

Standard Report on Methods and Quality (v1) for External Trade

This documentation applies to the reporting period:

2016/2017

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Section 1: Overview

Goods Exports and Imports statistics provide data on the movement of goods between countries. The statistics are a combination of Customs-based non-EU trade statistics and data from the Intrastat Survey of Irish traders involved in trade with other EU member states. The collection of trade data is the responsibility of VIMA¹ (a branch of Revenue). The CSO is responsible for processing and disseminating the data.

Goods Export and Import figures, produced by the CSO External Trade Section, are published monthly. The principal outputs are the value and volume figures for merchandise exports and imports. The monthly Goods Exports and Imports statistical release gives commodity and geographical analyses and more detailed tables for commodities are in the monthly Trade Statistics. A retrospective view is also provided in the chapter on External Trade in the CSO's annual Statistical Yearbook.

Goods Exports and Imports statistics are an important data source for many public and private sector analysts and decision-makers at national, European Union and international level.

Section 2: General Information

2.1 Statistical Category

Trade in Goods Exports and Imports data published by the CSO. The Intrastat system, covering intra-EU trade, has two components. Firstly, the Intrastat survey (conducted by the Revenue Commissioners), in which traders, above the Intrastat survey trade thresholds, make detailed monthly returns giving information on the quantity and value of all exports to or imports from EU countries. The Intrastat data are subject to revision on foot of late Intrastat and VAT returns and corrections made by traders. When the preliminary results for a month are published, the results for months -1, -4 and -8 are revised.

The second component of the Intrastat system is the regular VAT return, on which all traders are required to record the total value of goods imported from and exported to other EU countries. This information provides the basis for determining total EU trade for those traders below the Intrastat survey thresholds. It is also used to maintain the register of EU traders.

The statistics of trade with non-EU countries are compiled from the documents supplied by importers and exporters to the Customs authorities. The document is the Single Administrative Document (SAD) used for Customs clearance purposes.

2.2 Area of Activity

Goods Exports and Imports.

2.3 Organisational Unit Responsible, Persons to contact

Directorate: Macro-Economic Statistics

Division: External Trade and Environment

External Trade Section: Contact: Ciarán Counihan Tel +353-1-4984215; email: Ciaran.counihan@cso.ie;
Helpdesk: Tel: +353-498 4200; email: trade@cso.ie

2.4 Objectives and Purpose: History

Since the completion of the EU Single Market at the end of 1992, trade statistics with EU member states and trade statistics with non-EU countries are compiled from two separate sources.

¹ VIMA stands for VIES Intrastat and Mutual Assistance; VIES stands for VAT Information Exchange System

Customs declarations, the traditional source of almost all trade statistics, were no longer required for most movements of goods within the EU. A new EU-wide system for collecting intra-EU trade statistics, Intrastat, was introduced in January 1993. The Intrastat survey, which is conducted by the Revenue Commissioners (VIMA Office), is linked to VAT and applies to all EU member states.

2.5 Periodicity

Data are compiled and published on a monthly basis.

2.6 Clients and Users

Trade in Goods Exports and Imports data are a key component of EU and Euro area statistics compiled by EUROSTAT. In the CSO, Trade in Goods data are also a key component of the Balance of Payments (BOP) and National Accounts statistics. Trade in Goods data are also used by government departments and state agencies, academics, companies and media organisations.

2.7 Legal basis (as of January 2013)

The Intrastat survey, as conducted by VIMA, is carried out under Regulation (EC) No. 638/2004 of the European Parliament and of the Council² and Commission Regulation (EC) No. 96/2010³.

Trade figures with partner countries outside the EU are compiled under Council Regulation (EC) No 1172/95 of 22 May 1995 on the statistics relating to the trading of goods by the Community and its Member States with non-member countries. Implementation is subject to Commission Regulation (EC) No.1917 of 2000.

