

# Interview with Irena Križman<sup>1</sup>

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Ms. Irena Križman has been a member of the International Association for Official Statistics (IAOS) Executive Committee and served as the IAOS President between 2009 and 2011. She began her career and interest in official statistics in what was then Yugoslavia's Republic of Slovenia, and now is the independent country of Slovenia, in the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (SURS).<sup>2</sup> She has a B.Sc. in sociology from the University of Ljubljana's Faculty of Social Science (1975) and an M.S. in Management of Non-Profit Organizations also from the University of Ljubljana.

At SURS, Irena has held many different managerial positions from Head of department to Deputy Director General (1987–2003) and Director General SURS from 2003 to 2013. During the accession process of Slovenia to the European Union she was leading the preparation of the statistical legislation and programming tools and the development of social classification (occupations, education and social status) and other statistical infrastructure. Under her leadership, SURS has developed an excellent cooperation with other data producers including the National Central Bank and with important stakeholders such as academia, media, and policy makers.

As Director General of the SURS, Irena was in charge of designing, planning and implementing EU regulations and the Euro and OECD standards in the Slovene official statistics. Furthermore, Irena was directly involved in the preparation of the new version of the European Statistics Code of Practice (CoP) and the Quality Assurance Framework which set the standard for developing, producing and disseminating European statistics. Following the vision of a register-based statistical system under her leadership, Slovenia carried out the first completely register based census in 2011.

What is also of interest is the change in the political landscape that Slovenia has undergone and that Irena has experienced during her life at SURS. Initially, Slovenia was one of six Socialist Republics of former Yugoslavia. During the 1980s, Slovenia experienced a rise of cultural pluralism, what culminated in the Slovene Spring of 1987 and 1988. In Dec 1991, the Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia passed a new Constitution which became the first Constitution

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<sup>1</sup>The views and opinions expressed in the conversation are those of the interviewee and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of the Statistical Journal of the International Association for Official Statistics nor IOS Press.

<sup>2</sup>For more information regarding the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (SURS), please see: <http://www.stat.si/StatWeb/en/AboutUs/AboutStatOffice>.

of independent Slovenia.<sup>3</sup> On June 10, 1996 the European Association Agreement and Application for Full Membership was signed. On 7 August 2003 both parties signed the accession treaty of Slovenia and the EU. In 2004 Slovenia joined the EU, 2007 Euro Area and Schengen area, and 2010 OECD.<sup>4</sup> In 2008, during the Slovene Presidency of the Council of the European Union, SURS presided the Working Party on Statistics.

While the political, economic and social transition was happening, the government agencies that had already been in place needed to transform too. The process of transition was very fast and it requested a lot of effort from Slovene authorities and a good cooperation among partners in the country and with the other EU member states and EU institutions. Good quality and EU standardized statistics was a precondition for negotiations in other chapters of the EU legislation. With the help of Eurostat and the EU Member states, SURS and its partners in the national statistical system have done an excellent job. Thanks to that cooperation the institutional and professional capacity to fulfill the EU and national requirements have been successfully developed.

As you will hear in this interview there was a lot of future pre-planning/thinking that was happening within Slovenia, even before independence.

This interview was conducted via Skype with Irena Križman by Katherine Condon on April 20, 2018.

**INTERVIEWER: Thank you so much for allowing us to interview you. Let us start at the very beginning and go back to your childhood. What was it like growing up in your country?**

I was born in what was then called Yugoslavia, a socialist country but not under the Soviet influence. We had open borders and we could easily go across the border with Italy or Austria. I must say, looking back to those times, I don't have such a bad feeling – it wasn't as difficult as it might have seemed from the outside. Almost everyone had a job, but of course the level of living was much lower. Sometimes certain commodities were not available and we could go across the bor-

ders to buy it. However, because we all were experiencing this, no one felt excluded. On the other hand, there were almost no homeless people on the street. We had a good public-school system and health services for everyone. For instance, if one compares it with today, if the people living in the region where I was born – which is a less-developed region – want to study in Ljubljana, it is in most cases too expensive for them. In my childhood, it was more merit-driven, while today it is more money-driven. So, I don't know – I may be old enough to forget everything that was bad and just having nice memories. [Laughter]. Yes, it is in the nature of people to forget bad things.

