

Eurostat - Stats in a Wrap

Key figures on Europe

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SPEAKERS

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Jonathan Elliott

Stats in a Wrap - the podcast series from Eurostat

Jonathan Elliott

Well, Christmas is nearly upon us. And here in the Wrap Café, as we wrap our stats in Christmas paper and put the presents around the tree, our Berlin-based producer Matthias, who is dressed up today as the horned Christmas devil Krampus to scare all the naughty children (although actually Matthias doesn't need to dress up to scare children, by the way)...Matthias is bringing around the "Glühwein", the Stollen cakes and the gingerbread cookies, and singing a few Christmas carols before heading out to feed the reindeer.

What, I wonder, is Father Christmas going to bring you this year? Well, I can tell you what he's going to bring me because I asked for it. It's going to be the *Key figures on Europe 2023* edition, all 80 pages of it. And for me, Christmas has come early because I have it before me – oh, what a glorious thing it is!

I ordered it from the Publication's Office on behalf of Father Christmas, of course, and all I had to pay was €3.92 shipping. It will sit proudly and well thumbed on my shelf until next year, when I order the 2024 edition. Again, on behalf of Father Christmas. A bound volume of statistics is an increasing rarity these days of instantly available online data, but it is still very useful.

And it is an emblem of the shifting trends in how we view stats at different times: what's key this year, and what was key last year can vary greatly. What does that tell us about our evolving attitudes to the statistics that surround us? And we should not forget that stats are a vital tool in keeping all discussions and debates healthy and useful, especially in an age that some have come to call 'post truth'. Next year - 2024 - is going to be a big year for the European Parliament with its 10th election since 1979.

So, key figures are going to be essential as millions of Europeans participate in shaping the future of European democracy. To help us look at the way statistics have changed over the years and to see through the lens of changing publications we have two people, very well placed to talk about it. It's a great pleasure to have again John Verrinder back on the show.

John is head of unit at the department in Eurostat that deals with national accounts, methodology standards and indicators but he's worked with many different kinds of statistics over his career.

Welcome, John. It is a pleasure to have you back on the program.

John Verrinder

Thank you, Jonathan.

Jonathan Elliott

And we also have Birgit Schmeitzner, who is press spokesperson for the Commission's German office in Berlin. The representation, as it's called, which is a sort of consulate or embassy for the European Commission. Birgit, welcome!

Birgit Schmeitzner

Thank you, Jonathan.

Jonathan Elliott

Birgit, I want to come to you in a minute. But first, John, tell us a bit about your role at Eurostat.

John Verrinder

Well Jonathan, for the moment I'm very much focused, as you said, on national accounts. During my career, I've worked on several areas of official statistics. But I think most recently, I've become much more involved in the presentation of indicators: how to, for example, use dashboards, and how to use publications in order to get messages across and also to bring in users who may not traditionally have looked at our publications.

Jonathan Elliott

Birgit, tell us a little bit about your work and what you do in Berlin.

Birgit Schmeitzner

I'm a spokeswoman. And of course, I'm not a lone wolf here in Berlin. I have a team around me, because we have to cover all those different policy fields. We get press queries from German journalists on a daily basis on PFAS to sanctions, on nature restoration law to drivers' licenses, from pesticides to migration, so a big bunch of issues. And for the role of the representation of the European Commission here in Berlin, I would say we are sort of a bridge between the headquarters in Brussels and Berlin.

Jonathan Elliott

Before we get stuck into the main podcast we are going to have, especially as John Verrinder asked us particularly to have, a little Christmas quiz. And we're going to ask one question each and then a question for everybody. John's shaking his head. But before Matthias starts putting extra 'Schnapps' in the 'Glühwein', which he always does every Christmas, we have this quiz, and the correct answers will win you a piece of chocolate.

And if you get the answer wrong, Matthias will come round and beat you with birch twigs, which is what Krampus does to naughty children. So just be careful here, think about the answer with great care.

Question for Birgit: when was the last white Christmas in Germany? Was it 2013, 2009 or 2010?

Birgit Schmeitzner

Oh, my goodness! Are you speaking of Berlin or Bavaria, because these are different places.

Jonathan Elliott

You've got the whole of Germany.

