
THE EUROPEAN STATISTICAL SYSTEM HELPING TO MANAGE THE CRISIS – RELIABLE DATA FOR EUROPE

Christina Schliffka, Dominique Polus

↳ **Keywords:** *European Statistical System – German EU Council Presidency – European cooperation*

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a wide range of challenges for the European Union (EU) and given rise to new information needs. High-quality statistics are an important basis for fact-based decisions, especially in times of crisis. Meeting the new challenges and needs requires close cooperation. This article shows the solutions developed by the European countries and describes cooperation within the European Statistical System in the light of the crisis. The work programme of the German EU Council Presidency 2020 in the field of statistics is based on the relevant insights. Therefore the article also explains how the Federal Statistical Office intends to apply the lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic in its work in the longer run.



Christina Schliffka

is a political scientist and works as a research assistant in the “German Council Presidency” project division of the Federal Statistical Office.



Dominique Polus

is an economist and research assistant in the “European and international coordination” department of the Federal Statistical Office.

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Introduction

Reliable information is important for making quick and robust decisions, especially in times of crisis. During the critical phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, official statistics faced the challenge of, first, producing statistics under more difficult working and data collection conditions and, second, meeting new data needs that have emerged during the pandemic and are aimed at measuring and counteracting it. This concerns data on health, the economy, finance and the society. As a result of the crisis, the relevance of official statistics for robust and quick decision-making has come even more into focus.

In this context, exchange and cooperation at the European level are crucial. Only by cooperating across borders and in a coherent statistical system can official statistics provide robust answers regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and in that way support fact-based decisions in the European Union (EU). The European Statistical System (ESS) is a partnership between the Statistical Office of the European Union (Eurostat), the national statistical institutes and other national agencies responsible for developing, producing and disseminating European statistics in the Member States. The ESS ensures that the European statistics produced in all the individual EU Member States are reliable and comparable across the EU countries and that they are based on uniform criteria and definitions.

The national statistical institutes, too, have quickly developed target group oriented solutions during the COVID-19 crisis. This article gives examples of how new sets of statistics have been developed in short time and how new data sources and innovative methods are used in Europe to react rapidly and flexibly to information needs. Within the ESS, the exchange of best practices has been enhanced, so that Member States could benefit from the relevant innovation. Another central issue for official statistics in coping with the crisis is strategic communication. There are a number of approaches in the ESS, some of which will be presented here.

The experience acquired shows that established production, coordination and communication processes

of official statistics will have to be adjusted so that relevant statistics can be provided reliably and in a timely manner also in situations of crisis. The lessons learned during the crisis therefore build the basis for the focal points and the programme in the field of statistics during the German EU Council Presidency in the second half of 2020. These points will be presented at the end of the article.

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The European Statistical System remains able to act

The actions taken to prevent the pandemic from spreading further, such as reorganising everyday work and the complex communication channels involved, have created new challenges for the national statistical institutes as regards maintaining their ability to act.

A survey initiated by the German Federal Statistical Office has covered and regularly updated the COVID-19-related situation of the national statistical institutes. Its goals were to keep up communication between the national statistical institutes, to exchange best practices and to ensure coordination. The survey has shown that some national statistical institutes had to shut down their offices at least temporarily during the COVID-19 crisis. Physical meetings were reduced to a minimum and were held as video or telephone conferences.

In addition to the challenge of having to change their internal work organisation and communication, many national statistical institutes stopped conducting personal interviews. Where possible, they were replaced by other methods such as telephone or online surveys. The statistical institutes both in Germany and in many other Member States reacted to increasing business nonresponse by using new methods such as web scraping in price statistics. In addition, the national statistical institutes faced a variety of methodological and conceptual challenges. Despite all this, the ESS has been able to continue its core activities and to provide reliable statistics to the general public and political decision-makers.

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European coordination to manage the crisis — cooperation within the ESS

The core body in the ESS is the ESS Committee (ESSC), which provides professional guidance for planning, producing and disseminating European statistics. Committee members are the heads of Eurostat and of the national statistical institutes of the EU and EFTA countries¹. The Partnership Group, another central body of the ESS, consists of the heads of selected statistical offices of the Member States. Its task is to develop topics to be proposed to the ESSC and to discuss strategic issues of the ESS.² The following sections outline how cooperation in the ESS was used to react to the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis.

