Official statistics development strategy and modernization of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

I. Introduction

The data and information of official statistics are regarded as currently important and needed; however, recently they have gained in importance with the ongoing and intensified activities of the Serbian accession to the European Union. In addition, the firm orientation of the Serbian Government towards the economic issues, as well as the general public interest in conjecture, social and economic trends, resulted in an increased demands for statistical data and information, which rendered a positive influence for the Serbian Statistical Office (hereinafter: SORS) as the holder of the system of official statistics and and 'the proprietor' of the huge resource of most versatile data.

In order to fully accomplish its role, SORS has upgraded the quality, the versatility of data and information and facilitated the dissemination to users, at the same time strengthening the analytical component. However, the problems encountered in the course of implementation, undoubtedly indicated the necessity to further develop and modernize SORS.

The main reasons for implementing the SORS modernization are seen in the new trends of compiling statistics (wide usage of administrative sources and *Big Data*) and the new quality requirements for statistical information, specially imposed by the Serbian Government and its ministries, as well as the adoption of the European statistical system (ESS) strategy that is elaborated in the ESS Vision 2020.

SORS has started encountering difficulties in carrying out the developing activities a while ago, generally because of its status that does not allow the implementation of the coordination role within the statistical system, the full influence on methodological solutions for important administrative registers and databases, and hold back the adequate staff policy management.

Even though the official statistics development strategy is in place and makes an integral part of the Decision on the program of official statistics, 2016 – 2020 (Official Gazette of RS, No 55/15), certain new development directions have been initiated, which are expected to largely upgrade the efficiency and operative qualities of the SORS and have positive impact on comprehensiveness, timeliness and punctuality, and cost-effectiveness in collecting, processing, analysing and disseminating statistical data and information.

The Serbian official statistics and SORS as the holder thereof are expected to represent an overall information system based on quantitative data from all domains of public life, which shall make the results of statistical surveys available for a wide range of users, from the government and scientific institutions, university community, economic subjects, media, social organizations to the public at large, in a simple and accessible way and by using respective statistical methodology, ICT and statistical item analysis.

SORS is on the best way to achieve the mentioned objectives (recognition from Serbian European Integration Office for the best screening assessments); however, the SORS modernization is required to the effect of changing the status and linking SORS to the Serbian parliament (the National Assembly of RS), which would improve the efficiency and quality of work and ensure the implementation of the basic strategic directions, i.e. goals:

1. Accomplished alignment with the European Statistical System,
2. Developed methodological and analytical sector,
3. Developed system of registers,
4. Applied modern technologies,
5. Staff new structures and advanced professional training, and
6. Ensured professional independence.

The issue of ensured professional independence (6) should have priority and lead to staff new structures and advanced professional training, i.e. the issue listed before (5), in order to possibly implement the remaining objectives. The prerequisite for achieving the listed objectives is to amend the existing official statistics law and that would ensure the changed status for SORS and its strengthened independence and coordination role within the statistical system. After passing the amended law, the creation of the statute of the State Statistical Office would be resumed, along with the adoption and implementation of the defined objectives. Each of the envisaged objectives assumes the creation of the programs and plans in the form of documents of various periodicities.

Staff management solutions shall be developed on continual basis and the successful implementation of this process is closely related to a flexible staff policy, which includes the system of motivating employees (personal earnings), the adjusted organization and systematization of work positions, the system of promotion and the system of recruits and dismissals.

The independence guaranteed by the institutional position of the national statistical authority is a fundamental principle for modern statistical bodies worldwide and a basic requirement envisaged by Eurostat for official statistics of the Member States. It is necessary that also SORS, as the holder of the Serbian official statistics, shall have the

status that guarantees the adequate position and influence in the domain of statistical data and information production.

II. Current status

SORS is run as a separate professional organization within the system of the Serbian government administration, with well-organized production of statistics.

SORS has attained a high professional level in data compilation and processing, organization of large statistical surveys and implementation of international projects, which entail the specific system of management and administration.

Five-year programs and annual annual implementation plans are regularly and timely carried out, along with a series of special projects funded by international organizations (EU IPA programmes, UNDP, UNICEF, World Bank, Sida, and other).

Two large statistical campaigns have also been accomplished successfully: 2011 Census of Population, Households and Dwellings and Census of Agriculture 2012.

SORS is well supplied with IT equipment and features a modern pressroom; a network consisting of 15 regional divisions/offices over Serbia ensures an efficient data collection infield and information for users on local level.

Being aware of the Government necessity to have available conjecture economic indicators, starting from early 2016 SORS provides, on monthly basis, a set of major economic indicators followed by respective statistical item analysis; recently, the data set has been extended and supplementary complex analysis of results has been introduced.

III. Development activities

The main objective for SORS is to become a leading European institution in the domain of statistics, simultaneously preserving a high position among the national government institutions. To achieve this, in the first place it is necessary to strengthen the analytical tools and extend the set of information from administrative sources, among other means, by establishing new administrative registers.

To accomplish these activities, we require respective professionals specialized in the field of mathematics and economics, as well as the appropriate expertise.

Generally, the adequate staff solutions are of crucial importance for the successful implementation of the defined objectives; therefore it is required that SORS should be as much as possible free in making these solutions. The current legislation is seen to large extent to obstruct the efficient staff policy making.

IV. Accomplished harmonization with ESS

In the course of Serbia's accession to the EU, SORS takes active steps at harmonizing the Serbia's official statistics with European Statistical System (ESS); namely at adopting the EU standards and good practice, and getting included in the implementation of the ESS Vision 2020.