I remember when I was at my office, I had to go to Czechoslovakia. It was the first time I had ever crossed the border to an Iron Curtain country. It looked horrible for me. I had never seen such things before. While we were under a dictatorship, history may be kinder to those times in the future. We shall see.<sup>5</sup>

**INTERVIEWER: Looking back to your childhoods, what was your education like before university? we often find that a particular event or person had an impact on our later years. Did a particular person or event shape you into the person you are today?**

I was born on a small farm in the mountains. The only income of the family was from the farm. It was in the poorest region of Slovenia and not many children completed more than primary or some of them three years secondary education. My mother had no opportunity to study, but she was always reading books. Even today, at the age of 94, she is still reading. She introduced me to the world of books.

I had 8 years of primary school and then went on to complete four years of secondary school (gymnasium), which prepares pupils for university entrance.

I was interested in math, physics, chemistry and all this stuff as a child. I thought I was good in that. I was asked to help other school mates, to explain for those who were having trouble understanding, even though I found it very easy. I remember that my math teacher, when I was named Director General I met her, told me that she had known that I would be in an important po-

<sup>3</sup>For more information about this transition period of Slovenia, please see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Slovenia#1980s:\\_Towards\\_independence](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Slovenia#1980s:_Towards_independence).

<sup>4</sup>More about Slovenia in the EU, please see: <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/guip/introAction.do?profile=cpro&theme=euroind&lang=en&country1=SI&country2=eu28>.

<sup>5</sup>For more information on the history of Yugoslavia, please see: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yugoslavia>. For more information on the history of Slovenia, see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Slovenia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Slovenia).

sition someday. She was very proud of my accomplishment.

There were two people that had an important impact on me and shaped me into who I am today. These two people were my teacher at the primary school and my mother. When I completed the first year of primary school at the age of 8, this teacher told my mother that if she (my mother) was not able to put me into further education, then he was going to organize that.

After the primary school, I went to another town to go to the secondary school. My family had no resources, so I had to live with another family – my mother knew the family. I had to look after a 2-year old boy in the morning, then I went to school in the afternoon and studied at night. In spite of that, I had good notes and I even helped my school mates.

This family's apartment, where I stayed, was quite small. There was one room used as a sleeping room for the husband, wife and child, and then there was a small room used also as a kitchen in which there was a very small couch, a small bed where I slept. As I look back now, it was quite difficult, but at the time it allowed me to go to school. In the third year of my schooling I got a small scholarship. With that it was a bit easier. My scholarship was used to pay a part of the kindergarten's costs for the boy so I had more free time to study. It is very hard for me to imagine my grand-daughter now to live in these circumstances.

After four years at the gymnasium, I went to Ljubljana University. Originally, I wanted to study English. I don't know how this came to me. I just had a feeling that I was going somewhere and that I would need to know languages.

Otherwise, it is interesting that much of my life is based on things that I have no influence over. For example, I had planned to go to university to study English language. However, when I came there, the lady at the office said that I was too late to apply. I had spent one month in Geneva for a UN program organized for young people in Slovenia. So, I lost that time and I was very unhappy. My boyfriend was also at university for social science, studying sociology. He said "Come with me, maybe they have a place for you." So, you can imagine this in the life of a person. I went with him and this lady looked at me, looked at my notes and said "Yes, you can stay with us!"

I found that sociology helped me and is still helping me today. Today, children are encouraged to study natural sciences, not so much social sciences. However, it is important to understand the context we are living in. So, I think that social science is very important too. In

my life, I was able to combine my early knowledge of social science with my later knowledge in statistics.

Then, when I was 20 years old, I became pregnant and got married. It was difficult and I was afraid to go home to tell my mother that I was pregnant. I did all the exams in the first study year and then I went home. I said to my mother – "That's it but I did my year." I promised her to finish my studies and I kept my promise.

I did go back to school and after 4-years of studies, with my baby, working at the university, helping my school friends, and they helping me. And with no computers like today – I had to write down everything by hand. My school friends would play with my daughter and I would be studying also during the night. I did all the exams in time. While I could have spent one more year at university to finish diploma, instead I went to find a job.

