a senior manager with responsibility for those functions and for professional independence and statistical standards including observation of the CoP. However, this tends not to be the case for the other seven ONAs. Whether the current structural and managerial arrangements in each of the ONAs are sufficient to ensure CoP compliance is something for the proposed Coordination Committee to address in due course.

However, the Peer Review team was given more information about the arrangements within the Ministry of Finance and concluded that there was a strong case for a 'statistical head' to be appointed at a relatively senior level, with specific responsibility and authority. This would not necessarily require any change in organisation structure, just a formal recognition within the Ministry that there is one appropriately qualified and experienced official with authority over all decisions about the scope, methodology and presentation of official statistics produced by the Ministry.

Bearing in mind the range and importance of official statistics partly or entirely within the responsibility of the Ministry of Finance, **the Peer Review team recommends that:**

- 3. The Ministry of Finance should appoint a head of statistics at a senior level with responsibility and authority in relation to all official statistics for which the Ministry is responsible. (CoP, Principle 1)**

## **Building a common identity for the National Statistical System**

Many of the experts who gave evidence to the PR team noted that awareness of official statistics and of the existence of a national statistical system that extends beyond the SSO was very limited. The SSO is taking some imaginative steps to address this including a programme of work with schools. However, it is not just the external awareness that needs to be addressed. Staff in the SSO and particularly in ONAs often have only a broad understanding of the concept of a national statistical system, or national statistical service. With these considerations in mind, the PR team saw merit in the SSO actively promoting a shared brand name or logo for the whole of the national statistical system. This might in time be augmented by a common look and style for statistical releases, standard release practices, a shared advance release calendar, and standard statements on all relevant statistics, such as that they are a product of the national statistical system and produced in compliance with the CoP. In discussion with the SSO, it was suggested that the current MakStat label, currently used on the SSO website, might be developed into a wider logo and identity for official statistics.

To enhance both the external awareness of the NSS and its own shared identity **the Peer Review team recommends that:**

- 4. The SSO, supported by the Statistical Council, should promote a shared brand name or logo for the whole of the NSS so that users can identify statistics as being official statistics produced in accordance with the CoP. (CoP, Principles 6 and 15)**

## **Reinforcing professional independence**

The 2010 Light Peer Review (LPR) report recommended that the Law on State Statistics<sup>4</sup> be amended to include an explicit reference to independence regarding the content and timing of statistical releases, and making the nomination process of the Director of the SSO more explicit and precise. Some amendments to the Law on State Statistics were subsequently made to address these points and whilst they are much improved, the appointment arrangements for the Director of the SSO might still be vulnerable to political intervention in the final stages of selection in the future.

The LPR report also expressed concern about the arrangements for the 2011 census of population. It stated that “*it is of the utmost importance that the soon to be implemented census law is aligned with the Law on State Statistics*”. Whether or not that alignment was achieved, the census was a failure and was abandoned, leaving a major weakness in the quality of many official statistics, not just in the field of demography. The journalists to whom the Peer Review team spoke described the census as a political exercise.

The 2016 Country Report (referenced previously) commented that the SSO’s “*professional independence is enshrined in law but needs to be strengthened in practice...*”. The international community is clearly seeking assurance that professional statistical independence in the SSO and the ONAs is not just recognised in legislation but is fully understood as being in the national interest - including at the highest levels of public administration. And that it is not just an ideal that can be observed when faced no particular challenge, but is treated as a guiding principle to be closely observed when the issues are controversial and politically sensitive. The next population census will be an exceptional challenge for the SSO. It will be technically complex and even more politically sensitive than normal due to the failure of the 2011 census. It is in a situation such as this where professional independence – and the understanding of what that means among the political leaders of

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<sup>4</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/45004/6182541/FYROM\\_LPR+of+SSO+in+MK+-+final+report\\_complete.pdf/7d37b8dc-a7c0-44de-ab8d-ebed186858e2](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/45004/6182541/FYROM_LPR+of+SSO+in+MK+-+final+report_complete.pdf/7d37b8dc-a7c0-44de-ab8d-ebed186858e2)

the country – become essential.