Birgit Schmeitzner

13!

Jonathan Elliott

I'm sorry, that's not the right answer. I'm leaving it open for the rest of the team. Matthias is now approaching you with the birch twigs.

Birgit Schmeitzner

Oh, my goodness!

Jonathan Elliott

John, when was the last white Christmas in Brussels? Was it 2015, 2007? Or 2010?

John Verrinder

I'd say 2017. Would that be okay?

Jonathan Elliott

No! Birch twigs for you, I'm afraid, it was 2010. For both of you now fingers on the buzzer, please. Which country has the most reindeer and I include all varieties and subspecies - this includes mountain reindeer, Tundra reindeer, island reindeer, and surely today it will not snow but rain, dear. Is it Norway, Sweden, or Russia?

Birgit Schmeitzner

I'd say Russia.

John Verrinder

I think I'd go for Russia as well.

Jonathan Elliott

Okay, Birgit, you had fingers on the button first, you've got there quickly and you're quite correct. You get a piece of chocolate, well done. One of the most important tools for setting out what the EU does and how the Commission works is statistics. We've asked Birgit to be our frontline reporter, the bridge as she describes it between Brussels and Berlin and the media world in Germany. And tell us a little bit about how Eurostat's *Key figures* play out in practice.

But before we bring Birgit in, I'd like to get a little bit of input from John and just talk about this publication *Key figures*. It's changed quite a lot over the years. It has a long history. Just tell us first of all, John, get us going on this. Why is it an interesting document? What is it? And how does it...what does it tell us?

John Verrinder

Our target audience for the publication is basically for people who don't know so much about the detail of individual statistics. So, it tries to give an overview. It's visually appealing, we think, not too heavy on the text. And what we're doing is hand picking from the whole data collection of Eurostat. So, we're covering, for example, people in society, the economy, business, the environment, and it gives you an

overview of the most important data that are available. Of course, it doesn't dive into detail. But what it does is allows you an entry point into a broader range of statistics, if you're interested.

Person on street 1

I know that the European Union is publishing some key figures about consumer information, rates, or... but I do not really know about these figures.

Person on street 2

So, this is not the kind of figure that I would have seen already. But I think some classification between the economic situation of each country.

Person on street 3

So, yeah, if I look at the other graphs and everything, I can understand what everything means. I just don't know them by heart. If you asked me what is a GDP? No freaking clue, honestly!

Jonathan Elliott

It is amazing. It is a beautiful document, this particular one, 2023. I'll talk a bit perhaps a bit more about that later. It introduces the casual reader to quantification, to thinking more about relative sizes of all kinds of bodies of information, and it's really, really engaging. Tell us a bit about the evolution, John, I mean, this isn't the first time it's been produced, 2023. It goes back, I think, to at least 2007, probably way back before then. Just talk us through a bit, a little bit about the history.

John Verrinder

Yeah, that's absolutely right. I mean, this type of publication has certainly been around for more than 15 years. And actually, in terms of the evolution, it's no longer a kind of big compendium of statistics. It used to be, and we'll go into this in our discussion, it used to be a table after table, a table on this, a table on that.

And you had to wade through a lot of statistics in order to get through the publication. And of course, this publication brings data from all of the Member States and also compares it with the European level averages or aggregates. So now it's more of an, I would say, attention seeking publication, rather than some kind of comprehensive resource.

Jonathan Elliott

Birgit, coming to you now, just thinking about how stats are perceived by the everyday consumer of media in Germany, and I think the way that they consume media and information is typical of many other countries, of course. How are stats presented and how are they perceived, what's your experience about how they're handled in different publications, in different platforms.

Birgit Schmeitzner

The German Statistical Office is highly respected in Germany, no doubt. It's often mentioned in the media as a source, and I just checked the website to see what is being asked often at the moment. It's about inflation, skilled workers, fuel prices, Ukraine, gender pay gap, nursing care, risk of poverty - those sorts of things and issues.

We as a representation of the Commission, we are not so much into the German Statistical Office, we go to Eurostat, of course! Because there, we automatically get an overview of all these 27 Member

States. And then we take that data and facts from there and deliver an overview, but of course, with a special focus on how Germany is performing, so: front runner, just average or even a low performer. And yeah, that's basically it.