3.1 Major challenges

The COVID-19 crisis and its consequences for official statistics dominated the meetings held in the ESS in the last few months. Exchanging experience and best practices and looking for common solutions was part of the regular meetings and the reason to hold several special

meetings at the European level. The main issues of the meetings are summarised below. [↘ Figure 1](#)

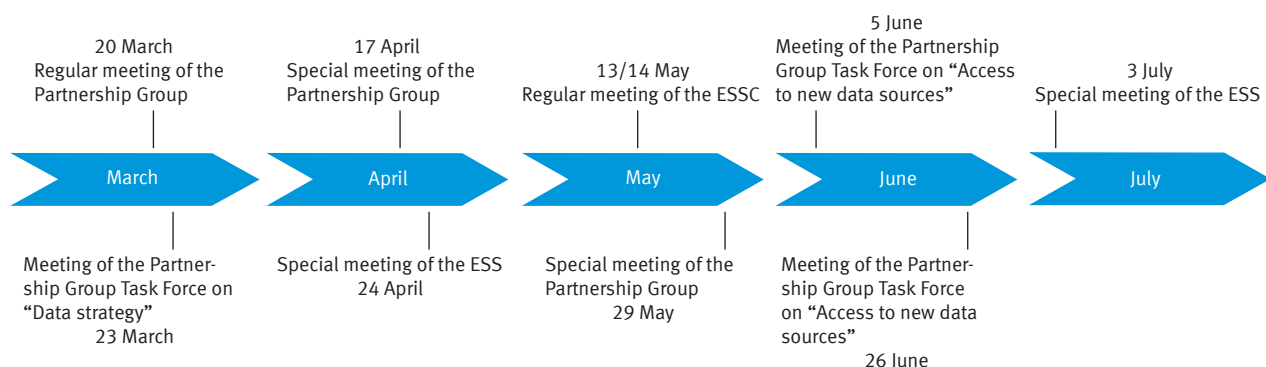
The COVID-19 pandemic was first discussed at the regular March meeting of the Partnership Group. The participants reported about the measures taken by their governments at the national level to contain the pandemic and its impact on official statistics. Especially lower response rates in business surveys, the cancellation of direct surveys and restrictions in household surveys and price collections created challenges for the national statistical institutes. Also, new information needs arose in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. The participants in the ESS meetings discussed the main needs for action and the further approach to streamline European statistics in order to manage the crisis.

Based on the exchange at the European level, four main areas are identified that have received particular attention during the crisis.

- › providing experimental statistics from new administrative and private data sources to meet short-term data needs;
- › ensuring the comparability of the statistics within the ESS;
- › ensuring continuous innovation, for example, in developing alternatives to face-to-face interviews;
- › developing efficient communication with data suppliers and users, for example, regarding data quality and data comparability.

1 The European Free Trade Association (EFTA) currently comprises the four countries of Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland.
 2 Due to the high relevance of the issue “access to new data sources”, a Task Force of the Partnership Group has additionally been set up during the COVID-19 crisis.

Figure 1
Meetings of the European Statistical System since March 2020



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3.2 Joint initiatives

When the crisis started, Eurostat and the Member States jointly prepared a prioritised list of statistics. It should provide orientation so that developments in the economy and the society can sufficiently be represented despite the crisis-related lack of resources. To ensure comparability of European statistics during the crisis, Eurostat publishes methodological guidelines on the [Eurostat website](#) in cooperation with the national statistical institutes.

Also, the ESS conducted a survey among the Member States to summarise all flash indicators released or planned and any access to new data sources acquired during the crisis. The results of the survey provide information on how the ESS reacted to the COVID-19 crisis and the survey allowed to exchange experience and best practices. It was also the basis for a [COVID-19 section](#) on the Eurostat website, which shows the impact of the pandemic.

The intensive exchange of experience and best practices has allowed to jointly develop solutions at the European level. The ESS is drawing lessons from the crisis to shape European statistics even more efficiently in the future.

3.3 Strengthening cooperation and coordination — the crisis as an opportunity

During the crisis, the focus was on compensating for nonresponse and on providing relevant indicators as efficiently and early as possible. Access to new data sources plays a major role in meeting the demand from policy-makers and the general public for early data provision. In this context, the Task Force of the Partnership Group discusses the benefits and challenges of using mobile phone data. At the European level, both transnational mobility aspects and data comparability within the ESS play an important role.

