

The World Is
Changing,
So Are We

The Serbian
Statistical Office
on the move





Foreword

On behalf of all my colleagues from the Statistical Office of Serbia, it gives me great pleasure to introduce this booklet. Its aim is to help you find out more about our institution through some of our reflections on the role of information provided by a public body at the start of the new millennium.

While the beginning of the last century was marked by the Industrial Revolution, our era has started with a boom in information and communications technology. Societies around the world are being immersed in a continuously growing flood of information the value of which is becoming increasingly difficult to assess. For our young people, reality is now something that can be virtual, as they can reset events as they like on their computers. However, tangible references are hard to find. Nowadays, the other side of the planet pretends to be able to assess our economic trends, social situation or political climate – and vice-versa. The media have become all-powerful and have placed the thoughts of the man in the street and of highly skilled specialist on the same level.

In this fast-moving world where information has an imprecise shape and knows no limits, people producing official statistics have an important responsibility: to provide their users with reliable, useful and unbiased information that can be applied with complete confidence in taking effective decisions. A desire to guarantee our users stable and credible references is a priority for us and, as Serbia's central official institution for statistics, we have adopted a strategy totally directed towards this goal.

Fortunately, we are not alone in this ambitious project, as we are part of a large international community of statistics producers facing the same challenges. Long-standing international efforts have led to the creation of fundamental principles, codes of practice and jointly adopted concepts about official statistics. Our statistical office, as an autonomous and independent institution, is determined not only to adhere to them, but to participate in their construction and development.

We are a public institution, which means we are neither a clan with interpersonal relationships, nor a private enterprise in search of profit. We are here to serve the general need for information, to provide our fellow citizens, our businesses, our researchers and our government with data comparable to those produced by other countries, which will be useful to all in leading our country towards a peaceful and prosperous future.

My colleagues and I believe that you are part of our future and we are committed to providing you with the data you expect. Your questions, comments and suggestions - for which we are already grateful – are a great help in improving the quality of our work. I warmly recommend that you use our website to get in direct contact with us.

Dragan Vukmirović
Director



Serbian Statistics . . . a Partnership Platform

As we reflected on our role in society, the first thought that came to mind was that the official statistics we produce can provide an important platform for partnership. - a platform to define and initiate projects, develop strategies, evaluate actions, and at the same time be a tool for dialogue, communication, cooperation, and negotiation. In some cases, statistics even provide a central meeting point for different arguments, ideas and points of view. Cases where the use of statistics influences major debates and decisions are manifold, but in all cases, one fundamental condition must be met: confidence in their reliability for all concerned.

Indeed, if our statistics are to be a useful pillar of partnership within Serbia, or between Serbia and foreign partners, a consensus that Serbian statistics provide an objective account of the economy and society, both over time and geographically, has to be reached. Such a consensus can only be attained if the relevant decisions underpinning the process of data production are understood and supported and if a climate of true teamwork, on the basis of equal partnership between data producers and data users, is achieved.

In order to assure any person or body using Serbian statistics of the reliability and objectivity of the data, our institution is in permanent dialogue with its partners. Partnership is a key concept in the institutional values we want to build up.

How can we provide appropriate material to help formulate and evaluate policies and manage the services for which central or local governments are responsible? What data do businesses need for their investment decisions, growth strategies or structural plans? What are the priorities of trade unions and other groups, in terms of statistics, in order to ensure better protection of employees or workers? Are the data we present detailed enough to meet the requirements of citizens, consumers, minorities, specific population categories and civic society as a whole?

These are basic questions that we want every member of our staff to keep asking because they are the only justification for our existence. Therefore, from our point of view, we have to become partners with our data users.

We do not produce statistics for ourselves but for a community of users with whom we want to work in partnership.

This partnership is not restricted to Serbia. Our Office plays an important part in international negotiations as we submit a large amount of data to many organisations such as United Nations and European Union bodies, the OECD, World Bank, and IMF and at the same time we make use of their databases.

In the process of growing closer to the EU we have ongoing cooperation with EUROSTAT - the Statistical Office of the European Union. EUROSTAT aggregates statistics for the whole of the European Union, thus enabling useful comparisons between Member States and candidate or accession countries. At EU level, statistics is also a highly regulated domain in which compliance with a series of recommendations or regulations is a condition for EU membership. Special attention is paid to cooperation with statistics offices from neighbouring countries, through common projects, mutual visits and the exchange of knowledge and experience related to conducting statistical surveys.