Again, it was luck that played an important role. When I was looking for a job, the employment office lady told me to go to the Statistical office. So, I went there. I remember that it was a very rainy day. Every corridor was full of papers. Initially, I thought I didn't want to work there, but I knew I needed money. So, I got the internship job there. First, I got the internship job for 6-months. After that the decision was made that I could stay permanently. They gave me the condition that I had to finish my diploma. I did it during my first working year at SURS. After diploma I got the job in the economic statistics department.

**INTERVIEWER: Your CV states that you have a B.Sc. in Sociology from University of Ljubljana in what is now Slovenia, and a M.S. in Management of Non-Profit Organizations, also from the University of Ljubljana. In between the two degrees you worked at the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (SURS). Focusing on the education part, how did that come about?**

The leadership in the Statistical office of Slovenia (SURS) has been always very keen to support education and training of its staff. Most of the staff went through intensive statistical courses, English language courses, ICT courses and other relevant studies already in the former Yugoslavia. This has been intensified during the accession to the European Union (EU), OECD, and Euro Area.

Formal education has also been a part of that. As the Deputy, at that time I felt a lack of managerial knowl-

edge and that was the motivation for me to study Management and receive my M.S. in Management of Non-Profit Organizations also from the University of Ljubljana. This was very useful especially when in 2003 I was appointed as the Director General (DG) of SURS.

During my study years there was a lot of work in SURS what I had to combine with my study and my family. Sometimes I was deadly tired but I managed to balance all three important parts of my life (family, job and study). I have three daughters: Sandra (46), Tina (40) and Urša (27). They all completed university studies (two are architects and one is a professor of English). I have also three beautiful grandchildren (Ana (18), Nejc (16) and Benjamin (9 months)). I am a very proud and happy grandma.

**INTERVIEWER: Remembering back to when you were completing your education, what did you hope to accomplish and what were your aspirations in your professional life?**

When I completed my B.Sc. (diploma), I was already working one year in SURS. When I came to SURS in 1974, I started working on cleaning the 1971 Census data. I knew something about it because I had worked as an interviewer during the 1971 Census. It was also my first experience with SURS and its statistical activities. I liked mathematics in secondary school and I liked statistics at the university. I also liked the challenges and opportunities offered to young people in the office. Thus, I stayed at SURS for the next almost 40 years.

**INTERVIEWER: You began your professional career at the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (SURS) and rose through the ranks to become Director General. What did you see as your greatest satisfaction? Is there any one project while you were at SURS that you feel you will be able to look back on and say that it was your favorite project? And could you give a little bit of background of the history of statistics in Slovenia – given its history until recently of not being its own country?**

The history of statistics goes back to 1754 when the first census of population on the territory of the present – day Slovenia was conducted. At that time Slovenia was a part of the Austrian – Hungarian Em-

pire. In former Yugoslavia, the Republic of Slovenia developed a modern statistical office with its own statistical program. This was in addition to the federal statistical program for Yugoslavia, but it gave Slovenia an opportunity to learn from the best practices in Nordic countries and Germany.

With agreement from the Federal statistical office in Belgrade, we could use the OECD's and some other international organizations and country projects to finance the statistical development for Slovenia. With the great vision and successful leadership of my predecessors, Mr. Franta Komel<sup>6</sup> and Mr. Tomaž Banovec<sup>7</sup> – former Director Generals of SURS, Statistics Slovenia – started with the development of registers and ID numbers in the seventies and started introducing the System of National Accounts (SNA)<sup>8</sup> in the eighties. Formally, the former Yugoslavia measured economic activities in the MPS (Material Product System). On the proposal of SURS, the Slovene government at that time adopted to publish both figures (MPS and SNA based). With the SNA we could easily compare the economic situation in Slovenia with Europe. It was not clear at that time where things would end up with Yugoslavia. But, Mr. Banovec's philosophy was that we have to prepare ourselves to use European and other international standards, whatever country we are living in.

SURS in cooperation with the Survey and Mapping Authority of Slovenia and Geodetic Institute has started developing the Geographical Information System already before the eighties. Today, Slovenia has one of the most modern GIS. SURS offers spatial statistics in several tools e.g. STAGE and others.<sup>9</sup> SURS was also experimenting with satellite data for land use statistics already in the nineties. All these activities helped Slovenia and SURS to easily adopt

<sup>6</sup>Mr. Franta Komel (1924–2015) served as Director General of SURS 1967 to 1981. Also see <http://www.stat.si/doc/pub/SURS-60-let-eng.pdf> for a short biography and some of the accomplishments during his tenure as Director General.