To further reinforce professional independence, **the Peer Review team recommends that:**

- 5. The SSO should take further steps to ensure that the meaning and importance of the requirements in the CoP, particularly Principle 1 on professional independence, are fully understood at the top levels of government. (CoP, Principle 1 and others)**
- 6. The relevant authorities should give high priority to supporting the SSO in planning and delivering the next population and housing census to be conducted as a statistical operation in full compliance with the CoP and European statistical standards. (CoP, Principles 1, 11 and 12)**

### **The exploitation of administrative data**

It is clear that in recent years the SSO has made real progress in the use of administrative data to supplement and replace data obtained from statistical surveys, particularly in relation to business data. The Peer Review team was assured that cooperation with the Public Revenue Office, which is responsible for taxation data, has been everything that the SSO would wish. Memoranda of Understanding have been signed with all the relevant bodies.

However, it is still early days for the SSO in terms of fully understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the data to which that it now has, or expects to receive, access. The view was expressed to the PR team that the data must be reliable because they come from major administrative sources. Experience in other countries suggests that this perspective may prove over-optimistic; administrative data can be problematic in numerous respects and it takes significant time and effort to identify and resolve the weaknesses. For example, administrative records can fail to record death and emigration, can have large gaps, and can be affected by changes in definitions and technology. Moreover, again by comparison with other countries, the range and richness of administrative data currently available within the public sector in the Republic of Macedonia is likely to be less highly developed than in many EU Member States. The 2016 Country Report (referenced previously) comments that “*the availability and quality of administrative data sources remains a problem*”. Users mentioned, for example, the lack of recent population data at detailed geographical level as an impediment when taking decisions relating to investments from abroad. A good quality population register would greatly support such decision-making and make the challenge of the next population census more manageable.

Regardless of the cooperation of the holders of administrative data, the SSO continues to face a real challenge in fully exploring the strengths and weaknesses of those data for statistical purposes and in prompting and guiding improvements in the availability and quality of administrative data sources in ONAs. The SSO plans to make extensive use of administrative data, including linked sources that will approximate to a population register, in the design and conduct of the next census of population. If successful, there will clearly be the potential for major efficiency gains in statistical production in future after the initial investment has been done. Whilst that approach is likely to be the best available, it further underlines the need to prioritise the development of both the data sources and the expertise in using them for the production of reliable statistics.

Fundamental to the successful use of administrative data for statistical purposes is a good understanding of any weaknesses in the original data. The CoP states simply (at indicator 8.9) that ‘Statistical authorities co-operate with owners of administrative data in assuring data quality’. However, this can be problematic. For example, an address that is used for communication with an organisation or individual – and therefore suitable for administrative purposes – may wrongly locate the organisation etc. within the country, reducing the accuracy and utility of regional statistics. There

are many such examples where the quality criteria for administrative data are different from the qualities needed for statistical use. Systematic and pro-active investigation of such tensions, agreed between the statistical authorities and the holders of administrative data, are likely to be required.

To further build capacity and expertise in relation to the use administrative data to produce statistics, **the Peer Review team recommends that:**

- 7. The SSO should prioritise the ongoing transition from reliance on survey data to the exploitation of administrative data sources wherever possible, including in the design of the next population and housing census. (CoP, indicators 8.7-8.9 and 10.3)**
- 8. The SSO should develop procedures and agreements to enable it better to assess the quality of the administrative data from which official statistics are produced. (CoP, indicators 4.2 and 8.7-8.9)**

### **The role of the Statistical Council**

The Statistical Council's membership and functions are set out clearly in the Law on State Statistics (articles 10-12). The President and 14 members are appointed by a parliamentary (Assembly) body and include representatives of the staff of the Assembly, the National Bank, Ministry of Finance, local government, Economic and Social Council, non-government organisations, academic institutions etc., plus the Director of the SSO in an ex-officio capacity, with secretariat support from the SSO. This could be described as a classic design for a national Statistical Council and no concerns about its composition were raised with the PR Team.

Its statutory functions are mainly to advise on the development and approval of the five-year Programme of Statistical Surveys but also to 'propose modernisation and rationalisation of state statistics' and to 'propose promotion of international cooperation in the field of statistics'. The evidence available to the PR Team indicates that the Statistical Council makes a substantive contribution to the development of the Programme and that its advice is valued by the SSO management.