In addition to providing services to these international organisations, we are keen to disseminate our data as widely as possible in order to address all the needs for quantitative information about our country that other potential partners, such as traders, investors, visitors, the Serbian Diaspora or any other international user might have.

Serbian statistics figure on the international platform as they are greatly suited to the requirements of international users and support international agreements. Our Office has official responsibility for international relations in statistics.

As mentioned earlier, in order to obtain internationally comparable indicators relevant to statistical estimates of economic and other achievements in the country, it is essential that we fall in line with the statistical system of the EU. This means adjustment of methods, classifications and other statistical standards, linked, for example, to the description or dissemination of data, with a frequency rate and timetable for presenting specific indicators and with the introduction of new surveys or variables over a period of time.

It is only by aligning our methods, concepts and practices with internationally accepted standards that we can compare trends in Serbia with those in other countries.

Assistance from more experienced nations and sharing good ideas and practices are invaluable. Since the start of the millennium our Office has seen various international or bilateral partners

providing sound and sustained assistance in support of our development. European Union, IMF, OECD, UN and World Bank funds and programmes have been fully used to help Serbian statistics take off and set out in a new direction compatible with democratic values.

Through foreign aid our Office has received not only ICT and other equipment, desperately needed at the beginning of the transition period, but has also benefited from guidance through substantial reform as the high-level technical assistance gathered pace.

Some bilateral funds, such as those from Sweden, or privileged cooperation with national statistics institutes from Italy, Sweden, Estonia, Hungary, Slovenia and many more, have instilled new ways of thinking and acting. Today, almost all our colleagues have visited one or more institutes abroad, have taken an active part in international conferences and have represented the Office in working groups on regional cooperation in the statistics field. What began as aid has turned into partnership and today Serbia can count on specific allies for cooperation and dialogue on statistical issues, especially in the European Union.





Assistance received from foreign experts or institutions is helping to consolidate consistent professional standards in our institution. It is also helping to create networks with colleagues from all over the world and give Serbia an equal opportunity of comparing its progress with the rest of the world. Partnership also means mutual aid.

As in many other countries, the Serbian official statistics system covers not only our Office but other authorised bodies that collect, process and sometimes publish official data for certain specific fields. For example, this is the case with health statistics – the responsibility of the Serbian Institute for Health Care – or balance of payments and foreign investment data, which are produced by the National Bank of Serbia. However, coordinating activities in the national statistics system and ensuring adherence to standards and coherence in official statistics remains the responsibility of our Office.

The coordination is reflected in firm partnership as regards designing methodologies and exchanging and using data from other institutions within the system, which requires permanent consultation and a sharing of views in order to get the best results.

Given our commitment to minimise the burden on businesses, and in line with international best practice, our Statistical Office encourages partnership with the public administration in producing effective and efficient statistics.





Aiming for transparency in everything we do

Serbian statistics... a tool of democracy

Citizens of democratic states have the right to be informed about all public factors that affect their lives and the government administration favours access to this information. Political decisions, new laws and by-laws, and all the rules governing social and economic affairs are, therefore, part and parcel of public debate and are available for public consultation. In much the same way, statistics are an important input for our citizens. They offer a window onto the performance of the government for which they voted, they allow people to take part in public debate, and they can guide personal decisions. That is why it is necessary for all statistics to be publicly diffused and explained in a way that is understandable and accessible to all citizens, not just specialist users. For all the above reasons, our Office makes every effort to provide clear-cut methodological explanations, to design comprehensible analyses and to promote meaningful data presentation.

In our efforts to support citizen involvement and commitment in Serbian public life, we present our data in a way that can be understood by non-specialists.

The famous demographer Alfred Sauvy used to say that “when well informed, men are citizens; when badly informed, they become subjects”. Through our responsibility as the national institution for statistics, we are determined to help our citizens participate in building the future of Serbia. Transparency of our work and our budget is an important aspect of this objective.

Indeed, the openness of Serbian statistics should be measured by how easy it is for the public at large to gain an insight into our work, our internal organisation structure, our staff selection and appraisal criteria, and our budgetary spending in line with the new public administration rules on transparency and quality management.

The efforts we invest and the progress we make towards increased transparency contribute to the overall democratic development of our country.