<sup>7</sup>Mr. Tomaž Banovec (1939) served as Director General of SURS 1981 to 2003. Also see <http://www.stat.si/doc/pub/SURS-60-let-eng.pdf> for a short biography and some of the accomplishments during his tenure as Director General.

<sup>8</sup>System of National Accounts (SNA) is the international agreed standard set of recommendations on how to compile measures of economic activity. Further, national accounts are one of the building blocks of macroeconomic statistics which forms the basis for economic analysis and policy formulation. For more information, see <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/nationalaccount/sna.asp>.

<sup>9</sup>For more information about the interactive maps and geodata, please see – <http://www.stat.si/StatWebArhiv/en/mainnavigation/interactive/maps-and-geodata>.

the rigorous EU and OECD statistical standards after Slovenia gained its independence in 1991. Today, SURS is a modern statistical service which is mostly based on secondary sources (i.e., administrative sources and big data). As it has been already mentioned above, in 2011 the first completely register based census was conducted. There was no field work needed and since then SURS has produced census data every three years.<sup>10</sup> With that Slovenia joined the Denmark, Finland, The Netherlands and Iceland which have already conducted such a census in the past and to those who did that the first time in 2011 (Austria, Belgium, Sweden and Norway). Slovenia did not only reduce the administrative burden but also saved 14 million euros which was the yearly SURS budget.

Turning to your question on a “favorite project” it is difficult to say that I had my favorite project. This is like with children. You might have more challenges with some of them compared to others, but you love them all. If I have to select some, let me just mention a few of them: the Law on National Statistics from the 1990s is still one of the most modern in EU. Slovene good practice was used when the EU Statistical Law was revised. I am proud of the organizational framework of cooperation and coordination with the stakeholders, especially data users, administrative data holders, media, academia etc. You can imagine that a statistical system which is so heavily based on secondary sources has to be well managed to retain and sustain itself in the long term. I was the DG when Slovenia had to adopt the most rigorous statistical standards (EU, Euro Area, OECD, IMF). As I mentioned before, I based my leadership on the visionary work of my predecessors and I had an opportunity to work with an excellent staff who made the necessary changes possible.

I would also like particularly to mention some achievements in SURS cooperation with academia. When I was appointed as DG in 2003 I intensified the cooperation with colleagues from Academia. Their contribution has been very important to the successful implementation of modern statistical standards in the Slovene national statistics. The statistical society, established 1977, has always been a bridge between different statistical communities at national level. Being aware of the importance of researchers as users of our data, SURS was one of the first NSOs who developed services to provide micro data for research and statis-

<sup>10</sup>For more information about the history of SURS, please see – <http://www.stat.si/doc/pub/SURS-60-let-eng.pdf> and <http://www.stat.si/dokument/5654/SURS-70-let-eng.pdf%20%20>.

#### ABOUT SURS:

The Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (SURS) is the main producer and coordinator of national statistics in Slovenia. In line with the National Statistics Act SURS is a professionally independent Government service; head of SURS is autonomous as regards professional and methodological issues. The mission of the Slovene statistical office is to provide to user statistical data on the status and trends in the economic, demographic and social fields, as well as in the field of environment and natural resources. These data must be of sufficient quality, timely, comparable in time and internationally, and presented clearly and understandably.

SURS is a member of the European Statistical System and in this role actively cooperates in working groups and committees of Eurostat, the Statistical Office of the European Union, and in technical and infrastructural projects coordinated by Eurostat. In addition, SURS is included in all procedures of preparing, coordinating and adopting European legislation governing statistics.

SURS also coordinates the implementation of statistical surveys between the institutions authorized for implementing national statistics in certain areas and is authorized for international cooperation in the field of statistics and for determining methodological and classification standards. One of its duties is also to take care of the confidentiality of collected data and strive for modern data dissemination adjusted to the needs of various user groups.

#### SOURCE:

<http://www.stat.si/StatWeb/en/AboutUs/AboutStatOffice>

tical purposes.<sup>11</sup> SURS was also among the founders of the master study program: Applied statistics.<sup>12</sup> It was introduced in 2002/2003. Official statistics is one of the modules. Today students can continue master study to receive a doctoral degree. In addition to that the cooperation with Academia also contained lectures of experts from Academia in the SURS’s internal training program as well as SURS’s experts lecture to students and teachers of statistics. Through co-operation with academia I met my dear friends: prof. Anuška

<sup>11</sup>For more information about the data for researchers, please see: <http://www.stat.si/StatWebArhiv/en/mainnavigation/data/for-researchers>.