Jonathan Elliott

Key figures is, of course, just an introduction to Eurostat's treasure trove of data. It's only the tip of an iceberg. John, what is the relationship between the publication and the stats available online?

John Verrinder

This type of publication is a gateway into a lot more information, it really depends on the users of the statistics. And the way that this would work would be: every user will be interested in some basic key figures, some statistics. Some users will be satisfied with that, they'll be interested, they'll take note. Some other users will think: well, I'd like to go a little bit further, I'd like to pull on the string. I'd like to see a little bit more about the background.

Why is that figure developing in the way that it is? How does it break down? How am I comparing it with other countries? How is it in the context of the overall European situation? So, you rightly said there's an enormous database of statistics behind all this. But it's very daunting if you just go to the database. So, this is a way in as it were. But it also means that we can satisfy different kinds of users: the users who just want some key figures, and those users that want a pathway into finding more relevant data for their work.

Jonathan Elliott

Birgit, I want to come to you: *Key figures* is packed with beautiful and informative infographics, where there used to be just basic graphs. As a seasoned German media watcher, what changes have you seen in the way that data is presented in news reporting?

Birgit Schmeitzner

Infographics is a wonderful way to tell stories. So, in order to prepare facts and figures as sort of an eye candy, I would say, short and sweet, easy to grasp at first glance, I think that is really the essence. And maybe in former times, the need for that was not so obvious. Because nowadays, with all those social media platforms we do have, and the interaction of the users there, it's, yeah, it's better to wrap it nicely.

But on the other hand, sometimes facts and data are quite complicated, we all know that, especially if it comes to the broad European level. So that can be at least discouraging, I would say, for users. And so, we are really happy to have different formats in which we can prepare the data. So, maps and tables as well as bar charts, and everything is available at the Eurostat website, we really appreciate that.

Because, you know, variety, I would say, is the spice of life in this area. In our experience, is...that's a good way to attract users, the attention of the users. And it helps us absolutely to tell stories, especially when it comes to really, really complex things like climate crisis, you mentioned it. And it's really good to zoom in and pick up some details to make it easier for the people to deal with it. And to talk about it.

Jonathan Elliott

Really interesting. I mean, I can't emphasize enough how beautiful this one is this year - going through it, there are 75 pages, only six where there is no graphic. On page 14 there is an infographic representing first time asylum applications which I would happily have on my wall. It is quite an outstanding piece of artwork. It's very, very interesting graphically and it tells you a lot! But *Key figures 2023* is not I would say a professional statistician's resource. This is for the non-professional. John, tell us who this is aimed at.

John Verrinder

In this particular publication, actually, we find that a lot of users are actually aged between 35 and 54. And so it's not exactly the very younger student user base you would expect, Jonathan. However, when you dig into it, you find that a lot of the users come from academic institutions, teachers, professors, public sector, researchers.

So, the kind of people who actually bring the publication to others. We also see users, though, such as journalists, and that opens the door through their articles and publications to a broader audience. We get the feedback from the users that they're very positive about graphics, the overall look and the accessibility.

Person on street 4

Okay, this is more like a personal thing, but I would like to know salaries, salary comparison within countries. See - if we are like one market, one union, one everything, why is there so much disparity? Or I feel like there's so much disparity. If I had news about how living works in other countries within the EU, I would feel more comfortable with what I have. Or I would say, okay, then I better move to France, or I move to Germany.

Person on street 5

I would like to know more about, well, the advancement in climate and waste minimization in European countries.

Person on street 6

I think I would like to get to know more about employment rates, because in Spain is quite concerning, and also related to the work and salary conditions...the time that Europeans spend at workplaces.

Person on street 7

Social-wise, I feel like not a lot of those numbers are published, like poverty rates and stuff. But financial numbers, they're all over the place.

Jonathan Elliott

John, the impression to the outsider is that a statistical organization is a kind of immutable rock that merely processes flows of information that don't change from one year to the next. But in fact, it's nothing of the kind because what is prioritized in stats over time reflects changing values. And in a democracy, that's determined by debate, even political debate, is that fair to say?