Section 3: Statistical Concepts, Methods

3.1 Subject of the Statistics

External Trade statistics are concerned with the exports and imports of goods to and from the State. Merchandise is measured in quantity and value terms. Exports are published on the FOB (free on board) basis to the point of exit from the State. Imports are published on a CIF basis (inclusive of cost, insurance and freight to the point of entry in the State). Non-EU trade figures are published nationally using the general trade system but sent to EUROSTAT using the special trade system. No distinction is drawn between the general trade system and the special trade system for intra-EU trade.

General Trade and Special Trade are broadly two approaches, closely linked with customs procedures, used for the measurement of international trade in goods. The general trade system is the wider concept and it includes all goods entering or leaving the economic territory of a country, with the exception of simple transit trade. In particular, all goods which are received into customs warehouses are recorded as imports at that stage whether or not they subsequently go into free circulation in the member state of receipt. Similarly, outgoing goods from customs warehouses are included in the general trade aggregates at the time they leave the member state.

The special trade system, on the other hand, is a narrower concept. Goods from a foreign country which are received into customs warehouses are not recorded in the special trade aggregates unless they subsequently go into free circulation in the country of receipt (or are placed under the customs procedures for inward processing or

² Official Journal No L102, 07.04.2004, p.1.

³ Official Journal No L43, 5.2.2012. p.1.

processing under customs control). Similarly, outgoing goods from customs warehouses are not recorded as exports.

The differences between the two approaches are in particular a time lag when the movements are recorded, but it may be more than that. For example, goods from country A, placed in a customs warehouse of country B and re-exported from there to country C will appear in general trade statistics for country B (if such a system is applied) but never in special trade statistics for that country.

3.2 Units of Observation/Collection Units/Units of Presentation

The units of observation refer to the exports and imports of individual traders detailed by product (commodity CN) description, geographic origin/destination and by value and quantity. The units of collection are the traders involved in exporting or importing goods to and from the State. The usual units of value and quantity are tonnes and euro. Where tonnes are not ideal, quantity may also or instead, be collected under a more appropriate unit – such as kilogram's or hecto-litres.

3.3 Data Sources

Trade with EU countries is based on the two components of the Intrastat system.

- i. The Intrastat survey itself conducted by VIMA. From January 2016, traders whose exports to EU countries in the previous twelve months exceeded €635,000 must make a detailed export return each month while traders whose imports from EU countries in the previous twelve months exceeded €500,000 must make a detailed import return each month. These returns give information on the quantity and value of all imports or exports with EU countries. Around 49,000 traders are involved in intra-EU trade, of which about 2,200 are required to make Intrastat export returns and 5,200 Intrastat import returns. The response rate in terms of number of traders is about 66%, covering about 90% of the total value of intra-EU trade.
- ii. The regular VAT return to the Revenue Commissioners, on which all traders are required to record the total value of goods imported from and exported to other EU member states. The information provided on the VAT returns forms the basis for:
 - determining total EU trade for those traders below the Intrastat thresholds;
 - estimating trade for non-respondents above the thresholds;
 - maintaining the VIMA trader register of EU traders; and
 - identifying those exceeding the thresholds required to make the detailed Intrastat return.

Traders not registered for VAT and private individuals who move goods within the EU have no obligations under the Intrastat system, and their intra EU trade is, therefore, not included in the statistics

Trade in goods with non-EU countries are compiled from the documents supplied by importers and exporters (or their agents) to the Customs authorities. The relevant document is the Single Administrative Document (SAD) used for Customs clearance purposes. The information on the document is captured by the Customs AEP (Automated Entry Processing) system, either by entering it at the Customs Stations or by electronic transfer direct from the trader. The AEP records, with the statistical fields, are transferred to VIMA and then to CSO for processing who are responsible for dissemination of the data.

Non-EU trade in goods that are imported or exported by parcel post, and which are not the subject of customs entries, are also estimated each month using data collected by the Revenue Commissioners at postal depots around the country and private courier companies.

Given the nature of certain commodities, for examples ships, trade for these goods are captured by movements on (imports/arrivals) and off (exports/dispatches) the National register, i.e. the Register of Shipping.

3.4 Reporting Unit/Respondents

Traders, importers and/or exporters, of goods.

3.5 Type of Survey/Process

See Section 3.3 above.