<sup>12</sup>For more information about the master and doctoral programme, please see: <http://stat.uni-lj.si/en/node/16>.

Ferligoj, prof. Lea Bregar and prof. Andrej Blejec and many others who deserve credit for their contribution to the development of Slovene statistics.

Let me also mention one more project: Statistical Days in Radenci, Slovenia. Since my retirement I was in the core team who organized the yearly meeting of all stakeholders from the country and with also many important statistical leaders and experts from abroad. In addition to the professional part, the conference had a strong emphasis on networking. On its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2011, SURS published a book about the history of this event.<sup>13</sup> This event played an important role in the development of Slovene national statistics.

I always put a lot of energy in my work. Once in the CES I was told that I have an energy of generations.

I've always studied beyond the current assignment, even as a child. When the teacher said at the end of a class, "Next time we will study X, ..." I would go home do the homework assigned and then look into X so I would be prepared for the next class. Thus, when I came to class the next day and the teacher started talking to us, I knew the material already. This too is what I did in my work life. I used this method – learning in advance – in my work life too and I encouraged my colleagues at the office to look outside the boundaries of the task that was assigned to them. That is just me. If you give me a job I will start it with much energy – maybe putting too much energy into it. At the end of the project, I always enjoy the outcome, but sometimes in the middle of the project – it isn't so much fun. [Laughter]

In 2014 I was given the "Blejec Award" by National Statistical Society. This is the highest award for work in statistics in Slovenia.<sup>14</sup>

**INTERVIEWER: Quickly if you don't mind, and I know I am putting you on the spot, but I am interested in how it was to be at the Statistical Office during the time of such change in the political landscape – becoming an independent state – Republic of Slovenia.**

Slovenia was the most developed of the republics in Yugoslavia. As such it contributed the most to the

developing part of Yugoslavia. At that time, we had 8% of the population, but produced 20% of the total GDP (measuring in the MPS system). As goes for all of our institutions in Slovenia, we always tried to build republican institutions looking over the border to the West and the same was true for our Statistical Office.

My predecessors, who I mentioned above, greatly deserve to get all credit for their visionary work done during their mandates. Mr. Komel had a vision about the information system, which should be put in place in order to connect the government system with the statistical system, as being both a data provider and a data user. He looked at good solutions in other developed countries.

He brought two solutions to Slovenia. As a data provider, the first solution he brought were the data registers, such as in the Nordic countries. The Nordic countries, and now Slovenia, have a system of data registers and uniform identification numbers for each individual, business, real estate and territorial unit. This is something that is impossible in many other countries, but it is very good, especially for a small country, if you want to organize data in a way that you can manage it. For instance, today in Slovenia, we have completely e-Government. Which means, for example, if an individual applies for a social benefit then, at the moment when the person at the office is processing your application, the 35 databases are connected to be used in this process. The person who is authorized by law to look at the data is obliged by law to respect very strict data privacy rules. In all interaction of people with the public authorities they do not need to present all the data already stored in the official data bases themselves but official authorities have to collect them by sharing the data among each other.

Mr. Komel had already introduced the project of improving and modernizing the statistical information system. It had the emphasis on statistical registers, publishing of results, co-operation with data providers and the social information system in seventies. When the national statistical office brought the philosophy of registers and records to Slovenia in 1971 other ministries at that time were not interested to work on it. They said, "oh you can have it, if you want." Implementation of registers (population, territorial units, businesses, real estate) was continued under Mr. Banovec's leadership. So, all these registers are today the basic administrative and statistical infrastructure. Censuses were used to establish the registers. These were administrative registers and SURS had conducted them as a non-statistical activity. Extensive

<sup>13</sup>For more information about the Statistical Days, please see: [http://www.stat.si/doc/pub/Twenty\\_Statistical\\_Days.pdf](http://www.stat.si/doc/pub/Twenty_Statistical_Days.pdf).

