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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OFFICIAL STATISTICS AND THE MEDIA IN POLAND – THE ROLE OF INFORMATION SERVICE AND THE CONFRONTATION AND COOPERATION ZONES

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between official statistics and the media in Poland – including the scope and the timetable of the mutual collaboration on statistical information delivery and access – is regulated by the Law on Official Statistics and the Press Law, with a set of procedures that are rigorously observed in practice. The media are provided with full range of ‘publicly available’ information being produced within the system of official statistics that remains under the responsibility of the President of the Central Statistical Office. The cooperation with the media is based on a user-friendly and free of charge access to all public data files.

Key words: official statistics, the media, information service.

1. Introduction

Pursuant to the Act of 1995, official statistics provides information services for the wide spectrum of users, including general public and the mass media. This information service, which is often involved in conflicts and confrontation with the media, originates from the fact that the media have become one of the most important factors in shaping political, social, and economic opinions and decisions. Unfortunately, the disproportionate power of the media hardly goes hand-in-hand with the mass media’s competence in the area of statistics, including objectivity and impartiality required for professional presentation of the statistical information to a general public and other audience.

During the transition period in Poland, the media service system has been developing as a part of systemic, social and political changes in the country. The first stage, until 1995, entailed the construction of such a system from scratch, as there had previously been hardly existing any independent media or impartial

statistical information policy. The second period, from 1995 through 2002, was characterized by a gradual adjusting of the economy to the European standards, as well as the official statistics' presence on the market of economic and social information. Since 2002, we have actually implemented EU standards and met conditions, whereas the information service for the media has taken a form slightly different from those operating in other countries, being a more diversified and oriented towards the needs of the media. However, over the last 2 years new economic conditions, together with newly implemented statistical operations, posed several challenges to the information service system. The information and technological potentials of the Polish media have grown enormously, triggering a tremendous increase in terms of their sense of aggressively manifested public mission. All this has made statistics the object of numerous information-related provocations. In addition, there have appeared certain intra-statistics problems, arising from the subsequent stages of development, including huge expansion of the informational portals and the electronic information systems allowing for introduction of electronic reporting, easily made modification of classification systems, and preparation for the national censuses – the National Agricultural Census (PSR) in 2010, and the National Population Census (NSP) in 2011. This constitutes the background for the issue of the relationship between official statistics and the media discussed below (however, the dramatic legal confrontations that took place between representatives of official statistics and the judiciary administration, due to some misinterpretation of the fundamental principles of “statistical confidentiality, also should be mentioned in this context).

2. Scope and forms of information service for the media -- what content is provided to the media, when and how?

The information service for the media has actually become the main organisational form of the service of all sections of the social audience of statistics. The general principle observed here is **the 3XR principle**, comprising **Equivalence** (in Polish *Równorzędność*), **Simultaneity** (*Równoczesność*), and **Equality** (*Równoprawność*), showing in what way information is made available to the public.

2.1. Thematic scope and frequency of publications

Basic statistical volumes and values, published in compliance with the legal provisions imposing the publicity obligation on the President of the CSO, are the most significant pieces of information published. These usually include 12–15 presentations, containing from a dozen or so to several dozen pieces of information which concern the principal areas and key phenomena for running the country. The data included refer to inflation, the labour market, wages and

salaries, unemployment, foreign trade, retail trade, manufacture, etc. As regards this group of information, deadlines which cannot usually be exceeded by a part of a second are extremely rigorously kept. The second group consists of final information and information notes (including monitoring data and periodic surveys), concerning various areas of life and economy, such as population, projections, labour market, production of the main products, etc. Aggregated studies, such as tabular “Statistical Bulletin” and descriptive information on the economic situation, are published on a monthly basis, usually in connection with a press conference. Various materials and studies related to the concept of a monthly press conference are also published every month. Thorough studies, both in hard copy and in electronic format, are released on a quarterly, half-yearly, and yearly basis. Finally, all types of statistical yearbooks, both general and related to a specific field of statistics, are published annually. Each of the publications mentioned above is communicated and provided to the media, mostly in electronic format, or in the form of studies published on the information portal, mostly in the press section, but often also in the general one.

2.2.Schedules and deadlines

The programme of information to be presented is published a year, a month, or a week in advance. It is provided to journalists, being made available on the Internet, as well as served for the Government Information Centre, published in the form of publication announcements, and disseminated, whenever there appears any such request or order. The schedules are viewed as fixed legal and information-related obligations, and as regards dates of the presentation – we extremely rarely withdraw from accepted arrangements. Throughout the last 2 years, there have been only two instances of delayed publication dates resulting from the breakdown of our computer system. On the contrary, it very often happens that an attempt is made to accelerate the calculation of statistical indicators published at the end of the month, so as to make it possible for these indicators to be published on the date of the press conference (usually taking place on day 24–25 of the month). We notify our users of any change of the deadline 24 hours in advance, and announce any such change „urbi et orbi”.