The Screening report Serbia 2014 acknowledged Serbia's successful accomplishments and SORS is ready to resume the opening of Chapter 18 – Statistics.

The ESS Vision 2020 is based on four main elements:

1. Upgraded quality of statistical processes and data while making good use of new technologies;
2. Statistical following of the globalization phenomenon from the economic and financial viewpoint, while taking efforts at meeting increasing demands for statistics on national and regional levels;
3. Applied approach of cost-effectiveness in data collection and non-excessive burden on respondents – better use of administrative sources and statistical methods and models of estimation;
4. Ensured good quality and timely statistical indicators that are required for decision taking and successful economic policy at all levels.

The prerequisite for the successful implementation is the existence of a robust and well organized statistical system led by an independent statistical institution with clearly defined role of coordinator and national representative in the EU, i.e. Eurostat.

V. Methodological and analytical sector

Statistical methodology and analysis represent the most complex element of any statistical system. Methodology makes the basis for the implementation of statistical surveys, and sound analytical grounds ensure proper interpretation and use of statistical data and information.

The approach of cost-effectiveness in data collection in field entails even better use of various sampling methods and their permanent upgrading as well.

Statistical analysis, which is applied in all statistical domains, cannot be sufficient nay longer in respect to economic phenomena and processes. Official statistics had to adopt statistical item analysis, since it exclusively deals with data sources and origin – item of analysis.

For this sector, the professionals in mathematics and economics are very important as staff members; they are expected to follow the latest developments in the domain of statistics and economics in order to ensure permanent promotion.

VI. System of registers

The trend of increasing use of administrative sources, i.e. administrative registers is prevailing in the ESS. When related to the EU, the availability of administrative registers in Serbia is not sufficient, while the existing registers are kept without respective consultations and therefore they are often hardly applicable for data transmission and exchange.

SORS is experienced in maintaining administrative and statistical registers, at the same time SORS abundantly make use of administrative registers. Based on these facts obvious is the necessity that SORS shall undertake an active role in establishing and maintaining administrative registers, as well as in coordinating register related activities in Serbia, presently and in future.

Another role for SORS would be to assume methodological coordination in establishing and maintaining large and important administrative registers, with the aim to ensure a simple data transmission and exchange that would result from using standard identifications, definitions and classifications.

Specially worth noting is Population register, as a register of major importance in Europe, which has not been established in Serbia. SORS can render its full contribution to the establishment of the Population register; also SORS is directly interested since the preparatory activities for the forthcoming population census have already started and the creation of this register is much appreciated.

SORS also anticipates the introduction of the Register of public funds beneficiaries, which is expected to facilitate successful following of economic and financial movements.

VII. Modern technology

Nowadays, technological novelties in the domain of statistics assume the coupling of ICT, i.e. hardware (computers, scanners, printers, laptops, tablets, mobiles, etc.) and software (system, applicative and communication software, as well as internet and operative systems for mobiles).

SORS has established a good tradition in following the ICT development, making use of it for data processing, and now in all stages of statistical production – from data collection (web applications, tablets, laptops in field operations) to dissemination of results (through internet, web presentations, emails, intranet, USB, CD, etc.).

Taking into account the fast pace of these developments, SORS is obligated to permanently follow the trends and provide new resources. However, this is regarded as a financially demanding activity.

To this effect SORS makes use of IPA funds for casual ICT innovation, but investments from own assets are felt required.

Therefore, it is important that SORS should get included in commercial projects, with the aim to gain supplementary funds to be invested in equipment and for logistic needs, but also to spur the motivation of the highly professional staff.

VIII. New staff structures

Adequate/highly educated and professional staff is of crucial importance for the successful implementation of the mentioned objectives. SORS staff is not sufficient in number regarding adequate professional capacities, which was also concluded by the Eurostat mission. Therefore a number of staff members need to be replaced and, even more important, the number of employees engaged on certain tasks need to be increased.

The lack of professionals in mathematics and economics is mostly felt, especially of statistical, econometric and financial profile.

The issues of organized staff training ask for special attention, concerning both internal and external trainings. Specialized training organized by Eurostat, as well as training courses in other European countries with highly developed statistical systems (Sweden, France, etc.) are mostly appreciated and expected for the future.

International cooperation, especially with the countries of the region (B&H, Montenegro), presents a good starting point for professional promotion of the staff,

since this is way the SORS representatives appear as educators for the respective domains.

IX. Professional independence

The professional independence of the official statistics is not envisaged only by international standards and the EU requirements, but it also used to become practice resulting from the Serbian development strategy. This is the only way to achieve guaranteed objectivity, even though it is not impossible to stay objective with much weaker protection of independence. Therefore, it is required to find a solution to guarantee long-term institutional independence, which would also be compliant with the EU standards.

X. Conclusion

There are numerous tasks that SORS will be faced with and they need to be accomplished efficiently and in near future.

The achievements made so far, regarding the Serbian European integration process as well as the successful implementation of large statistical campaigns, i.e. regular statistical surveys and international projects, confirmed the fact that SORS has capacity and is ready and able, with a small support for the governmental institutions, to coordinate the system of official statistics and successfully accomplish all tasks.

The prerequisite for further developments is to ensure the position for SORS by which certain freedom and operative flexibility, and before all professional independence will be guaranteed.

The only feasible way to attain this is to adopt a new Official Statistics Law, expected to define the SORS status a State Statistical Office, linked to the Serbian parliament and its bodies.

This solution is fully in compliance with the EU recommendations that the official statistics and their holder (SORS) shall respect the principle of objectivity and impartiality, i.e. independence from the current policy makers, but also to support the same policy.