<sup>14</sup>For more information, please see: [https://www.stat-d.si/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=265&Itemid=168&lang=en](https://www.stat-d.si/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=265&Itemid=168&lang=en).

co-operation with administrative authorities has been developing gradually since then and it is today well developed. With the accession to the EU, administrative registers were put to be held by the administrative units. With that registers' quality has been improved due to their daily use in administration. In 2010 the work on the Register of Real Estate (REN) was completed by Surveying and Mapping Authority in close cooperation with SURS. REN was the last missing pin to be able to conduct the register-based census in 2011.

With the National Statistics Act<sup>15</sup> (2005, 2001), SURS was authorized to have influence on the standards (classifications and definitions) used in these administrative registers and records. SURS also suggested the laws on uniform identification numbers. Most of the discussion was always going on the PIN numbers.<sup>16</sup> SURS was authorized by the National Statistics Act<sup>17</sup> to have access to administrative records and registers to use it for statistical purposes. This all is necessary if you want to have real data integration today.

Using secondary sources, among others, demands a lot of methodological work in SURS, a proper legislative framework, organizational and technical protocols on data transfer between SURS and data providers, rules about the data linkage, secure technical and physical infrastructure, staff's awareness of the importance of the data protection, a good quality administrative environment and last but not least supportive partners among the administrative data holders. SURS done a lot on these fields during my tenure as DG of SURS.

<sup>15</sup>More information please see: <http://www.stat.si/dokument/5186/NationalStatisticsAct.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup>In Republic of Slovenia, individuals have got three personal identification numbers, which define an individual completely – that is, (1) the personal identification number, (2) tax number and (3) the health insurance number. For more information, see <https://www.dzlp.mk/node/2287>.

<sup>17</sup>Article 32 of the National Statistics Act, <http://www.stat.si/dokument/5186/NationalStatisticsAct.pdf>, defines the right to data access: "For the purpose of rational implementation of the activities of the national statistics, the Office and other authorized producers make use of identifiable individual data from various official and other administrative data collections of the public and private sectors (records, registers, databases, etc.) which are kept on the basis of law or written consent of the individual. In compliance with law, register holders must, free of charge, submit to the Office and to authorized producers all the requested information. The conditions of collecting, using, and linking personal data from different personal data collections shall be established by the act governing the protection of personal data, or respectively, the protection of the individual's information privacy." linking personal data from different personal data collections shall be established by the act governing the protection of personal data, or respectively, the protection of the individual's information privacy."

In order to improve the statistical dissemination SURS started to cooperate with Statistics Nordrhein – Westfalen in 1970. Already at that time Germany had a modern data bank. Our staff went to Germany and studied their system. They brought it back to Slovenia and adjusted it to our needs. In 2003 SIS-STAT data base replaced the data bank and is still a portal for professional users today.<sup>18</sup>

SURS were doing a lot of things which were not yet being done in more developed countries. In a sense, we were very advanced. Building the modern registers, data bank, GIS and using satellite data started back in the 1970s and 1980s. Due to data quality issues and cost of the data the project on using satellite data for land use statistics was later stopped and other data sources are used today. Since we were such a small country, Mr. Banovec said that if one cloud passed through we would miss a whole region. [Laughter].

I'm just trying to explain to you that thanks to the decisions and leadership of my predecessors, Slovenia had already a good statistical infrastructure to grow on and successfully complete the accession to European Union. There were 10 countries that came into the European Union at the same time.<sup>19</sup> Romania and Bulgaria had to wait two more years as they were not ready at the time.

While in the former Yugoslavia there was a federal statistical agency, we also had a republican office of statistics. Nevertheless, Slovenia had its own statistical legislation – republican legislation, not just federal legislation – and SURS prepared the first data protection law. I remember that I was asked to explain the draft text to the Parliament bodies. That Law was done for very practical reasons as we could see war on the horizon. We were afraid how everything would go with the data. But still, this law was the first data protection law in all of the regions of the former Yugoslavia.

Cooperation among statisticians was very well organized in the former state. Once a year we met in one of the republic to share the statistical knowledge as well as to network. Our office was always told we were very forward-thinking. We would then share our statistical ideas with other parts of Yugoslavia. However, un-

<sup>18</sup>SI-STAT, please see: <http://www.stat.si/StatWeb/Home/Contact>.