John Verrinder

As a professional statistician, I'd say that we really want to keep the politics out of statistics. We want the professionalism and independence of statisticians to be preserved. But at the same time, clearly,

there are needs coming from policy development, from political discussion, you mentioned the European Parliament elections next year. So, there are obviously needs for statistics, which are raised constantly. And that's, of course, a challenge for the statistical office.

Because on the one side, we do have long standing statistics that we've collected for many, many years. And these statistics are important, because you need to reflect how things have evolved over time, you need a time series of statistics. So, to some extent, yes, we are continuing to produce the old statistics, the well-known data, because there is an inherent need to keep producing them and we have the infrastructure in place to do so.

But at the same time, we have to be agile, because as the new needs come through, we need to reflect those, we need to introduce new collections, new breakdowns, some statistics will need to be faster, produced more quickly or more regularly. It is a very big challenge to do all of that. One of the ways out that a lot of statistical offices use is the development of technology, use of digitalization. And increasingly using the data in digital form that's out there, the so-called big data, in order to produce statistics more efficiently.

Jonathan Elliott

Birgit, a lot of information now reaches people via social media. And that specifically allows for short attention spans. How do you think that has affected how people take on board statistical information?

Birgit Schmeitzner

Oh, well, to be honest, who reads a daily newspaper from front to back every day? I do sometimes, but not on everyday basis. So, more and more people, of course, they get their information from the Internet, and it's easier. Most of the time it's for free. And it's, yeah, I would say driven by the good old KISS principle. So: 'keep it simple, stupid'. So, and yeah, you mentioned the attention span, and the attention span is shrinking.

The message has to come out in the first three seconds or so. Otherwise, you have lost your public. So, our challenge I would say is to avoid too much complexity but still show the whole picture. And social media platforms are sometimes helpful, because you can reach a lot of people there. And sometimes not very helpful, because you can't tell the whole story. It's truly a, I would say a tightrope walk.

Jonathan Elliott

John, do you find yourself on the horns of a dilemma here where you risk trivializing a stat on the one hand, and on the other hand in giving necessary context, losing your target audience's interest?

John Verrinder

Yes, undoubtedly, it's a big challenge. As a statistician, I would love to be able to explain a lot more about what's behind the number, where there may be some things that you can interpret it in one way, but you couldn't interpret it in another. I may be saying, well, it doesn't include this aspect yet, but it will. So, I would like to explain a lot more. But if you've only got one shot, you've got three seconds, and you've got one figure, then you give the figure.

And in that respect this publication is, as we said earlier, a gateway into that. There are some users who don't want to hear about all that complexity, they want to see: is the number going up? Is it going

down? And they think through what the consequences are for them. The idea of this publication is to say: well, you can have that if you wish. But if you want to know a little bit more about where it comes from, here's where you can go to find out.

Person on street 8

It's also equally important to have people who are unbiased and trustworthy that can help cut through the data. Because the more, like, for every piece of data that says something one way, there's probably someone trying to find a piece of data that says it the other way, and it's about making sure you're getting that data from the reliable sources.

Jonathan Elliott

Birgit, you have to make sure that a lot of what gets reported about the EU in the German media is accurate and fair. Is this about giving proper context? Or are you having to rebut assertions that simply give an inaccurate impression? Which keeps you busiest - explaining or debunking?

Birgit Schmeitzner

It is about explaining. But of course, sometimes it's about tackling misinformation as well. So, we had, maybe I give an example from June, we had then a tabloid running a story on remuneration. So, they claimed that President von der Leyen has demanded a significant salary increase for herself, and for all the staff of the EU institutions. So, we have this story. And of course, we knew that this is false and misleading.

And then we had to provide very, very fast facts and figures. And the main argument was the exact description. So how is it actually calculated, what the officials are paid? And the answer was: look at Eurostat, because Eurostat is in charge. And we had the beauty of information that the calculation is based on two different factors, the development of the net purchasing of the income of national civil servants, and the development of the inflation in Brussels and Luxembourg.

And so, we did this fact check, we posted it online, and that was really successful, and the excitement on the internet quickly died down, subsided. That is maybe a good example where we saw a story in the media, in German media, really exploding sort of, and we have the chance using facts and figures to calm the whole situation down.

