

Standard Report
on
Methods and Quality (v1)

for
External Trade

This documentation applies to the reporting period:

2008

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Section 1: Overview

External trade figures, produced by the CSO External Trade Section, are published monthly. The principal outputs are the value and volume figures for merchandise imports and exports. Summary information is shown in the External Trade Statistical Release and more figures in the Trade Statistics publication (also known as the “Redbook”). A retrospective view is provided in the chapter on External Trade in the CSO’s Statistical Yearbook, which is published annually.

The underlying data in these publications are based on administrative and survey data which are collected by the Revenue Commissioners, VIMA Office. (VIMA stands for VIES INTRASTAT and Mutual Assistance: while VIES stands for VAT Information Exchange System).

Trade data are also collected from enterprises operating in the Shannon Free Zone and parcel post.

External trade 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 data is published by the CSO based on administrative and survey data collected by VIMA, survey data collected from enterprises in the Shannon Free Zone and administrative data collected from parcel post transactions, the Irish Register of Civil Aircraft and the Register of Shipping.

2.2 Area of Activity

External Trade in Goods

2.3 Organisational Unit Responsible, Persons to Contact

Directorate: Macro-Economic Statistics

Division: External Trade & Environment

External Trade Section: Contact Norita Murphy: Tel +353-1-4984295; Email norita.murphy@csso.ie
Helpdesk: Tel +353-4984200; Email: trade@csso.ie

2.4 Objectives and Purpose: History

Customs declarations were the traditional source of almost all trade statistics before the completion of the Single European Market in 1992. This is still the case for trade with non-EU countries. Trade statistics with non-EU countries are compiled from documents provided by importers and exporters to the Customs authorities. The document used is the Single Administrative Document (SAD). The VIMA office in Dundalk is the branch of the Revenue Commissioners which edits and validates the data supplied. The VIMA Office passes the edited data to the External Trade Statistics Section of the CSO.

Customs declarations are no longer required for most movements of goods within the EU. A new EU-wide survey 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. These data are supplied to the CSO.

The data from VIMA are then aggregated, checked and published by the CSO in the Statistical Release and Trade Statistics publications.

Historical trade data is available on microfiche from 1948 and electronically on the CSO website since 1990.

2.5 Periodicity

Data are compiled and published on a monthly basis.

2.6 Clients and Users

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

2.7 Legal basis (As of January 2008)*

The INTRASTAT survey, as conducted by VIMA, is carried out under Regulation (EC) **No. 638/2004** of the European Parliament and of the Council. Implementation is subject to Commission Regulation (EC) **No. 1982/2004**

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 imports and exports of goods to and from the State. Merchandise is measured in quantity and value terms. Imports are published on a CIF basis (inclusive of cost, insurance and freight to the point of entry in the state). Exports are published on the FOB (free on board) basis to the point of exit from 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.

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 description, geographic origin/destination and by value and quantity. The units of collection are the traders involved in importing or exporting 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 kilogrammes or hecto-litres.

* Please note that new EU legislation governing the compilation of trade statistics was introduced in 2009.

** (see endnote below for an explanation)

3.3 Data Sources*

The statistics of trade 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 feeding it in at the Customs Stations or by electronic transfer direct from the trader. The AEP records, with the statistical fields, are transferred to VIMA for processing and supply to both the CSO and EUROSTAT.

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

- The INTRASTAT survey itself conducted by VIMA, in which the larger traders make detailed monthly returns giving information on the quantity and value of all imports or exports with EU countries. This survey was carried out under Regulation (EC) No. 638/2004 of the European Parliament and of the Council and Commission Regulation (EC) No. 1982/2004. Traders whose imports from EU countries in the previous year exceeded €191,000 must make a detailed import return each month; traders whose exports to EU countries in the previous year exceeded €635,000 must make a detailed export return each month. There were about 37,650 traders involved in intra-EU trade, of which about 7,700 were required to make import returns and 1,900 export returns.
- 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, for estimating trade for non-respondents above the thresholds, for maintaining the VIMA trader register of EU traders, and for 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. The estimate of imports incorporates a compensating upward adjustment equivalent to about 1.75% of total imports, which is included in "Unclassified estimates". The purpose of this figure is to compensate for the non-collection of imports by traders who are not-registered for VAT.

The Imports and Exports of traders in the Shannon Free Zone are not subject to the SAD or INTRASTAT regime and trade statistics are collected from them by direct statistical enquiry, conducted by the Central Statistics Office.