The compilation of trade statistics is based on Intrastat survey data provided by VIMA; Customs data for non-EU trade provided by VIMA; parcel post data for Non-EU countries collected by the Revenue Commissioners and administrative data from national shipping registers.

3.6 Characteristics of the Sample/Process

3.6.1 Population and Sampling Frame

See Section 3.3 above.

The survey population for Intrastat consists of VAT registered traders involved in trade with other EU countries. The sampling frame consists of traders registered for VAT and who are above either the import or export value threshold. Non-EU trade is based on administrative data rather than survey data.

3.7 Survey Technique/Data Transfer

All Intrastat data is collected by VIMA via the Revenue On Line Service (ROS). This data is then transferred by secure electronic means to the External Trade section in the CSO for processing and dissemination. The Non-EU data is collected via the Customs AEP system and then securely transferred by VIMA to the CSO.

3.8 Questionnaire (including explanations)

Details of the information collected by ROS for Intrastat are available in the Traders Manual on the Office of the Revenue Commissioners website ((<http://www.revenue.ie/en/customs/businesses/vies-intrastat.html>)). Similarly for the non-EU data, AEP trader guidelines for exporters and importers are also available on Revenue's website.

3.9 Participation in the Survey

It is compulsory for traders to complete a SAD for Non-EU trade. For intra-EU trade, completion for VIMA of the Intrastat survey is compulsory for transactions above the thresholds set out in section 3.3 above.

3.10 Characteristics of the Survey/Process and its Results

Data are collected by VIMA from SAD's (for Non-EU trade) and the Intrastat survey (for Intra-EU trade). VIMA sends the data securely to the CSO who are responsible for the main processing and dissemination of results. The CSO processing includes not only checking data but also the estimates for non-response and below threshold trade are generated. The data is then aggregated and disseminated. VIMA contact the traders directly should there be any queries on their data. There are two monthly publications on Trade in Goods - Goods Exports and Imports Release and the more detailed monthly Trade Statistics Publication. The CSO is also responsible for disseminating the required data to Eurostat on a monthly basis. Trade section also handles all queries from the public or stakeholders.

Trade data is based on statistical value as opposed to invoice value. The principle that applies in the case of Arrivals is that any transport /insurance etc. costs attributable to that part of the journey of the goods which takes place on the statistical territory of the State must be excluded for statistical value purposes. In the case of Dispatches it is any transport/insurance etc. costs attributable to the part of the journey of the goods, which takes place on the statistical territory of the State, which must be included for statistical value purposes. In delivery terms, the statistical value is the invoice value adjusted as necessary to a CIF (Cost Insurance Freight) basis at point of entry to the State, in the case of Arrivals, and to a FOB (Free on Board) basis at point of exit from the State in the case of Dispatches. Statistical Value is only required of traders with annual EU trade of Arrivals over €5 million and/or Dispatches over €34 million. The CSO use the invoice value to estimate statistical value for the remaining traders.

3.11 Classifications used

Four major classifications are used in the compilation of trade data:

- (A) Trade data are classified by traders according to the 8-digit Combined Nomenclature (CN) classification. This nomenclature is managed and updated annually by EUROSTAT in co-operation with EU member states. The CN is aligned with the 6-digit Harmonised Commodity Description and Coding System (HS) which is used globally for applying customs tariffs and compiling external trade statistics. The CN contains about 9,400 8-digit subheadings, the first 6 digits of which correspond to the HS code.
- (B) Trade Data are coded and published by the CSO at the five digit level of the United Nations' Standard Trade Classification Revision 4 (SITC classification). The SITC has been developed by the United Nations for the advancement of the international comparability of external trade statistics. SITC Rev 4 contains about 2,970 basic headings (5 digits), which are combined into 261 groups (3 digit), 67 Divisions (2-digit) and 10 Sections (1 digit).
- (C) Countries are also classified by traders using EUROSTAT's country nomenclature (Geonomenclature) as set out annually in the Official Journal of the European Union. From January 1999, this follows the United Nation's coding system, where each country is identified by a two letter code.
- (D) Delivery terms are also recorded by traders using a classification with three digit alphabetical code. This information is only required of traders with annual EU trade of arrivals over €5 million and/or dispatches over €34 million. There are 11 three digit delivery term codes. The purpose of these "Incoterms" terms is to provide a set of international rules for the interpretation of the chief terms used in foreign trade contracts as defined and published by the International Chamber of Commerce. They aim at defining the liability of parties as clearly and precisely as possible. Further information is available from the ICC website: <http://www.iccwbo.org/> and also in the Traders manual on www.revenue.ie.