However, the earlier recommendations in this report indicate a need for the whole of national statistical system to develop a more coherent identity focused on supporting all users whose use of official statistics is beneficial to society. It is proposed in Recommendation 1 that the leadership of the statistical system should be operationalised through a Coordination Committee. But that committee will, necessarily, be composed of officials whose first responsibility is to represent the various national authorities that employ them. To ensure that development of the statistical system is focused on the needs of a wide range of users, the Statistical Council could perform an important role in both guiding and monitoring the evolution of the statistical system. Given that it already has a statutory duty to 'propose modernisation and rationalisation of state statistics', such a role would not seem to require legislative change. The primary basis for 'rationalisation' of any statistical system must be to meet user needs more effectively and efficiently.

The change required would be a re-focusing of some of the Council's activities towards promoting adherence to the principles of the CoP that relate most directly to the service to the user (particularly Principles 1, 3, 6, 10 and 11-15). An additional role of this kind for the Council might prompt some reconsideration of its membership but the description of its membership in the legislation seems broad enough to require no specific alteration.

So, to further strengthen the coordination of the statistical system and to guide it in developing a stronger user-focus, **the Peer Review team recommends that:**

- 9. The role of the Statistical Council should be extended to support actively the proposed Coordination Committee in ensuring that all parts of the NSS are engaging effectively with, and responding to, all beneficial uses of official statistics. (CoP, Principle 11)**

## **2.2.2. Developing a more outward facing approach**

### **Promoting user engagement**

The SSO's compliance with the CoP is informed by their understanding and interpretation of the basic principles underpinning the Code. In respect of Statistical Outputs, these principles focus on meeting user needs and, in practice, this requires an interpretation of what use of statistics is to be seen as being of value. In this context, the PR team noted that the users who gave evidence to the review acknowledged the improved accessibility of the SSO products on its website over recent years. The availability of most of the data through an online database with the possibility to download tables was particularly valued by website users. The openness and accessibility of SSO staff and their willingness to discuss additional data or to provide clarifications were unanimously noted as excellent.

However, the PR team formed the impression that the SSO is mainly concentrating on users it already serves – particularly the users who access the website rather than the full spectrum of users who draw on official statistics to inform their decisions and actions. The SSO assesses user satisfaction and investigates emerging needs principally by focusing on feedback from users of the website rather than by identifying the actual use made, and potential uses, of its statistical products.

The SSO has established a series of procedures and tools to deal with users' requests for clarifications, and to collect users' comments. Users' questions and SSO answers, however, are not systematically summarised, analysed and made available publicly. In the view of the PR team, there would be real benefit, both to the SSO and to users in drawing together and sharing information about what users are requesting, commenting on, or criticising. This would alert the SSO to emerging data needs, give it a platform to offer a coherent reply to requests that it cannot meet, help it to promote forthcoming improvements, and educate the users about the nature and limits of official statistics – and so build confidence among both institutions and the general public in the SSO as the provider of a transparent, user orientated, statistical service. This would enhance compliance with Principle 11 and other parts of the CoP and also demonstrate more generally the importance of official statistics to decision-making in all parts of a democratic society.

In the context of a country, and a public administration, that SSO notes as having relatively low statistical literacy, there is scope to broaden the beneficial use actually made of official statistics as well to simply increase the number of users. The SSO has taken some initiatives of this kind. For example, it put in place some teaching activities, such as a “*caravan*” going from school to school around the country to explain statistics to school students, and organised some seminars jointly with the Chambers of Commerce, and information sessions intended for university students. However, much of this activity is about increasing awareness of the existence and value of official statistics, rather than increasing support to decision-makers, at local and national level, in their understanding and use of the data. The mission of the SSO is stated as being to produce and disseminate official statistics as “*a basis for the process of decision making based on relevant information*”. At present the emphasis is on production and dissemination rather than on enhancing relevance to decision makers.

Among the additional steps the SSO could take would be identifying what users do with data – are they seeking to influence policy, support an industry, inform their own or others democratic choices,

prevent disease, manage services or whatever – and publish this information alongside relevant statistics. As the use of statistics by researchers develops and results in published papers, the SSO might offer links to published papers that may be of interest to users – whilst making clear that it does not endorse any specific research findings. Similarly, the SSO could offer links on its website to significant publications on specific topics by recognised national or international organisations that draw on the country’s official statistics. Not only would such steps offer additional support to users, they would serve to indicate to a broader public that the SSO is aware of at least some of the uses made of its outputs and is actively monitoring the relevance of its work. This would also further highlight the importance of official statistics within the country.