<sup>19</sup>Slovenia entered into the European Union in 2004, along with Cyprus, the Czech Republic (now Czechia), Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland and Slovakia. Sometimes they are referred to as the "A10". For more information see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2004\\_enlargement\\_of\\_the\\_European\\_Union](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2004_enlargement_of_the_European_Union).

der the old regime everything from outside the country must come through Belgrade. Yet, we in Slovenia used every possible channel, even under the table, to gain an understanding and prepare ourselves to European and international statistical standards. For example, in the 1980's SURS introduced Statistical Advisory Committees (SAC)<sup>20</sup> which were in 1995 formally legislated by the National Statistics Act. SACs are today even more important as "meeting points" of users, data providers and statistical producers from public, private sector and academia.

**INTERVIEWER: Turning back to our question, while you were serving as Director General, you also served as a Member of European Statistical System Committee: How did that come about? Could you tell us a little more about the types of services and activities you were involved in as a Member of the European Statistical System Committee; Is there any one project while you were in this position that you feel you will be able to look back on and say that it was your favorite project?**

The European Statistical System Committee (ESSC) is composed of DGs of NSOs of the EU member states and is supported by the Partnership Group. The Partnership Group is a group of Directors General of the National Statistical Institutes of the European Statistical System (ESS) whose mission is to develop the ESS further at the highest level, notably through ensuring the effective functioning of the European Statistical System Committee.<sup>21</sup> While I became automatically a member of the EESC as appointed DG of the NSO of Slovenia I was elected also in the Partnership Group. The tasks I was involved are defined by the rules of the procedure of the ESSC. It was very important that Slovene statistics actively contributed to the development and implementation of the legislative, organizational and methodological framework of European Statistics. It means that SURS and other authorized producers of statistics in Slovenia have participated at different levels at the ESS – the expert level, directors' level and general directors' level. In preparing our positions, SURS has developed a system of in-

ternal organization. This was valid also for other international meetings (OECD, UN ECE and UN SC). With this management tool we were able to coordinate contributions from our partners in the Slovene statistical system and also to include the knowledge of SURS's staff.

I was also elected as a member of the European Statistical Advisory Committee (ESAC). This Committee plays an important role in ensuring that user requirements, as well as the response burden on information providers and producers are taken into account in developing the Statistical Programme. It delivers its opinion on the Multiannual Statistical Programme, addressing in particular its relevance to the requirements of European integration. It also gives its view on the balance (priorities and resources) between different areas of the Multiannual Statistical Programme as well as the annual statistical work program of the Commission.

The work in the ESSC was very interesting. There were so many important projects. It was the time of building the ESS after recovering from the scandal with data in Greece, as well as the time that many new countries entered the ESS which introduced many challenges to manage it.

I would like to mention a role SURS played to find the co-operation modes between the ESS and the EU System of European Central Banks. Following the experience from Slovenia, where we have established a very good collaboration model between the National Central bank, SURS and the Ministry of Finance in producing macroeconomic and financial statistics, SURS has contributed to the solutions among the two statistical systems at the EU level.

**INTERVIEWER: Also, during this time, you served in various other roles, such as Vice Chair of the Bureau of the Conference of European statisticians, Member of High-level Group on Modernization in Statistics. Focusing on this last one, how did that come about? Could you tell us a little more about the purpose of this group was and what particular types of services and activities you were involved in this role?**

The UNECE High-Level Group for the Modernization of Official Statistics (HLG-MOS)<sup>22</sup> was set up by the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) in

<sup>20</sup>For more information about SAC, please see: <http://www.stat.si/StatWeb/en/NationalStatistics/AdvCommittees>.

<sup>21</sup>See more at <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/european-statistical-system/ess-governance-bodies/partnership-group>.

<sup>22</sup>More information about the HLG-MOS, please see: <https://statswiki.unece.org/display/hlgbas/Modernisation+Groupsp>.



2010 to oversee and coordinate international work relating to statistical modernization. It promotes standards-based modernization of official statistics. “The HLG-MOS oversees modernization projects and manages the models and tools needed to support modernization in statistical organizations. It aims to improve the efficiency of statistical production and help statistical organizations to produce outputs that better meet user needs. The HLG-MOS focuses on “cutting-edge” developments, working with those statistical organizations that are both willing and able to contribute. However, outputs are available to all, and other groups and organizations are encouraged to use these in their capacity-building work with less developed statistical systems.”