This Task Force will continue to deal with access to new data sources. The aim is to provide statistics early and with deeper granularity and to be able to react even more rapidly to new data needs in future situations of crisis. For this purpose, European principles will have to be established to safeguard the principles of transparency, quality, comparability and data protection. Eurostat, as

part of the European Commission, strengthens the role of official statistics in the Commission's activities.

Furthermore, Eurostat endeavours to gain access to new private data sources and make it available to the national statistical institutes. Another focus of the Task Force of the Partnership Group will be on implementing future European legal acts regarding access to new data sources.

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Managing the crisis — national approaches

4.1 Innovative methods and data — meeting information needs

The COVID-19 crisis has increased the demand for short-term indicators in many areas. According to the results of a survey conducted within the ESS, there is higher demand for indicators on the development in the health system, on the education and labour market situation and on identifying the impact of the pandemic on the income situation and on European businesses. In addition, higher demand was recorded for disaggregated statistics on weekly death figures and for early and more regular provision of comparable economic key indicators.

The survey also determined the measures taken by the Member States as a reaction to the increased information need. It turned out that all national statistical institutes are making efforts to use new data sources, to accelerate their work on experimental statistics, to develop flash indicators, and to ensure efficient communication with data users and providers. Examples for initiatives in this context are presented below.

Some Member States support responsible organisations in preparing and carrying out validation studies regarding COVID-19 antibody tests or in epidemiological studies on measuring the spreading of COVID-19. In Austria, for example, an analysis of the validity of the test methods is carried out by the Medical University of Vienna. The Austrian statistical office contributes meth-

odological skills in establishing samples and analysing the results. The Spanish statistical office, too, provides methodological support by supplying a sample design for an epidemiological study.

In Germany, the Federal Office for Goods Transport has developed the truck toll mileage index, which is calculated from digital process data of truck toll collection, and the Federal Statistical Office has taken it as a basis to produce a seasonally adjusted short-term indicator. This indicator reflects the monthly development of the mileage of large trucks (with four or more axles) on German motorways and provides an early indication of how industrial production is developing in Germany. During the COVID-19 crisis, the index is updated every working day and provides a very early picture of the mileage of heavy goods vehicles, which are subject to toll charges, on German motorways and trunk roads, with a time lag of five to nine days.³

The measures taken during the crisis to protect the population also have an impact on people's well-being. The Irish statistical office took this as an opportunity to conduct a survey on well-being among a sample of 4,000 people. The statistical office of Luxembourg, too, conducted a national survey on the social and economic effects the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the country's population.

In addition, tax data are evaluated more timely during the crisis to analyse economic issues. The Hungarian statistical office uses data of the tax authorities to produce additional indicators on the labour market development. The Federal Statistical Office of Germany provides an experimental early indicator on the overall economic development that is based on the monthly advance turnover tax returns (Lorenz/Fries, 2020). Also, a cooperation with a German information provider allows short-term evaluation of information on loan agreements (Hauf, 2020).

4.2 Ensuring target group oriented communication – reliable information also in crisis situations

The impact of the COVID-19 crisis also requires ensuring efficient and target group specific communication. For confidence to be placed in official statistics the following prerequisites are indispensable: ensuring comprehensive information of users and of the general public, establishing digital contact with respondents, fighting fake news, and maintaining close communication with the staff.

Another effect of the crisis situation is that the national statistical institutes have increased their use of new communication channels and forms to reach their target groups and to provide clear information rapidly. For instance, Germany, Poland and Lithuania are developing dashboards for a frequently updated and interactive presentation of various aspects of the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In some countries, the statistical offices have increased their radio and television activities. In addition, many countries have increased especially their social media presence. There the national statistical institutes face particular challenges in fighting fake news. In view of the conflict between the principle of neutrality and the commitment to counteracting disinformation, approaches are being developed to provide reliable information for the general public also in the social media. The Federal Statistical Office, for example, has published an easy-to-understand [explanatory video on the truck toll mileage index](#) on Twitter and YouTube.