2.3.Forms of dissemination. Press conference as a specific release form

Materials are released through all possible information carriers, and via all communication channels, the most significant of which include the Internet, e-mail, print-outs, DVD or CD, telephone, fax, briefing, press conferences, and face to face service. As part of the service technology, we have introduced a multifunction device which scans and formats an electronic announcement, transfers it to the PC, and enables it to be sent via the Internet. This makes the time of compiling multi-thematic materials, and the materials covering various

reporting periods, far easier and considerably shorter. We make our publications available when ordered, though within reasonable limits. We are prudent in managing publications since this is an expensive form of information supply to journalists. Only in the case of general statistical yearbooks, all the journalists cooperating with statistical bodies receive their own copy, together with a CD version.

Among the release forms, special emphasis is put on the public, open, and publically-accessible press conferences held by the President or Vice-Presidents of the CSO. The press conference is devoted mostly to presenting the socioeconomic results for the preceding month, as well as to a number of materials and data which are significant, urgent and crucial for the situation in the country. These concern unemployment, labour market, wages and salaries, agriculture, housing, etc. The date of the conference is announced a month in advance. The invitations to the conference are sent three times, the last being 1 day before the conference. They are placed on the Internet, and sent to all the media and Government Information Centre. We also individually invite those journalists whose position in the media market is most prominent. The conference is attended by CSO experts and specialists, as well as by CSO managers and heads of particular CSO divisions. The entire conference is recorded in the "audiotele" system (the registered trademark of the Polish Television (TVP), denoting services rendered or commissioned by TVP via the fixed-line telephony – *translator's note*). It is then transmitted to statistical offices, as well as made available for playing back on one of the TV educational channels. The conference takes the form of a presentation of CSO analyses, supported by audiovisual materials. Following the presentation, we usually respond to all questions asked by the attendees. There are no limits to the number of questions, and they are answered immediately without postponing to any subsequent meeting. All conference materials, including sound records, are made available on our information portal in the press tag which is easy to notice, being placed in the most prominent place, right below the portal headline.

The general principle that governs the services we provide to the media entails absolute prioritisation and timely execution of the orders submitted, maximum satisfaction of media expectations, and observance of the 3XR principle mentioned above. The rule of multiplication of materials dissemination to the media takes effect that objections to the lack of reaction to the orders submitted by the media are extremely rare. However, there are certain problems connected with too aggressive and repeated attempts to use identified personal data, or to gain earlier access to the data, as well as to obtain the data for exclusive use. The most recent case (occurring on 31 March) concerned the request for a list of goods and representative items covered in the price survey, as well as the products added and removed from this list. Therefore, it is a general principle that any material prepared at the nominal order of any editorial board can be of secondary use and can be disseminated several times, and that no editorial board

can claim the exclusive copyright to put the question, or to be given the response to it. The observance of this media democracy solution seems to create certain difficulties for the Polish mass media. However, the CSO observes the “first-come-first-served” principle as regards responding to questions raised. In the Polish media, the topics raised usually enter public domain via press columns, airdials and microphones, in a domino-like fashion, each publication giving rise to subsequent questions and publications.

2.4. Other forms of information services for journalists

Apart from the above-mentioned information service forms and systems for the media, we prepare multi-table and multi-disciplinary orders placed by editors. These are mostly concerns of main magazines and newspapers, and often specialised television. Such kinds of work for the benefit of the media are very burdensome, laborious and time-consuming, since it is often accompanied by time pressure. There are more and more frequent complex inquiries, of which a key element is the crisis as well as social and economic threats it involves.

A separate form of both information service and information confrontation constitutes response to publications and media complaints about statistics. It is a very demanding situation, since procedures of disclaimers and clarifications, which are stipulated by Press Law, gives media a large handicap. Receiving a denial, clarification or publication of one's own version of events is extremely difficult, and achieving such an effect is beset with deliberately posed obstacles and pitfalls. Some of the leading daily newspapers have hired highly specialised legal offices to protect their publications. From the point of view of the social media effect, a received disclaimer is of third-rate importance, because the social effect on receivers' awareness has been exerted and it is difficult to reverse it by means of a delayed and limited denial.