Our statistics monitor the situation in all segments of society, but, in order to adapt to European standards and new world trends, we have to improve cooperation with those institutional segments of society that until recently either did not exist or were insufficiently developed.

Collecting data to monitor the trends in a civic society is not a side activity for us and we dedicate the same attention and care to this as we do to economic data because we know that NGOs, various associations, consumer groups, trade unions and many other interest groups require reliable data to enable them to carry out their respective tasks. Education, labour, demography, gender or minority issues, the behaviour of households and many other fields of social life are also covered by our statistics. Where necessary, we do not hesitate to initiate new surveys or studies to follow trends in our society, as was the case with a special publication we produced on men and women in Serbia or with our recent survey on the use of information and communications technology for personal and professional purposes.

To produce a reliable set of official statistics, we face the challenge of performing a public function while protecting a respondent's privacy.

Respecting the confidentiality of personal data during all procedures, from data exchange, to proper storage and dissemination is a cornerstone of democracy. To be fully compliant, our Office keeps information confidential and uses it solely for statistical purposes. When micro-data have to be used for scientific or research purposes, access to them is strictly regulated. As a specific aspect of data protection, and in addition to the physical handling of information in a safe manner, we take measures to protect our computer system from illegal access and ban any release of identifiable information from our statistical outputs. Serbian statistics legislation has provisions for protecting confidentiality and restrictions on the use of individual data, and we fully comply with these requirements.



To some extent, all statistical surveys are an invasion of privacy, justified by the need for information. In an attempt to minimise this invasion of privacy, our questionnaires are designed to request only useful information. In addition, we inform the respondents of the purpose of the data we are collecting and try to ensure that the total reporting burden on the population is equitably distributed.

Producing good statistics without accurate data is impossible. We know that providing us with personal or sensitive information is a matter of trust. The challenge for us is to merit this trust.

Legitimacy and credibility are the core values of our product. Legitimacy is reflected in the social judgment that our activity is in the interest of the country and that it serves an essential purpose, while credibility is determined by the degree of confidence users place in our statistics. In fact, few users can directly validate the data we release and the majority must rely on trust. Our reputation is a key element in reinforcing this trust and since mistrusted information is useless, the increased confidence of users in Serbian statistics is an ongoing target.

We believe that a transparent planning process, including a strategic plan that explicitly identifies longer-term priorities for public scrutiny, is a valuable factor in increasing confidence in statistics. Therefore, every year we propose a programme of statistical surveys, which is submitted for public debate and adoption. Once adopted, the programmes are published in the Official Gazette. Important issues in our work, such as changes in methodology, are also officially published. Our Office is currently working on the elaboration of a multi-annual programme that will set down the main development strategies on which annual plans will be based in the future.



In response to the perceived integrity of official statistics, we strongly believe that the production and presentation of statistics need to be free from political interference and should be seen as such. In pursuit of this goal, we are convinced that in its adoption of a law on statistics and in setting up a national statistics system model for accountability and good governance, the Serbian government will ensure that the model selected respects this need for independence.

Models for a National Statistical System must ensure that official statistics are free from political interference and are included in a specific law on statistics so that they do not disintegrate over time or are vulnerable to changes in government. To achieve partnership in Serbian statistics means developing impartiality in our statistical system.





Serbian Statistics . . . an Official Public Good

Our National Office of Statistics imposes no restrictions on use or access, making the data accessible to each user equally, in the same way, at the same time, and under the same conditions, no matter who the user is. There is no privileged treatment, even for our own government. To ensure transparency of this principle of equality, we publish our dissemination schedule in advance so that everybody knows exactly on what day and at what time specific statistics are released.

Above all, we value equality in the production and dissemination of statistics. Our statistical system guarantees equality in defining priority indicators and equal access to data

As a public institution, it is our duty, and moreover our wish, to respect the persons or bodies that provide us with information and respond to our surveys. To achieve this goal, our Office has developed new methods of data collection aimed at reducing the constraints that providing us with information represent. Wherever possible, we use sampling techniques, so only the smallest possible segment of the population under scrutiny has to accept – on behalf of all the units it represents - the burden of completing a questionnaire or responding to an interview. We also make the fullest possible use of information readily available from administrative sources, while fully respecting the confidentiality of individual information. Finally, we share data within our institution and with our external partners to avoid the same information being collected twice.