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...

These data sources are supplemented by monitoring reports of specific movements of exceptional large items as well as changes to the Irish Register of Civil Aircraft and the Register of Shipping.

3.4 Reporting Unit/Respondents

Irish traders (importers and/or exporters) of goods.

*Please note that the reference period for this (and all other sections of this document) is 2008.

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; administrative data for non-EU trade provided by VIMA; parcel post data for Non-EU countries collected by the Revenue Commissioners; administrative data from national aircraft and shipping registers; and survey data concerning enterprises in the Shannon Free Zone.

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 foreign trade. 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

Trade data is received from VIMA and the Shannon Free Zone by electronic means

3.8 Questionnaire (including explanations)

In addition to the administrative data sent to VIMA for extra-EU trade, INTRASTAT survey data is collected by that Office. These figures are then sent by VIMA to the CSO which also receives survey data from enterprises in the Shannon Free Zone. A copy of the INTRASTAT and VAT3 Questionnaires are available in the VIES and INTRASTAT Traders Manual published by the Office of the Revenue Commissioners.

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 and VAT return is compulsory for transactions above a certain threshold.

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). Information is also collected electronically via email by the CSO on enterprises in the Shannon Free Zone, trade via parcel post and air and shipping registers. VIMA checks the data and if necessary contacts companies to confirm their figures. VIMA sends the data to the CSO which checks the figures, generates estimates for non-response and below threshold trade, aggregates the data and publishes them in the CSO Trade Release and Trade Statistics book.

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 cooperation 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 9,700 8-digit subheadings, the first 6 digits of which correspond to the HS code.
- (B) Delivery terms are also recorded by traders using a classification with three digit alphabetical code.
- (C) 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).
- (D) 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.

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

4.1 Data Capture

VIMA electronically forwards the trade data files for Preliminary (t+2 months), Publishing (t+3 months), Revised (t+6 months) and Final (t+9) months to the CSO where it is prepared for publication. Data on enterprises in the Shannon Free Zone, parcel post and aircraft and shipping registers are also received electronically by email.

The compilation process involves a three step process which is applied to each of the INTRASTAT data files.

- Step 1 generates query files which are edited and forwarded to VIMA.
- Step 2 generates estimates and identifies types of estimates
- Step 3 incorporates revisions to the data.

Non EU Step 3 is run for the Preliminary (t+2 months), Revised (t+63 months) and Final (t+9 months) data. After processing the figures are transferred to EUROSTAT, put up on the CSO's Databank and published nationally in the Statistical Release and Trade Statistics book.

4.2 Coding

See Section 3.11 Above

Trade data is pre-coded by VIMA using the 8-digit Combined Nomenclature (CN) classification and EUROSTAT's country nomenclature referred to in Section 3.1 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).

A similar imputation process is done for non-respondents in the Shannon Free Zone survey.

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 Service and forwarded to VIMA and then 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 Service.

SAS is the IT tool used for grossing of intra-EU data, where necessary.

The estimate of imports incorporates an upward adjustment equivalent to about 1.75% of total imports, which is included in "Unclassified estimates". This special adjustment arises from the difficulty of comprehensively covering all EU imports under the INTRASTAT survey system. The adjustment is designed to capture traders who are not registered for VAT and private individuals who move goods within the EU and have no obligations under the INTRASTAT system. Their intra EU trade is not otherwise included in the statistics

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 using SAS and TPL

4.7 Other Quality Assurance Techniques Used

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

Section 5: Quality

5.1 Relevance

The INTRASTAT survey is carried out under Regulation (EC) No. 638/2004 of the European Parliament and of the Council. Implementation is subject to Commission Regulation (EC) No. 1982/2004

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.

External trade data are a key component of EU and Euro area trade statistics compiled by EUROSTAT. 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 but there is no formal CSO User Liaison Group for external trade.

5.2 Accuracy and Reliability

5.2.1. Sampling Effect & representivity

We do not provide information on sample errors or confidence intervals.

VIMA attempts to keep the register of companies representative and up to date. VIMA receives a file every two months from the Revenue Commissioners based in Limerick which contains a list of all VAT registered companies and uses this list to update its own register.

Our sample is heavily reliant upon the large multinational companies especially for exports. The dominance of these companies in our trade statistics may mask the trade performance of indigenous Irish companies.