Section 4: Production of the Statistics, Data Processing, Quality Assurance

4.1 Data Capture

All Intrastat data is collected by VIMA via the Revenue On Line Service (ROS). This data is then transferred by secure electronic means to the External Trade section in the CSO for processing and dissemination. The Non-EU data is collected via the Customs AEP system and then securely transferred by VIMA to the CSO. Four months of data are sent to the CSO on a monthly basis – the preliminary month which are published along with data revised months t-1, t-4 and final t-8 months.

The compilation process in the Trade section involves a three step process which is applied to each of the four monthly Intrastat data files.

- Step 1 generates query files which are edited and forwarded to VIMA for follow-up with the traders.
- Step 2 generates estimates and identifies types of estimates.

- Step 3 incorporates revisions to the data.

Following the processing, data are transferred to EUROSTAT, published in the monthly Statistical Release and Trade Statistics Publication and made available on the CSO's Databank. Trade section also has a Helpdesk for any ad-hoc queries.

4.2 Coding

See Section 3.11 above.

Trade data is pre-coded in ROS using the 8-digit Combined Nomenclature (CN) classification and EUROSTAT's country nomenclature referred to in Section 3.11 above. The CSO then codes and publishes the trade figures using the United Nation's Standard Trade Classification Revision 4 (SITC Rev 4).

4.3 Data Editing

All data received are subject to credibility/validation checks by VIMA and then by the CSO using SAS and Excel. The editing method applied examines the data for anomalies by checking the consistency of the figures against previous and other returns at micro and macro level. Companies are contacted by VIMA if necessary to confirm the accuracy of their figures.

4.4 Imputation (for Non-Response or Incomplete Data Sets)

In the case of Intra-EU traders below the Intrastat thresholds, the value of exports and imports on the company's VAT3 return for the period in question is used. Failing that (where no such VAT3 return exists), a forecast is done based on the historical data held for the company. Estimates for traders below the thresholds are assigned by partner country (by using the country profile of returns from traders above the thresholds). The overall figures are not broken down by commodity.

Intra-EU trade figures above a threshold are collected by means of the Intrastat survey managed by VIMA. In the case of a non-response in respect of a company where the company has a history of returns, that series is used to forecast a value for its missing arrivals/dispatches at total level. (No account is taken of product or geographic breakdown).

Extra-EU trade figures are based on the completion of SAD's by traders. No imputation is needed because the system is a census of traders rather than a sample survey. The figures are collected by the Customs AEP system and forwarded to VIMA and then to the CSO. Non-EU trade in goods by parcel post, not the subject of customs entries, is also estimated each month, based on information provided by private courier companies and Revenue Office (Customs) staff located in postal depots around the country.

4.5 Grossing and Weighting

No grossing is necessary for the compilation of extra-EU trade data because all traders are covered by the SADs collected by the Customs.

4.6 Computation of Outputs, Estimation Methods Used

See 4.4 and 4.5 above

Once the estimates are generated for non-response and below threshold data, the aggregate outputs are aggregated, computed and published by the CSO.

See 3.10 in relation to the use and calculation of Statistical value.

In May 2015, significant revisions were incorporated into International Trade in Goods statistics back to 2000. The most significant revision was due to recording trade in aircraft (commodity group SITC 79 - *Other transport equipment, including aircraft*) on a "transfer of economic ownership" basis. There are offsetting effects as both imports and exports of aircraft increase, but generally, the new methodology has a greater effect on aircraft imports. *The technical note (<http://www.cso.ie/en/surveysandmethodology/externaltrade/>) gives more detail on the revised trade in aircraft methodology and explains the impact the revisions have on Trade in Goods, National Accounts and Balance of Payments.*

4.7 Other Quality Assurance Techniques Used

The CSO and VIMA maintain close contact and co-operation with each other in order to ensure data quality is acceptable.