And of course, we do this every now and then - every day, maybe. Our goal is to, yeah, de-bunk or even better to pre-bunk, as I told you, it's always wonderful to have facts and figures to calm the situation down and to, yeah, to be a neutral player in that media sphere.

Jonathan Elliott

There's a saying isn't there that a rumour has travelled twice around the world before the truth has got its boots on? News outlets hate publicizing their mistakes. Do you find that even if you're right, all you can do is limit, not reverse the damage?

Birgit Schmeitzner

We, our voice is heard, obviously, and our community management, working 24/7 on our social media platforms, is doing a hell of a good job. So, we really see that the community on the internet is getting our information and it's using it. We do have a network with of course the national journalists as well here and I call them a lot and provide our information.

And in order to give them the possibility to get the whole picture, because it's so easy to listen to national politicians turning their finger or putting their finger on Brussels and saying: okay, those grey-suited technocrats are deciding something. And we are the good guys here in this game. And most of the time, it's not like that. We have the opportunity and the duty to give this information. And we have our strategies as well.

Jonathan Elliott

Fantastic! Now we've got the 2024 elections next year, Birgit, you've been getting ready for that a little bit. Just tell us about how you're preparing for the election fever that will be gripping everyone next year.

Birgit Schmeitzner

Yeah, there will be a fever. Yeah, I'm pretty sure. So, we've been planning that for months now. And of course, we have an eye on all those technical abbreviations and frequently used key words, buzzwords. But a lot of people they tend to do not know what those words mean. So, we explain it in an easy-to-understand format, easy language, which we can use in social media, to counter misinformation.

Because we know that we have to counter misinformation better and easier. So that's one point. We have our press trips to Brussels, including for influencers, because that is really very, very important for us - to include them in our strategy.

We have some seminars for journalists throughout Germany, to prepare them for the European elections, and this is a cooperation with the European Parliament and the Federal Press Office. Overall, I would say it's more or less about explaining and to spread the word: please participate! Please have your say, go voting!

Jonathan Elliott

John, what's your experience of the way that Eurostat has to respond to the statistical noise and fever that goes on during elections?

John Verrinder

We do see at times of elections, and not just European Parliamentary elections, but also at times of national elections in the Member States, that there's more demand for facts and figures, they're flying around. There's a lot more references, a lot more comparisons. How are we doing compared with another country or another region?

And that's an area where we get a lot more queries and user questions that we have to answer in short periods of time. We're obviously in touch through the journalist channel. And naturally, as Birgit has explained, the colleagues working in the Member States are in constant touch with us as well.

Jonathan Elliott

Fantastic. Okay. Well, sadly, we've run out of time on this very special Christmas edition. A huge thanks to our wonderful guests for their amazing insight and depth of knowledge, the variety of perspectives that we've been introduced to in this podcast, it's been fantastic. I'd like to say, as well, thank you very much to John Verrinder at Eurostat. John, thank you very much for joining us today.

John Verrinder

Thank you, Jonathan. And Merry Christmas to everybody.

Jonathan Elliott

Merry Christmas to you, too. And Merry Christmas to you, Birgit. Birgit Schmeitzner, the European Commission office in Berlin. Birgit, thank you so much for joining us today.

Birgit Schmeitzner

Thank you for having me. And Merry Christmas to all of you.

Jonathan Elliott

Merry Christmas to you, too. Thank you very much for today. Now, you may have been shouting at your device earlier because you knew the answers to the little quiz that we gave to Birgit and John. Have no fear, because this is your chance to win some prizes. And no! Among them will not be, I promise, the *Key figures* document.

Just go to Eurostat's Facebook, X, formerly known as Twitter, or Instagram page, and from the 21st of December, you will have the chance to test your knowledge on Europe's key figures. And as I say: walk away with an exciting prize, just in time for Christmas. And if you've enjoyed the show, don't forget to share with friends and colleagues where Stats in a Wrap can be found on Spotify, Apple, Google and all the usual places.

And if you'd like to know more about the subjects discussed today, just search 'Stats in a wrap Eurostat'. And of course, join us for the next episode, when the Wrap Café will be dishing up more flavoursome insights.

Join us then to find out more, but for now, goodbye!