We have great respect and consideration for the persons and bodies that provide us with information



Thinking clearly because each user is specific

Being a public property, our statistics are free of charge. All Internet users can access most of them on our website, there is no fee to visit and use our libraries, and we even distribute some publications free of charge. The lowest possible fees are charged for dissemination support (publications on paper or on CD) or for some special processing done on request. The Statistical Office of Serbia is, and will remain, a non-profit-making public institution.

Statistics belong to everyone and only the State can fully finance their production – although earnings from some sales can go at least some way towards recovering production and dissemination costs.

Our responsibility goes beyond the borders of our country. We represent Serbia in the international community of official statisticians. To be accountable in this important role, our office is committed to respecting the United Nations fundamental principles of official statistics and the European statistics code of practice that are essential guidelines in our journey towards the European Union and the community of developed democracies. We care about our international public image as it is a reflection on Serbia and its citizens.

Statistics must be spread as widely as possible. All citizens have the right to be informed about trends in their country, be this simply in their capacity as consumers or as voters. Consequently, our institution has to make every effort to use the as a means of reaching individuals. Nowadays, newspapers, television, magazines are to be found in every household. It is a great advantage to be able to use media networks in disseminating our data, yet, on the other hand, it is also our duty to monitor how our data are interpreted.

Journalists often construct their own interpretation and conclusions about our statistics, and present them in an attractive way. However, they may also draw erroneous conclusions or use inappropriate terms simply due to a lack of knowledge or misunderstanding of some highly specialised topic. In such cases, our regulations envisage a public denial in those same media to ensure that our public is correctly informed. We also try to pre-empt such cases by maintaining close contacts with journalists and analysts and by explaining to them the limitations and



precise meaning of our statistics. We also do our best to present our data in a form that facilitates proper interpretation and meaningful comparisons.

Our plan to reinforce our presence in the media should contribute to increased confidence in official statistics and to a general improvement in statistical literacy. Debates among specific groups of users and producers of statistics are very useful in rendering statistics more accessible to non-specialists. Our educational role is an integral part of our public character.

The media are an important partner in the dissemination of statistical data to the general public.

The independence of statistics is only ensured if statistics are produced irrespective of any potential conflict of interest. From the financial standpoint, this implies that statistics is financed by the State. Indeed, if any interest group - for example, enterprises active in a given sector - had the power, by virtue of providing important funds, to divert the production of statistics to their own needs and foster the production of data for this market alone, the principle of equality would be violated. In such a case, it would be difficult for our Office to produce social statistics because nobody in this field would be able to pay for it. In reality, statistical data are public property, just like schools, roads and hospitals, and their funding by the State is essential.

As with all other goods, statistics have production costs, with each stage demanding human and economic resources. In our transition period public funding is often limited so it is necessary to make an effort to produce high-quality statistics at minimum cost. As a result of this constraint, we have to be cautious in defining priorities and a substantial proportion of our development costs is met by donors and international agencies.

Together with our economy, our institution is in transition from an old to a new system and our financial and human resources are limited. In this period, we cannot produce all the statistics we would like and we have to make choices to satisfy priority demands at national and international levels.



Serbian Statistics . . . integrating new technology

The rapid technological progress of the last two decades, which has had a tremendous impact on our lives, has certainly not bypassed our statistics. Not only has new information technology given us more powerful tools, but it has also created a completely new segment for statistical research. The continuing boom in this new sector represents an increasing part of our overall economic output, but it has to be properly monitored and measured. Given the pace of these changes, this has not been an easy task. We have responded to this challenge by publishing the results of a new survey on the use of ICT and by including the IT sector in our data on public and individual spending and in the list of economic indicators (price indices, national accounts).

Development of an information society creates new statistical areas

In addition to providing us with new areas for greater statistical production, new technology has revolutionised the way we work. Keeping up with technological progress, we have at our disposal many sophisticated systems for electronic data collection and transmission and special programs for their processing. This has resulted in our ability to obtain results and estimates that reflect reality more closely.

Moreover, recent methodological developments are now quickly implemented in the surveys that are regularly conducted. For example, complex formulas used in sampling procedures are now integrated into our computer systems and are only a click away from effective application.