Section 5: Quality

5.1 Relevance

External trade data are a key component of EU and Euro area trade statistics compiled by EUROSTAT. At a national level it is one of the key monthly economic indicators. In the CSO, Balance of Payments (BOP) and National Accounts require trade data. Trade data is also used by government departments and state agencies, academics, companies and media organisations.

The trade help desk provides a special returns service and answers ad hoc queries from customers as they arise.

5.2 Accuracy and Reliability

5.2.1. Sampling Effect and Representatively

VIMA is responsible for maintaining the register of traders. VIMA receives a file every two months from the Revenue Commissioners which contains a list of all VAT registered companies and uses this list to update its own register.

5.2.2. Non-Sampling Effects

5.2.2.1 Quality of the Data Sources used (other than survey register)

Our main data source is the VIMA office which provides information on the Single Administrative Documents for extra-EU and on Intrastat returns for intra-EU trade. Enterprises are legally obliged to complete the Single Administrative Documents for extra-EU trade and the Intrastat survey the traders intra-EU trade transactions exceed the Intrastat thresholds. The majority if not all of the Intrastat transactions are captured on the Revenue on Line Service (ROS). This system will highlight invalid codes when being inputted or uploaded by the traders. All other data processing is done by the CSO upon receipt of the data from VIMA. The Register of Shipping is used to capture trade in shipping vessels. VIMA also have a trader education section who educate traders in completing the Intrastat returns. Therefore, any recurring error made by a trader can be rectified through contact with this section.

5.2.2.2 Register Coverage

See Section 5.2.1 above. VIMA use the Register of all VAT registered traders to compile a Register of traders liable for Intrastat Trade. Traders are liable to complete the monthly Intrastat return when their trade exceeds the Intrastat Export and Import thresholds.

5.2.2.3 Non-response (Unit and Item)

The statistics for trade with non-EU countries are based on the Single Administrative Document used for Customs clearance purposes by all companies engaged in extra-EU trade. Non response is not an issue.

The statistics for trade with intra-EU countries are based on the Intrastat survey form filled in by about 3,500 importers and about 2,100 exporters. Data problems may arise if companies do not send in their INTRASTAT survey responses on time or do not respond at all to the Intrastat survey. In these cases estimates are generated and these estimates may differ from the true value of transactions

The CSO generates estimates for firms below the Intrastat threshold and for non-respondents. VIMA has a team specifically dealing with large companies in order to improve the response rate and accuracy of returns, while persistent offenders who do not submit returns to VIMA may be prosecuted.

5.2.2.4 Measurement Errors

Information on sample errors or confidence intervals.

Where data errors are suspected VIMA queries the traders involved and asks them to check the data supplied. VIMA passes on trade data to the External Trade Division of the CSO who may query VIMA if anomalies are suspected.

5.2.2.5 Processing Errors

Data capture, coding and editing are all potential sources of error.

CSO checks data for coding errors and if returns are inconsistent with previous or expected figures. The CSO may send VIMA queries about the accuracy of such data. VIMA will contact the trader and if required, traders send back revised data to VIMA who in turn provide the CSO with revised data.

5.2.2.6 Model-related Effects

Model-related effects may be associated with two processes: Imputation and seasonal adjustment. Imputation for non-respondents above the threshold engaged in intra-EU trade is based on the values of previous returns, which may cause some degree of inaccuracy in the figures.

Monthly imports, exports, trade surplus, and the volume series for imports and exports are seasonally adjusted using the US Bureau of the Census X-11 Variant of the Census Method 11 Seasonal Adjustment Program. The pattern of trade may be affected by irregular movements. The seasonal adjustment process does not remove the irregularities, and so isolated extreme values should not be given too much weight.