To further support an informed use of statistics, **the Peer Review team recommends that:**

- 10. To stimulate further use and user engagement, the SSO should systematically document and publish on its website the requests and comments it receives from users and potential users; and similarly document and publish information on the use made of official statistics. (CoP, indicators 11.1 and 11.2)**

### **Promoting use and equality of access**

In addition to the data published on its website, the SSO recognises a growing demand for customised tables. In addition, it makes available tailored data sets on a regular basis to specific users. For example, some disaggregated data on trade statistics are prepared and sent monthly to the three Chambers of Commerce operating in the country, according to agreements signed between the SSO and each of the Chambers. The Chambers act as a dissemination relay of the SSO in the sense that they use the data, supplemented by market research, to serve their own clients, including potential investors, providing them with more focused data and/or analyses.

Some institutions request custom-designed output on a yearly basis, to support their preparation of publications on broad topics within their area of competence. One example is the Employment Agency which requests tailored-made products to incorporate in its annual macro-economic and labour market analysis. There are also many requests for data to be disaggregated at lower geographical level, and disaggregated by categories of the variable such as product, activity, age, gender, ethnicity or mother tongue.

Although the SSO is active in meeting as many of these requests as it can, it does not appear to be maximising the value to be obtained from sharing these tailored outputs more widely. Users interested in market analysis, for example, might find it helpful to be able to access all relevant tailored data sets produced for other users in a centralised place. The CoP requires equal access to all users and it would be a breach of the CoP to refuse one user access to a tabulation or analysis prepared for another user. It is potentially a breach of the CoP not to make any such tabulations readily available.

The benefits of making all one-off tabulations and analyses openly available could include helping to promote investment, allowing representatives of national and international organisations to get better access to data about a local community or target population, and helping researchers to map social inequalities.

So, to further promote the use of data and enhance equality of access, **the Peer Review team recommends that:**

- 11. To better meet the demand for detailed data, the SSO should make available via its website any disaggregated data or tables it produces to meet requests from specific users. (CoP, Principle 6 and indicator 15.3)**

## **A broader approach to official and non-official data**

The SSO has adopted Eurostat's SMIS+ application as a tool for self-assessment, and regards the fulfilment of Eurostat expectations – as indicated by the SMIS+ application – as important evidence of compliance with the EU acquis and CoP. It has thus become a major influence on the scope of official statistics in the country and development priorities. In practice, and in line with legislation, the SSO defines official statistics as being those statistics included in the five-year Programme of Statistical Surveys, which is in turn very much driven by the aim to comply with the EU acquis. However, the PR team heard from users within the country that there are many examples of statistics required at national and local level that are not covered or regarded as priorities for development. Examples were mentioned in fields such as tourism, migration, social statistics, environment or trade. The SSO is not currently orientated towards introducing new statistical products that would not be part of the EU requirements, possibly because its own progress has been heavily influenced by the IPA (Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance) programmes through which it receives support.

The PR team was told that with a view to better compliance with the CoP, the SSO would not wish to see included in the five-year Programme of Statistical Surveys (and thus as official statistics), any statistical series where there might be doubts about CoP compliance. Potentially this is too restrictive an approach. For example, government policies that require strong statistical support might not be developed or monitored effectively if the related statistics were simply excluded from the Programme and thus exempted from the need for CoP compliance. Within the country there are specific topics of high political sensitivity, including the ethnic composition of the population, the scale of emigration flows, perceived inequalities between urban and rural areas, etc., that should be seen by the SSO as indicating strong user requirements and thus lead to the development over time of a broader view of what should be included within the scope of the Programme, and thus included as official statistics. The various non-governmental interest groups that are important players within a democratic society and their statistical needs should be given appropriate priority.

The PR team concluded that the scope and content of official statistics – not just the range but also the nature of the statistical outputs and products – should be determined by consideration of their potential utility, rather than starting from either the EU acquis or the current priorities of government ministries, important as those will remain. The test of whether to produce, or include as official, additional statistical series and products should be whether there is evidence that those statistics or products will play an influential role in decision-making, at the national, local or international level. The first principle of the UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, states that “*official statistics that meet the test of practical utility are to be compiled and made available on an impartial basis...*”. The test of practical utility should be the central consideration.