Statistical data are now available to our users in a variety of formats as the publication of data takes less and less time. Most of our publications now appear in paper and electronic form. Even some of the most comprehensive editions, such as the “Statistical Yearbook of Serbia”



Lightening the workload for our respondents

and “Municipalities in Serbia”, are available electronically, in CD format or through our website. Advanced technical standards have been closely followed by improvements in data presentation. Using a mix of intuitive graphics and animation, we try to bring our users the results of our research in a way that is clear, illustrative and easy to compare.

New tools for data dissemination and modern presentation features are integrated into our everyday work.

New technology has made communicating with our users easier. The Office website is regularly updated with new releases and is linked to a variety of databases that can be accessed online. This wealth of information is released almost immediately, following a quality check of the data we produce.

While increasing our production and the amount of material that is available to our users, we make sure that total respect for data confidentiality is a top priority. A combination of programming tools, access rules and archiving procedures is deployed to preserve the confidentiality of individual pieces of data that we receive from our sources. In this way, as stipulated by law, the aggregated data that we produce cannot be traced back to the individual respondents from whom the data were collected.

Protecting data confidentiality with appropriate programming tools and applying strict rules for archiving and accessing electronic data are our top priorities



Working together with other administrations

Serbian Statistics working for you

Serbia is moving towards a market economy. What does this mean? Simply that it is no longer up to the State to make decisions, but up to the markets. There is a huge expansion of private enterprise that was not seen before. Many new businesses are being created. Citizens and workers are forming various associations. The number of interest groups, like non-profit-making organisations, is increasing, and external exchanges are growing in number and intensity. As a consequence of this, statistics no longer have a single privileged user - the State - but are there to serve an enormous number of economic and social factors. This totally new landscape has had a strong impact on the work of our Statistical Office.

One aspect of this major professional impact is data collection. It is not possible any more to obtain information automatically as it was under the old system. Now, companies are concentrating on making a profit, not on giving us data or serving the Government. Secondly, the number of units to be surveyed has become too big to collect data from each of them.

As is the practice in developed countries, we must find alternative methods of capturing data, and this is done in two ways: through the use of sampling, which makes it possible to survey a much smaller but representative segment of the population, and through indirect sources of information, such as data kept by other public administration bodies. In practice, these methods of data collection imply that Serbian statisticians must learn to apply complex surveying methods and must create and maintain updated registers from which the necessary samples are extracted.

Transition towards a market economy has revolutionised the way we work.

These effects of transition are tangible and measurable, but a far greater revolution has taken place in a completely new approach to our work. We have shifted from government-oriented to user-oriented institutional guidelines. In other words, we have evolved from a self-contained to a demand-driven and open statistical system.

Today our Office combines major trends in Serbia and on the international scene together with user priorities to decide what priority data to produce. On this basis, we release exhaustive series of data on the situation and trends in many economic, demographic, environmental and social fields. Specifically, we are also in charge of conducting censuses, maintaining statistical registers and processing election results.

We produce and release a lot of useful data, indicators or indices on prices, retail and wholesale trade, external trade, industrial or energy production and consumption, agriculture, construction, transport, communication, tourism, education and science, the judiciary, population, labour, employment, wages, and the environment. These statistics are available at various geographical levels and we have taken measures to preserve as far as possible data comparable over specified time periods despite the introduction of new classifications or methodology.

Depending on the field covered, surveys are carried out monthly, quarterly or annually. We also conduct periodic large-scale surveys such as censuses and conduct ad hoc surveys on specific topics where relevant. Together with other national accounts data, our Office compiles quarterly and annual GDPs and is currently expanding the number and coverage of price indices produced.

We are trying hard to help you picture and monitor economic, demographic, environmental and social phenomena over a specified time period.

Our statistical system is always ready to listen to the needs of our market economy and those of neighbouring countries. The introduction of new indicators such as gross domestic

product, consumer price index and purchasing power parities are a direct result of this user-oriented approach. We have recently expanded our database to include completely new data on energy balances and the environment. With a view to adjusting to European standards, we have also placed emphasis on gender statistics, poverty, the living standard and unemployment, the statistical use of information, communications technologies and various other issues.

The fields covered by our statistics are constantly expanding in response to new issues as the world evolves.

Our chief concern is to establish a quality statistical register, which would serve as the main framework for our activities. To be successful also requires that we create, maintain, update and upgrade statistical methods and standards (nomenclatures, classifications, codes, meta-data) which are indispensable tools representing the core elements of well-organised statistics. Along with the use of brand-new information technology, these elements constitute a fundamental infrastructure in support of our work.

