

Communicating revisions and the timing of revisions to users

Irina Meinke¹

¹ *Federal Statistical Office (Destatis), Wiesbaden, Germany; irina.meinke@destatis.de*

Abstract

Revisions are part of the regular production process of about one quarter of the statistics published by the Federal Statistical Office of Germany. Some statistics-specific revision practices and revision cycles are already well documented and communicated to users. But this information is not easily available for all statistics which undergo revisions, it is scattered on the webpage or in various documents and the terminology used in the context of revisions is not always consistent. Revisions, when not properly explained and communicated to the users, can damage the credibility of official statistics and limit their usability.

Therefore, the Federal Statistical Office published a revision policy in accordance with the European Statistics Code of Practice, defining what revisions are and explaining the general revision procedures to the users. Subsequently, a revision calendar was published, providing an overview of all statistics which underlie revisions and describing briefly and concisely their revision cycles by using a standardized structure. The revision calendar contains information on the timing of revisions of approximately 85 statistics.

The purpose of this paper is threefold: First, it aims to give an overview of the current situation within the ESS concerning key documents on revisions. According to the Peer Review improvement actions published on the Eurostat website, other National Statistical Institutes (NSIs) besides Germany were asked to elaborate a revision policy and a revision calendar or to clearly distinguish between revisions and errors. Thus, the second part of the paper is focused on drawing a clear distinction between both terms. Finally, following the Q2014-paper on the development of a revision policy, this paper concentrates on the presentation of the recently elaborated revision calendar, its aim, content and standardized structure as well as its interaction with the revision policy.

Keywords: Revision policy, revision calendar, error correction, Peer Review

1. Current situation within the ESS concerning key documents on revisions

In early 2016¹ a survey on existing revision *calendars* was conducted within the ESS Working Group "Quality in Statistics", which comprises quality management staff from 34 countries (28 European Union, 4 EFTA member states and Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia as well as Montenegro as EU membership candidate countries). It was a follow-up of a survey on existing revision *policies* also conducted within the same ESS Working Group in 2014. The survey on existing revision *calendars* enables a very good overview about the current situation within the ESS. Altogether, 32 out of 34 countries replied to the survey, resulting in a response rate of 94%.

The following results can be observed concerning the questions *how many and which surveyed countries have developed a revision calendar or similar and where can the information on the timing of revisions be found?* 11 out of 32 surveyed countries indicated that a revision calendar or similar exists. 4 countries indicated that they have included information on the timing of revisions in the release calendar (see **table 1**). 9 countries indicated that a revision calendar or similar doesn't exist. 8 countries pointed out, that a revision calendar is currently in the works. So, even though other countries will follow and will develop a calendar on revisions in the next period, there will be still some countries, which don't have a revision calendar.

The following results can be observed concerning the questions *which information is given and how comprehensive is the information?* When information on the timing of revisions is provided in the release calendar, it can be observed, that the information provided is not as comprehensive as it is in a dedicated revision calendar or similar. Release calendars mainly provide information on when the preliminary and final results are released, but they lack in information how often preliminary data is revised and about the length of the re-calculated

¹ The survey on existing revision *calendars* was conducted by the author of this paper from January 25, 2016 until March 8, 2016 (approx. 6 weeks). Please note, that only the most important findings are discussed in this paper. For more detailed information please contact the author.

time series (certainly also relevant information for users). This more elaborated information is mainly given when a country chooses to inform the users about the timing of revisions in the form of a revision calendar, revision policy or a corresponding describing website for the relevant statistic, which underlies revisions. Hence, a document which is specifically elaborated to inform about the timing of revisions is preferable, when comprehensive information is to be given to users. This comprehensive information (in the form of a revision calendar, revision policy or a corresponding describing website for the relevant statistic and not in the form of a release calendar) is only provided in 11 out of 32 surveyed countries (34%). In order to complement the just said, a key result of the last survey on existing revision *policies* within the ESS should be emphasized: According to the survey² from 2014 and the author's own research findings, 19 out of 32 ESS member states have developed a revision policy (60%).

Table 1: Where can information on the timing of revisions be obtained?

Country	Where can information on the timing of revisions be obtained?	
Austria	revision policy:	Statistics Austria's revision policy .
Czech Republic	revision policy:	CZSO Data Revision Policy (2015)
Estonia	release calendar:	Release Calendar
Finland	webpage of the relevant statistics:	For example: Trend Indicator of Output
France	release calendar:	Release Calendar
Germany	revision calendar:	Revisionskalender. Beschreibung der Revisionszyklen
Greece	revision calendar:	List of scheduled revisions in 2016

² Key results of the survey on existing revision *policies* can be obtained from the author's paper on "Good governance in statistics: The development of a revision policy for the German Federal Statistical Office in the European context" presented at the European Conference on Quality in Official Statistics (Q2014). For more detailed information please contact the author.