To better ensure that official statistics support decision-making, **the Peer Review team recommends that:**

### **12. The SSO should promote a broad concept of official statistics based on the potential value of the data to support decision making. (CoP, Principle 11)**

One major impact of the digital revolution is the sudden availability of a vast range of quantitative information either as a by-product of online services or from organisations that previously would not have published data in an accessible form. Financial, retail, environmental, market research and academic sources are increasingly making data available via the Internet. Some NSIs and ONAs have started exploring the potential of these ‘big data’ sets as a source for producing, testing, or validating, official statistics. But possibly of more importance is that the digital revolution is reshaping the environment in which users of statistics operate. With quick and easy access to data of different kinds

and quality, users, including the general public, are faced with many data sources and will often not know the relative strengths and weaknesses of the different sources. To maintain trust in official statistics, and maximise their utility and use, NSIs will increasingly have to guide the user – whose interest tends to be in a topic rather than a specific source – on the different sources available and the particular merits of the official statistics in that context.

Relating this issue to the CoP, users of statistics exposed to a broader choice of data are likely to identify new needs and develop new expectations, which official providers need to take into account. And equally, assessing the quality, coherence and comparability of official data require not only scrutiny of the official estimates but also awareness of, and comparison with, data produced from other sources.

The PR team perceived the SSO as overly cautious in its willingness to engage with data from external sources. There are certainly reasons to be cautious but a middle way has to be found to give the user the best possible advice without appearing to give official endorsement to, or to rely on, potentially unreliable external data.

To improve the service to users in the context of the digital globalisation **the Peer Review team recommends that:**

- 13. The SSO should engage constructively with statistical data from non-official sources to better support users. (CoP, Principle 11 and indicator 14.4)**

### **More explanation to support informed use**

The SSO currently takes a particularly cautious approach to the text – explanation and advice – it provides in metadata, statistical releases and publications. This can diminish the clarity and accessibility of these outputs, and thus reduce their usefulness. One example might be the Eurostat format metadata reports, which do not seem to be widely understood or used. One way to improve the usefulness of the quality reports would be to provide further explanations of technical terms, in such a way that less experienced users are able to assess the value of the data. Also, the SSO should aim to provide systematic links on its website between statistical tables and the corresponding metadata. Revisions between subsequent releases of data need to be explained in a more user-friendly way in order to avoid confusion about the need for them or their validity.

The SSO's caution about offering any greater amount of commentary or analysis partly due to seeing itself as fundamentally a producer of standardised statistics, rather than a service provider. But it is also influenced by a concern to avoid the risk of inappropriate comment, or the unfounded accusation of inappropriate comment. In consequence, it does not produce any custom-designed analyses, seeing such products as a particular risk to the perception of professional independence and political neutrality. Internally, the SSO examines and analyses data as part of the validation process, and is thus forming its own views of what lies behind trends and patterns in the data, it does not share these insights with users. Again, the focus is on production of statistics rather than on optimising the service to decision-makers.

Informed by the views of various users of SSO statistics, the PR team concluded that the SSO could do more to develop the textual content of its statistical releases and other publications in ways that would facilitate and foster their use by a broader range of users – and promote their own status as a confident NSI voice. There is scope, in particular, for providing objective and factual explanations when statistics reveal particular trends and patterns. Some users also suggested that some insight into the reason of some changes would be helpful, especially when a given trend can be explained by the variation in a specific component. In some cases, contextualising the statistics with a longer time-

series or a wider range of international comparisons would facilitate proper interpretation and meaningful comparisons. Experience in other countries indicates that such explanation and advice can be provided openly without undermining the reputation for independence and neutrality; but it would be sensible for the SSO to make any changes cautiously and incrementally, gauging the reaction as it does so. The news media already rely heavily on the SSO news releases, so their reaction to developing more understandable and open statistical releases will be particularly important.

Another aspect of meeting user needs is the question of whether any of the statistical releases or publications should be issued in minority languages in addition to the official language and English. However, any decision to do so should be based on explicit statistical criteria – to extend the beneficial use of official statistics within particular communities – not in response to political pressure or simply to please particular groups.