At the European level, the Task Force on Strategic Communication, with Germany being one of its members, is evaluating challenges, approaches and lessons learned regarding strategic communication in the European countries and in the ESS. The goal is to provide various products that can support the European countries in managing the current and future crises.

³ A detailed presentation of the development of the daily truck toll mileage index is given in an article also published in WISTA 4/2020 (Cox et al., 2020).

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Learning from the crisis — programme of the German EU Council Presidency 2020 in the field of statistics

Beyond the approaches developed, official statistics have to draw lessons from the crisis to be adequately prepared for similar situations in the future. Germany holds the Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of 2020. In that period, the Federal Statistical Office will chair the meetings of the Council Working Party on Statistics on behalf of the Federal Government. In addition to that, the Federal Statistical Office will play a part in shaping the European Statistics Programme. The lessons learned during the crisis will be the basis for the focal points and the programme in the field of statistics during the German EU Council Presidency in the second half of 2020⁴.

5.1 Identifying data needs and providing information

To provide decision-makers with relevant data on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is necessary to close existing gaps, improve the timeliness of the information available and make it crisis-proof. The aim is a programme coordinated across Europe which provides relevant indicators for policy-making. More specifically, it is intended to develop a European dashboard containing data on the economy and finance, energy and the environment, health, social affairs, mobility, as well as information and communication technologies. It is also necessary to create the conditions allowing to supply data for (future) situations of crisis early and in a flexible manner.

5.2 Seizing the opportunities of digitalisation and enhancing timeliness

It is essential to have access to alternative data sources, calculate (early) indicators and use experimental and new digital data in order to supply politicians and the public with information at short notice in times of crisis. The aim is to seize the opportunities of digitalisation to improve timeliness and enable the permanent use of new digital data for preparing high-quality statistics. To this end, the use of alternative data sources will be advanced; a Task Force of the Partnership Group has specifically been set up. Also, a coordinated methodology has to be developed that allows comparable utilisation of those data sources. Using artificial intelligence and machine learning will optimise processes and create the prerequisites to ensure permanent access to alternative data sources.


5.3 Crisis-proofing communication and accelerating action

Coordination processes and communication channels have to be efficient and flexible especially in situations of crisis. The aim is to establish coordinated crisis communication within the ESS to be able to act more rapidly in future situations of crisis. To achieve this, it is planned to set up an EU Crisis Squad and to develop a crisis protocol. Ideally, a pre-defined group within the ESS would initiate and accompany the steps set out in the crisis protocol. The crisis protocol should specify who has to do what and when. The aim is to ensure a basic supply of statistical information also in times of crisis. Priority statistics for crisis situations must be known and non-response and delivery problems must be pursued. In addition to that, it is crucial to develop communication strategies so that decision-relevant data needs can be identified and met in a timely manner.

⁴ All information on the German EU Council Presidency in the field of statistics can be found on our webpage specially set up at www.destatis.de/eu2020

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Conclusion

During the COVID-19 pandemic, official statistics have faced the challenge of finding solutions within the shortest time and under difficult conditions to rapidly provide information on urgent issues. Innovative approaches at the national level and exchange and cooperation at the European level have enabled the national statistical institutes to provide relevant statistics despite the challenges. At the same time, the COVID-19 crisis has shown that more innovation and even closer cooperation will be needed to be able to adequately react to future crises. The German EU Council Presidency in the field of statistics in the second half of 2020 will be committed to continuing the processes initiated and to repositioning official statistics for the future. 

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Extract from the journal WISTA Wirtschaft und Statistik

Published by:

Statistisches Bundesamt (Federal Statistical Office)

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Abbreviations

WISTA	=	Wirtschaft und Statistik
JD	=	annual average
D	=	average (for values which cannot be added up)
Vj	=	quarter of a year
Hj	=	half-year
a. n. g.	=	not elsewhere classified
o. a. S.	=	no main economic activity
St	=	piece
Mill.	=	million
Mrd.	=	billion

Explanation of symbols

–	=	no figures or magnitude zero
0	=	less than half of 1 in the last digit occupied, but more than zero
.	=	numerical value unknown or not to be disclosed
...	=	data will be available later
X	=	cell blocked for logical reasons
I or —	=	fundamental change within a series affecting comparisons over time
/	=	no data because the numerical value is not sufficiently reliable
()	=	limited informational value because numerical value is of limited statistical reliability