Latvia	revision policy:	Revision Policy Guidelines
Lithuania	revision calendar:	Calendar of Scheduled Revisions of Statistical Indicators 2016
Netherlands	webpage of the relevant statistics:	For example: imports and exports
Romania	revision calendar:	Calendar of revisions 2016
Slovak Republic	revision calendar:	Kalendár revízií 2016
Slovenia	revision calendar:	List of surveys with regular revisions
Sweden	release calendar:	Publishing calendar
Iceland	release calendar:	Advance release calendar

To sum up, revision policies are more common than revision calendars within the ESS. However, both the revision policy and the revision calendar are not very widely used within the ESS community in order to inform users about the revisions themselves and the timing of revisions. There are still a lot of countries which are not using a revision calendar or a revision policy to inform users about revisions and their timing, even though both documents are recommended by the Quality Assurance Framework of the European Statistical System (QAF). So, still a lot has to be done within the ESS to actively help the users to get a better understanding of revisions and their timing.

This conclusion is also reflected in the results of the last round of ESS Peer Reviews 2013-2015. According to the Peer Review recommendations published on the Eurostat website, 9 National Statistical Institutes (NSIs) were asked to elaborate a publicly available and transparent revision policy or a release calendar for planned revisions or to clearly distinguish between the process of error corrections and revisions (see **table 2**).

Table 2: Overview of Peer Review 2013-2015 recommendations regarding revisions

Country	Peer Review 2013-2015 recommendations
Belgium	Recommendation 12: Statistics Belgium should develop and publish policies for handling errors and revisions.
Germany	Recommendation 8: The Federal Statistical Office of Germany should implement a uniform and transparent policy and procedures for planned regular and irregular revisions of statistical data. It should also publish a comprehensive release calendar for planned revisions.
Ireland	Recommendation 18: The Central Statistics Office of Ireland should elaborate a comprehensive dissemination policy. It should publish its revisions policy, which should be regularly reviewed. The Other National Authorities producing European statistics should also develop and publish dissemination policies.
France	Recommendation 15: A Revisions policy for official statistics should be prepared and published on the National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies' website.
Croatia	Recommendation 18: The Croatian Bureau of Statistics should publish its policy documents (dissemination policy, confidentiality policy, revisions policy) on its website.
Cyprus	Recommendation 23: The Statistical Service of Cyprus should establish a revision policy following standard, well-established, transparent procedures and publish it on its website, including a revision calendar to inform users when revisions of statistical results are planned to be published.
Poland	Recommendation 10: The Central Statistical Office should draw up and publish on its website a policy for how revisions of statistical outputs are planned, implemented and announced to users in advance.
Romania	Recommendation 21: The National Institute of Statistics should make a clear distinction between the processes for correction of errors in statistics that have already been published, and planned revisions due to other reasons, preferably in two separate policies that are published on the website.
Iceland	Recommendation: Statistics Iceland should publish and implement a revisions policy.

The results of both surveys on existing revision *policies* and *calendars* within the ESS as well as the Peer Review 2013-2015 recommendations underline the importance of providing users with adequate information on revisions (for example in the form of a revision policy) and the

timing of revisions (for example in the form of a revision calendar) and to clearly distinguish between revisions and error corrections.

2. What are revisions as opposed to error corrections?

According to the Peer Review recommendations, Romania was asked to clearly distinguish between revisions and errors (see **table 2**). This recommendation is surely not only relevant for Romania, but also for other NSIs, which have elaborated or are going to develop a revision policy and guidelines for error corrections. The Federal Statistical Office saw therein the necessity and defines revisions as opposed to error corrections in its general revision policy as follows:

A revision in official statistics is a modification of already published results as new data from outside the Federal Statistical Office and the statistical offices of the Länder become available and are incorporated into the calculation or when methodological and conceptual changes are made (also retrospectively). The data already published is replaced by the revised figures and is no longer valid.

A revision is not an error correction as defined in the “Guideline on how to deal with publication errors” of the Federal Statistical Office. Publication errors are incorrect data resulting from mistakes which occurred accidentally in the process of statistics production (such as data processing errors) or publication (such as typing errors or transposed digits) at the Federal Statistical Office and the statistical offices of the Länder.

Revisions, in contrast, are due to external causes. There may be new information which had not been available when the data were first released and could not be considered for that reason (example: respondents correct reports they have already submitted to the Federal Statistical Office and the statistical offices of the Länder). Other reasons for revisions may be improved methods or new concepts developed in accordance with international requirements which then have to be implemented.