To facilitate and foster the use of official statistics, **the Peer Review team recommends that:**

- 14. The SSO should develop its news releases, statistical releases and other products so as to provide more explanation to support the informed use of statistics. (CoP, indicator 15.1)**

### **Access to microdata**

The Law on State Statistics (Article 41) allows researchers access to microdata but the rules and procedures that must be followed are restrictive and time-consuming for both the researchers and SSO staff. Access is granted on the condition that the obligations of confidentiality, deriving from the LSS and from the rules and internal procedures of the SSO, are fully met. These procedures are based on the provisions of the Law on Scientific-Research Activity regarding the definition of what is categorised as a research activity and who is defined as individual researcher. Access is strictly regulated by a set of rules established by the Committee for Statistical Confidentiality and published on the SSO website. Core microdata from the Labour Force Survey are regularly transmitted to Eurostat.

Access to anonymised microdata is allowed only in a secured safe-room located in the premises of the SSO where researchers can produce their own outputs, under strict conditions of respecting statistical disclosure rules. The SSO staff checks the results of the data processing to ensure that there is no breach of confidentiality.

The researcher has to get the permission of the Committee for Statistical Confidentiality for each request and a detailed acceptance process has to be followed every time. Having to come to the SSO represents a burden for researchers who often need to reprocess data at various stages of their research, and, arguably, it is inconsistent with the principle of impartiality as the burden is greater for researchers working at a distance from the SSO. Users of microdata themselves expressed their desire for a faster and more flexible procedure to access microdata. There may be scope here for the SSO to benefit from the experience and practices of other countries in improving access to microdata, for example on a remote basis. The current approach might be considered an excessive protection against risk, reducing the optimal use of official data. The Peer Review team sees opportunity for the SSO to move towards a more outward facing approach, replacing progressively a practice of risk-rejection by a risk-management approach more supportive of the needs of broad research community.

To further enhance the service to the research community, **the Peer Review team recommends that:**

- 15. Drawing on international best practice, the SSO should develop new solutions over time to allow academic researchers and other approved users, more flexible access to microdata than the current arrangements permit. (CoP, Principle 11 and indicator 15.4)**

## **Improving the advance release calendar**

Indicator 6.5 of the CoP requires that ‘statistical release dates and times are pre-announced’ and indicator 13.4 says ‘divergence from the dissemination time schedule is publicised in advance, explained and a new release date set’. The advance release calendar improves the service to users, who can plan their access to official statistics in a more informed way. The release calendar is also a way to keep control over timeliness and punctuality, which are quality criteria of the CoP.

Based on the annual statistical programme, the SSO publishes on its website a yearly Advanced Release Calendar informing users of the date on which they can expect individual statistical releases and during which month statistical publications will be issued. Releases are always issued at the same time, at 12:00, with texts available in .pdf formats, and related tables downloadable in .xls format. The yearly calendar is prepared three months before the first publishing date foreseen for the next year. According to its dissemination policy, the SSO reviews the Release Calendar on a quarterly basis, and if a change has to be made, it informs its users at least three days before the original planned date of publishing.

The SSO’s Advance Release Calendar has an additional significance, as it is the primary way for users to identify the annual statistical programme derived from the five-yearly one, which is the only one currently published in full. However, when changes in the calendar occur, one limitation is that the reason for the change is not made public, although it is documented and considered internally by the SSO Management Board. The information disseminated through the release calendar is not only an indicator of timeliness and punctuality of outputs, it also supports equality of access to the data. Therefore, if changes occur in the publishing calendar, they should be systematically analysed, documented and published, otherwise, the benefit of producing an advance release calendar might be jeopardised by an apparent secrecy around the reasons for delays.

Similarly, the SSO should retain the original calendar available to users, and allow users to assess the punctuality achieved by comparing the original and final release calendars.