The series are recalculated at the end of each year using up-to-date seasonal patterns available at the time.

5.3 Timeliness and Punctuality

5.3.1 Provisional Results

According to the Community legislation, EUROSTAT is provided with:

- extra and intra-EU aggregated statistics within t+40 days of the reference month,
- extra-EU detailed statistics within t+40 days of the reference month,
- intra-EU detailed statistics within t+70 days of the reference month.

Preliminary data in the Trade Statistics Release is published within t+1 month of the reference month, while the Trade Statistics Publication, the more detailed breakdown of data, is published within t+2 months of the reference month.

5.3.2 Final Results

The final version of a year's trade figures is available and is sent to EUROSTAT by the end of October of the following year. The final revised figures are also published nationally 8 months after the publication of the preliminary monthly trade figures. Final figures incorporate late returns and revised data.

5.4 Coherence

The data published in the monthly Statistical Release and the Trade Statistics Publication are checked for coherence. The Consistency Unit in the CSO seeks to ensure the consistency and reliability of the figures supplied by large companies to different divisions of the CSO. The CSO also examines the coherence of Irish trade figures with those "mirror statistics" published by other National Statistical Institutes. All short term figures are subject to revision following the discovery of new or corrected figures. Such revisions are usually minor in nature.

There are a number of reasons why the external trade figures may vary over time, differ from those used by other divisions of the CSO and disagree with mirror statistics compiled by other National Statistics institutes:

- i. Differences in concept (e.g. the valuation of goods as they change ownership in Balance of Payments (BOP) compared with goods that physically cross the border in External Trade);
- ii. Revisions to the data;
- iii. Differences in the classification of the country of origin/destination versus country of consignment used in (BOP);
- iv. The fact that the country of origin or destination may not be known by the trader;
- v. Differences in the time of recording
- vi. Differences in coverage.

5.5 Comparability

See Section 5.4 above.

Historical trade data is available on microfiche from 1979 and electronically on the CSO database since 1992. A fundamental change in the data collection system occurred in 1993 with the completion of the EU single market. Since 1993, data has been collected using the Intrastat survey for intra-EU transactions and Customs declarations for non-EU transactions.

5.6 Accessibility and Clarity

5.6.1 Assistance to Users, Special Analyses

Queries from users are dealt with by the Trade Help Desk usually within one day. Special Return analyses and commodity reports are issued on a periodic basis to clients or on request. Special analyses and reports are also prepared in response to parliamentary questions.

5.6.2 Revisions

Each month of data is received four times as described in section 4.1. The data are subject to revision on the incorporation of late Intrastat and VAT returns and corrections made by traders to Intrastat returns already submitted. Final trade figures are published nationally eight months after the publication of each month's preliminary figures. However, further revisions are possible in exceptional cases and asymmetries are the subject of ongoing examination.

5.6.3 Publications

5.6.3.1 Releases, Regular Publications

The Goods Exports and Imports Release is a monthly statistical release giving preliminary figures for the month. It is published within one month after the reference month.

The Trade Statistics Report is the publication where detailed trade figures for the publication month are published within two months after the reference month.

5.6.3.2 Statistical Reports

The chapter on External Trade in the Statistical Yearbook of Ireland, published on the CSO website, analyses changes in trade flows.

5.6.3.3 Internet The monthly Trade publication is available on the CSO website at:

<http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/externaltrade/>

Historical data are available on the CSO website at:

<http://www.cso.ie/en/statistics/externaltrade/>

5.6.4 Confidentiality

Trade in Goods Exports and Imports operates a system of passive confidentiality. Confidentiality applies only where a trader requests that its data be treated as confidential and where it would be possible to identify that trader if full data was disclosed. The value of such confidential trade is included in the overall total value of imports or exports. However, the value, quantity or country of transaction maybe concealed at the detailed level.

6 Additional documentation and publications

Other relevant websites include the following:

EUROSTAT: <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/>

And

http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/international_trade/data/database

The entry for trade statistics under STATCENTRAL (the portal to Ireland's official statistics) is

<http://www.statcentral.ie/>