3. Informing users about revisions in the form of a general revision policy

Several reasons lead to revisions of already published statistical data as indicated in section 2. Revisions of published statistical data are part of the regular production process of many statistics. The Federal Statistical Office publishes approximately 85 statistics, which underlie revisions (this represents about ¼ of all statistics produced by the Federal Statistical Office). Therefore, revisions are not a peripheral phenomenon, but they appear frequently. This underlines the importance to adequately inform users about revisions (e.g. what are revisions as opposed to error correction?), their procedures (e.g. what are the principles governing revisions?) and their timing (see section 4).

In the Federal Statistical Office, some statistics-specific revision practices and revision cycles are well documented and communicated to users. But this information is not easily available for all statistics which undergo revisions, it is scattered on the webpage or in various documents and the terminology used in the context of revisions is not always consistent. Within the German statistical system different terms are used in individual statistical contexts to describe revisions. There are 'corrections of results' in business statistics, 'retrospective corrections' of short-term indicators, 'major revisions' in national accounting and 'regular adaptations' in price statistics. All of these are revisions. For the sake of standardization, one aim of the revision policy is to ensure that only the term 'revision' is to be used.

Revisions, when not properly explained and communicated to the users, can damage the credibility of official statistics and limit their usability. Therefore, the Federal Statistical Office published a general revision policy in accordance with the European Statistics Code of Practice in June 2015, explaining what revisions are, describing the reasons for revisions, showing the different types of revisions and displaying the general principles governing revisions. The revision policy provides the users with explanations about revisions and shows that revisions take place within the framework of an overall policy including standard rules and guidelines for revisions and that revisions are undertaken according to a predetermined schedule. The revision policy manifests that revisions are not ad hoc and are not made for political reasons.

4. Informing users about the timing of revisions in the form of a revision calendar

The general revisions policy is supplemented by the revision calendar of the Federal Statistical Office, which was published in October 2015. The revision calendar provides an overview of sets of statistics that are subject to revisions and it describes briefly and concisely the respective revision cycle by means of a standardized structure without giving exact dates. The revision calendar contains information on the timing of revisions of approximately 85 statistics. The revision calendar follows a “t+x” structure. The letter “t” indicates the end of the reporting period. The letter “x” shows how many days, months or years elapsed since the end of the reporting period or the survey date. The “t+x” structure doesn’t indicate the exact date when provisional results is released or revisions occur (e.g. preliminary data is released on 15th January, final data is released on 23rd January.), but explains it in a more general way (see **table 3**).

Table 3: Extract of the revision calendar of the Federal Statistical Office

Statistic	Periodicity	Revision cycle
Index of new orders in manufacturing	Monthly	<p><u>Provisional results:</u> t+37 days</p> <p><u>1st Revision (revised provisional results):</u> t+67 days</p> <p><u>2nd Revision (final results):</u> in April of the following year</p> <p><u>Methodological revisions:</u> Implementation of a new base year takes place every 3 years after those reference years ending with 0 and 5 (e.g. switch to the base year 2010 has been implemented in 2013). 3 years preceding the implementation of a new base year are recalculated (e.g. from 2010 until 2012) and linked with years further back in time (e.g. from 1991 until 2010).</p>

The description of the revision cycle starts with when provisional results are published and ends with when final results are published. In some cases provisional data have to be revised more than once in order to arrive at final results. In these cases the description of the revision cycles indicates when revised provisional results are published. In case of some statistics, methodological revisions occur, where time series are re-calculated. Results are considered as final, provided that no later changes due to methodological revisions occur. To sum up, the

goal of the revision calendar is to answer the following questions: When are provisional, revised provisional and final results published? What is the cycle for methodological revisions? Why are revisions made and for what period are data recalculated?

5. Conclusion

A revision policy and a revision calendar are important tools for NSIs for communicating revisions and their timing to users³. Both documents are necessary to comply with the European Statistics Code of Practice (CoP) and are recommended by the Quality Assurance Framework of the European Statistical System (QAF). In order to comply with the revision-related principle 6 'impartiality and objectivity' and principle 8 'appropriate statistical procedures' of the CoP, the NSI has inter alia to give advance notice on major revisions or changes in methodologies (CoP-indicator 6.6) for example in the form of a revision calendar (QAF-method 6.6.1). Furthermore, revisions must follow standard, well-established and transparent procedures (CoP-indicator 8.6). This could be demonstrated in the form of a publicly available and transparent revision policy, where revisions are accompanied by all necessary explanations (QAF-method 8.6.3.) and where guidelines and principles relating to the revision of published statistics exist and made known to users (QAF-method 8.6.1.).

³ See also Sattelberger, S. "How to tailor press work if quality standards of official statistics conflict with media interests" presented at the European Conference on Quality in Official Statistics (Q2016). Using recent examples from everyday press work at the Federal Statistical Office, the paper illustrates how important it is for future communication strategies with the media to explicitly refer to the general revisions policy and revision calendar of the Federal Statistical Office.

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