Some confrontations assume very extensive forms and are harmful to research conducted by the public statistics. A discussion, which started in one of the newspapers concerning the SUPER BASE allegedly prepared by CSO, may serve as an example. The cause of it was a draft of the Census Act planned for 2011. Despite many announcements, disclaimers, clarifications and protests, this tsunami of absurdity, which started in February this year, has been present up to the moment of editing this text (the beginning of April 2009).

2.5. Special prospects of work with the media in 2009

As was mentioned in the introduction, since the beginning of 2009 several conditions have occurred that will affect the media service and official statistics. These are: classification of the national economy, electronic reporting, advancement of works on information systems of the official statistics (in Polish – SISP) (within the framework of the Public Administration Computerisation Plan), the change in the way economic entities are registered (in Poland it is called the principle of 1 counter), in the preparations for the censuses of 2010–2011 and preparations for starting an educational portal and a substantial modernisation of information portal.

These new circumstances have caused and will cause a substantial change of both the subject matter of the information service for journalists and the technical and organisational form of such activities. It seems to be inevitable that an online-newspaper and information chats will start, and to a larger extent official statistics services in the field of the media service will be activated.

Currently the press staff consists of Spokesman for the President of the CSO, the Press Office and the direct resources of Information Division. In each of 16 statistical offices, there is a person trained in the field of the media service, and media training is conducted, and also efforts have multiplied to speed up publications and results, as well as to enrich the informational and analytical level of presented materials.

The specialisation of voivodeship statistical offices is of utmost importance for the future of information activity for the benefit of the media. In practice, it means that what so far has been at the disposal of the specialised units at the CSO, has now been assigned to regional offices, which from now on will combine a multi-field regional function with a one field all Polish specialisation. In the case of information services, it entails completely new work conditions, the necessity for special training and a special communication system, as well as an active participation by the spokesman and his personnel in the information and media activities of statistical offices in voivodeships. So far, the results are still promising, although they also indicate a need to create a national network in the public statistics for the benefit of the media. The system under construction at present, which has been conventionally called „Library” and should be called „Information”, will combine and release information resources of the Central Statistical Library (one of the largest statistical libraries in Europe), of the Central Statistical Information Centre, Press Spokesman and Press Office as well as Information Centres in 16 voivodeship offices. The Centre of Statistical Education is included in the network. Moreover, the existing data bases and data banks, as well as those that are being developed and planned, will serve the purposes of the information system for the media.

3. Official statistics and the media – mutual relationships in the 2015 perspective

2015 is the final year for the research programme for the years 2008-2015. During this period several solutions concerning the mutual relationship between official statistics and the media will be developed, which at present appear only as preliminary drafts. However, the following basic solutions for the information service for the media will remain unchanged:

- the immediate current service, mainly by means of an electronic system; the Internet, and mail chat,
- the analytical elaboration of announcements, communiqués and information notes
- the organisation of conferences and subject-related meetings (branch-related)
- the establishment of media laboratories and workshops for statistical services
- the immediate creation of own on-line newspaper
- the full reconstruction of the information portal, and, in the long-term, creation of a separate portal for cooperation between the statistics and the media.

The relationship between the media and official statistics poses a separate problem. The attitude of journalists towards statistical information is based on an excessive conviction about their own subject-related competence and an actual lack of basic preparation for conducting basic statistical analysis. Some interpretations of statistical data performed by the media are shocking and numerous cases of “statistical handicrafts”, incredibly naive attempts to conduct research and statistical observations, as well as the unimaginably simplified attempts to produce different forecasts, indicate that dialogue in this field is and will be difficult. An emotional language is often overused in assessments presented by the media, and unfortunately they deprecate information obtained from statistical surveys conducted by the official statistics. In this situation the mechanism of adulating public opinion or something that is regarded as the public opinion is taking place. An example of such a trend is a series of the media messages, which anticipated the economic crisis in Poland much earlier than its symptoms occurred. Any attempt to present actual data is in general perceived as projecting an excessively-positive image, which, according to the media, has occurred in the case of the crisis.

The dialogue between official statistics and the media has to be conducted as intensively as possible on all subjects for which clarification will be demanded by the media. The media, mostly through electronic media, are the most important transmitter of information to public opinion. They shape public opinion and the awareness of the social and economic situation developed by the system of authorities. They create the behaviour of the consumers, the attitudes of producers

and they substantially influence scientific assessments of the situation in the country. In statistical terms, the media presentation of statistical data is as a laser form of information transmission, which dominates, limits and deletes other forms. No reasonable person acting in the field of statistics can exclude such a form from the cooperation with the media; however, no one can neglect the work on cooperation with the media and on shaping its behaviour in the field of statistics.