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 if intra-EU trade transactions exceed a certain threshold. All such data is edited extensively by VIMA. VIMA also use other registers to confirm data accuracy – e.g. the Irish Register for Civil Aircraft and the Register of Shipping. For 2008 an entry or deletion from the Aircraft or Shipping Registers defined an import or an export.

5.2.2.2 Register Coverage

See Section 5.2.1 above.

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 for these traders.

The statistics for trade with intra-EU countries are based on the INTRASTAT survey form filled in by about 7,700 importers and about 1,900 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 final response rate in December 2008 was 96%. The CSO generate estimates for firms below the INTRASTAT threshold and for non-respondents. A similar procedure is employed for non-respondents to the Shannon Free Zone survey.

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 cooperate with VIMA may be prosecuted.

5.2.2.4 Measurement Errors

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

5.2.2.5 Processing Errors

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

VIMA conducts checks on the data and contacts companies who are suspected of making erroneous returns. VIMA checks anomalous data if returns are inconsistent with previous or expected figures and compares the returns with invoice values as well. Companies then send back revised data to VIMA who in turn provide the CSO with clean data. The CSO may also send VIMA queries about the accuracy of such data. The CSO corrects or minimises the occurrence of errors by reviewing the data and comparing figures with expected and historical values of exports and imports. The data is also examined for coding errors.

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+6 weeks of the reference month,
- intra-EU detailed statistics within t+10 weeks of the reference month

Preliminary data in the Trade Statistics Release is published within t+2 months of the reference month, while the Trade Statistics Book, the more detailed breakdown of data, is published within t+4 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 seven months after the publication of the provisional 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 Book 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. Generally, with the exception of exports to Belgium, discrepancies in mirror statistics are not big. 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:

- (A) Differences in concept (e.g. the valuation of goods as they change ownership in BOP compared with goods that physically cross the border in External Trade)
- (B) Revisions to the data
- (C) Differences in the classification of the country of origin/destination versus country of consignment used in Balance of Payments(BOP)
- (D) The fact that the country of origin or destination may not be known by the trader
- (E) Differences in the time of recording and
- (F) Differences in coverage.

5.5 Comparability

See Section 5.4 above.

Historical trade data is available on microfiche from 1948 and electronically on the CSO database since 1990. Particular care should be taken in comparing post-1992 data with data from 1992 and earlier years at the commodity or country level. This is due to a fundamental change in the data collection system that occurred in 1993 with the completion of the EU single market. From 1993

on, data has been collected using the INTRASTAT survey for intra-EU transactions and Customs declarations for extra-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 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. Historical trade data is available on microfiche from 1948 and electronically on the CSO database since 1990.

5.6.2 Revisions

All figures are estimates. They are subject to revision on the incorporation of late INTRASTAT and VAT returns and corrections made by traders to INTRASTAT returns already submitted. Revised figures are published three months after the publication month. Most revisions are minor in nature. Final trade figures are published nationally seven months after the publication of each month's provisional 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 External Trade Release is a monthly statistical release giving preliminary figures for the publication month. It is published two months after the reference month. Provisional figures are published in the Statistical Release three months after the reference month.

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

5.6.3.2 Statistical Reports

The chapter on External Trade in the Statistical Yearbook of Ireland 2008, published in November 2009, analyses changes in trade flows over the period 1999 to 2008.

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

http://www.cso.ie/releasespublications/pr_extrade.htm

Historical data are available on the CSO website at:

<http://www.cso.ie/px/pxeirestat/database/eirestat/Trade/Trade.asp>

5.6.4 Confidentiality

The CSO 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

The following link refers to the Compilers Manual for the International Trade in Merchandise Statistics at the UN website.

United Nations Statistics Department

<http://unstats.un.org/UNSD/trade/imtssupplcompilersmanual.htm>

Other relevant websites include the following:

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

World Trade Organisation: http://www.wto.org/english/tratop_E/cusval_e/cusval_e.htm

Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development:

http://www.oecd.org/about/0,3347,en_2649_34241_1_1_1_1_37431,00.html

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

<http://www.statcentral.ie/viewStat.asp?id=18>

Note: General Trade and Special Trade There are broadly two approaches, closely linked with customs procedures, used for the measurement of international trade in goods. These are the general trade system and the special trade system. 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.

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

The differences between the two systems cause in particular a time lag when the movements are recorded, but it is 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.