To maximise the benefits of publishing an advance release calendar, **the Peer Review team recommends that:**

- 16. When a pre-announced date or time in the advance release calendar is changed, the SSO should publish the reason for the change in order to maintain confidence in its impartiality; it should also allow users to assess punctuality by keeping track of the changes made in the original version. (CoP, indicators 6.5 and 13.4)**

## **2.3. National Statistical Institute views where they diverge from peer reviewers' assessment**

### **General remark**

The work of the SSO is based on the provisions of the Law on State Statistics, the European statistics Code of Practice and other international regulations on statistical principles, methodologies and procedures. We would like to emphasise that no activity conducted in the SSO is either imposed or influenced by politics, in order not to get the wrong impression of the terms “*political sensitivity*” or “*political intervention*”.

### **Recommendation No. 1**

The SSO has an objection to the formulation of recommendation No. 1. In particular, SSO consider that the line “...and in particular of its principle of professional independence” should be omitted, because it is not necessary to point out only one principle, but rather all of the 15 principles should be respected.

Therefore, the recommendation No. 1 should read as follows:

“The SSO should establish and chair a Coordination Committee for the NSS responsible for promoting a shared interpretation of the CoP as it applies to all relevant national authorities (CoP, Principles 1-15 and Coordination).”

### **More explanation to support informed use**

The use of the official language for the publication of statistical data is based on the principles established in the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia and other relevant laws in the country, and are binding for all state bodies and institutions.

The requests of international users are met by publishing official statistical data in English language.

### **Access to microdata**

The SSO keeps track of the new methods and solutions for access to microdata for researchers that are being introduced in the EU countries and beyond. Any future solutions for improvement of this approach will, as before, be regularly checked with our partner statistical offices, and the benefits, weaknesses and the financial viability of certain decisions will be examined by taking into account the number of requests received.

## **Annexes**

### **Annex 1. Agenda of the Peer Review meetings**

#### **Monday, 13.02.2017**

**09:00 – 10:00 Peer Review Team preparatory meeting**

**10:00 – 10:30 Preparatory meeting with the SSO Coordination Team**

**10:30 – 11:00 Coffee break**

**11:00 – 12:00 Welcome and introduction, adopting the agenda, organisational matters. Short presentation of the SSO**

**12:00 – 13:00 Lunch break (Review team meeting)**

**13:00 – 14:30 Presentation of the NSS and coordination role of SSO**

**14:30 – 15:00 Review team meeting (Coffee break)**

**15:00 – 16:30 The Law on State Statistics and related legislation (CoP principles 1, 2, 5 and 6)**

**16:30 – 18:00 Review team meeting (outside the SSO)**

#### **Tuesday, 14.02.2017**

**09:00 – 10:15 Programming (statistical work programmes), planning and resources (CoP principles 1, 3, 9 and 10)**

**10:15 – 10:45 Review team meeting (Coffee break)**

**10:45 – 12:30 Quality (organisational structure, tools, monitoring) (CoP principles 4, 11 to 15)**

**12:30 – 13:30 Lunch break (Review team meeting)**

**13:30 – 14:45 Dissemination and confidentiality (CoP principles 5, 6 and 15)**

**14:45 – 15:00 Review team meeting (Coffee break)**

**15:00 – 15:30 Ad hoc discussion about the revision policy in National Accounts**

**15:30 – 16:00 Ad hoc discussion about the census of population**

#### **Wednesday, 15.02.2017**

**10:00 – 11:00 Meeting with Other National Authorities (cont.)**

**11:00 – 11:30 Review team meeting (Coffee break)**

**11:30 – 12:30 Meeting with junior staff**

**12:30 – 13:30 Lunch break (Review team meeting)**

**13:30 – 14:15 Meeting with main users – Media**

**14:15 – 14:45 Review team meeting**

**14:45 – 15:15 Meeting with main users - Scientific community**

**15:15 – 15:45 Review team meeting (Coffee break)**

**15:45 – 16:30 Meeting with main users - international organisations**

**16:30 – 18:00 Review team meeting (outside the SSO)**

**Thursday, 16.02.2017**

**09:00 – 10:30 Meeting with main users – Ministries and other public/private institutions (including National Bank as a user)**

**10:30 – 10:45 Review team meeting (Coffee break)**

**10:45 – 11:45 Meeting with main data providers/respondents**

**11:45 – 12:15 Meeting with Statistical Council**

**12:15 – 15:30 Lunch break (Review team meeting)**

**15:30 – 16:30 Meeting with senior management: conclusions and recommendations**

**16:30 – 18:00 Review team meeting (outside the SSO)**