Registers, meta-data, classifications, nomenclatures, structural statistics, specialised software, and the IT infrastructure are foundations that support the entire statistical structure.

It is no exaggeration to say that our statistics users enjoy personalised treatment as we always try to meet their special requests in full, or at least most of them. We are also ready to offer detailed explanations and are open to all comments and suggestions. To achieve this, we have also carried out a survey on user satisfaction. From the numerous responses we have received, we have acknowledged our weak points, but also the elements that our users marked as highly successful. We are fully aware that our data only become relevant, accurate and objective when they are used.

Caring for your major needs means producing indicators on demand and developing tools to measure your satisfaction and ascertain your wishes.



Statistics about us

Human resources are our chief strength

The major strength of our Office in this transitional period, when Serbian statistics is being transformed into a modern European science compatible with its counterparts in the EU, lies in our staff. Realising the importance of human resources, we started bringing in young people and developing their potential. Within a short time this process produced significant results. Without help and support from international institutions, we would however have not been able to achieve this so quickly. The policy of ongoing professional education, improving command of English language and continuously upgrading IT skills is, and will continue to be, a main priority in our care about the quality of our personnel. The current number of over 550 employees, of whom two thirds are university graduates, guarantees that this objective will be attained.

We take great pride in serving an increasing number of users.

As our Office progresses towards meeting the standards and quality of data coming from the EU, it faces a growing number of more demanding users.

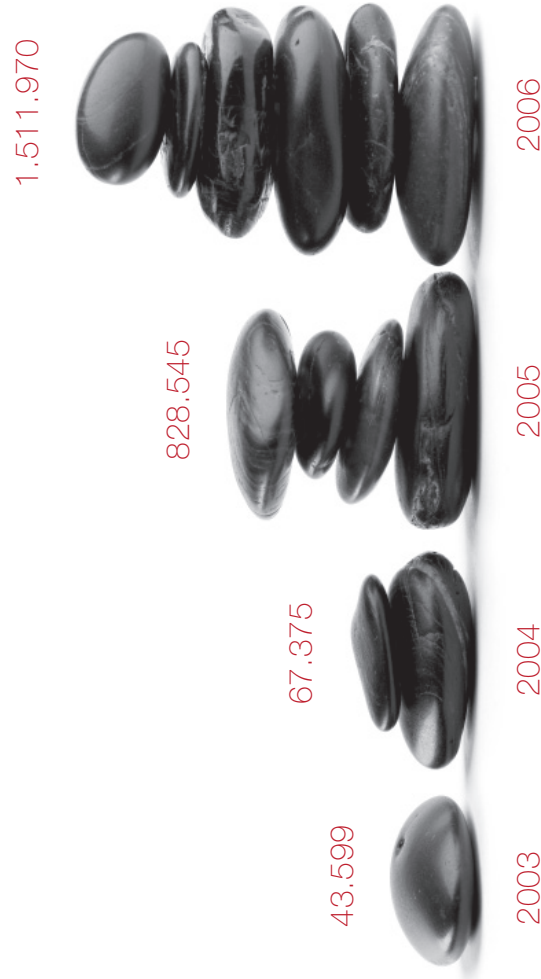
One particular asset is our web site. Starting from mere 43,599 site visitors in 2003, it reached 1,200,000 visitors during the first half of 2007 which puts it among the most frequently visited sites in our country. The 35,000 or so requests for information processed by our office annually require enormous efforts on the part of our staff. This number is rising year by year despite the wealth of publications on offer in print or available in our Library, which welcomes some 2,200 visitors a year. We are delighted by huge public interest in statistical data and especially by the interest and treatment accorded by the media.



We are producing more and more data for you.

The need for statistical data never stops, which compels us to work on new and more complex projects. This has resulted in an increasing number of activities using new formats compliant with those in the EU. The 256 statistical surveys conducted in 2007 are a good illustration of the volume and complexity of the tasks challenging us. We are particularly satisfied with the development of our system of national accounts, the upgrading of Serbian GDP figures and consumer price index, and the progress of our surveys on the labour force, the household budget, and the use of ICT, a range of activity which places us side by side with renowned institutions in the EU.

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The Italian National Institute of Statistics, in partnership with the statistical offices of Hungary and of Sweden, has implemented this important project to help Serbia reach the European Union standards in statistics



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