Here is the story about how we started with the High-Level Group. In one of the CES Bureau meetings we discussed several proposals of meetings of different groups dealing with modernization of statistics. As a part of the preparation of the Bureau meeting I studied this with my colleagues at SURS. As a very small office, we could not afford to send so many people to all proposed meetings and in addition to that I, as a manager, could not find a clear purpose and objective of these groups. I suggested at the Bureau meeting to rethink the issue and find out how we can better streamline and coordinate modernization work in the ECE region. After some discussion and later analyses by UNECE, EUROSTAT and CBS Australia the High-level group on statistical modernization was born. As one of the mothers I was invited to join it. It has been very important for SURS to be able to contribute to and benefit from modernization projects. Let me mention some important projects where SURS were involved during my leadership e.g. GSBPM (Generic Business Process Module) and GSIM (Generic Statistical Information Model).<sup>23</sup> Genovefa Ružić current DG of SURS is a member of the HLG-MOS since 2013.<sup>24</sup>

**INTERVIEWER: Like before, I want to ask, is there any one project while you were in this position that you feel you will be able to look back on and say that it was your favorite project?**

Work on statistical modernization was among them. There were many others. More than 60 countries came

together at the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) to drive statistical work in the UNECE region and beyond. I was elected in the CES Bureau from 2003–2007 and 2009–2013. As one of the Vice-presidents I played an active role in the development of statistics in the ECE region. In 2013 I had an opportunity to chair the yearly CES meeting which was a great honor. I was also offered in 2013 to take a chairmanship of the CES Bureau but due to my retirement this was not possible. My work in the CES Bureau will always stay in my memory as one of the most interesting part of my professional and personal life. I met many good colleagues and friends and I will certainly remember them forever.

**INTERVIEWER: You stepped down from the Director General position in 2013 to take on a new role outside of SURS, Vice President of the International Statistical Institute, could you tell us a little about the types of services and activities you are involved in this role?**

I served as the Vice President of the ISI from 2013–2017. As a vice-president I was responsible to work with the official statistical community. We worked together with the ISI Permanent Office to get more institutional and individual members from the field of official statistics, especially in developing countries. We organized High Level Governance workshops – one in Tanzania and one in Cameroon.<sup>25</sup> We also organized 4 UNSC side events: in 2014: Developing a Partnership between the Statistical Agencies and the International Statistical Institute, in 2015: Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics (FPOS) and Professional Ethics in the Era of Big Data: Challenges and Strategies for Implementation, in 2016: Official Statistics and Partnerships on Sustainable Development Data, in 2017: Are the current business models of NSOs still relevant? I also actively participated in several important meetings like the one at the Economic Commission for Africa Statistics meeting where I had two presentations for more than 80 NSOs’ DGs from Africa, at the anniversary meeting of Ethiopian Statistical Society with two presentations and at the anniversary of Korean Statisti-

<sup>23</sup>For more information on statistical modernisation, please see: <https://www.unece.org/stats/mos.html>.

<sup>24</sup>For more information on current SURS leadership, please see: <http://www.stat.si/StatWeb/Arhiv/en/mainnavigation/about-us/statistical-office/leadership>.

<sup>25</sup>For more information on Tanzanian workshop, please see: <http://isi.cbs.nl/events/2015Tanzania/indexTanzania.htm>. For more information on Cameroon conferences, see <https://isi-web.org/index.php/news-from-isi/20045-isi-workshop-on-leadership-and-management-cameroon>.

cal society. In 2017 I was awarded for my work by the ISI Service Award.<sup>26</sup>

Currently I am a co-chair of the ISI Statistical Capacity Building Committee together with Fabrizio Ruggeri. We are working with a small task force to prepare the SCB Action plan for 2017–2022. I am also still a liaison person to the Global Partnership on Sustainable Development Data (GPSDD) and a Programme Committee member of the 2nd UN World Data Forum.

**INTERVIEWER: Over your career – so far – how has your international experience impacted your views on government statistics and how has it helped you in thinking in the strategic direction?**

It has helped me a lot with broadening my knowledge about the international statistical standards, institutions and frameworks. It has given me an unique opportunity to meet very many knowledgeable and nice people and to build a broad international social framework.

**INTERVIEWER: Turning to your other professional activities – such as your involvement with the IAOS, ultimately serving as President of IAOS between 2009 and 2011? How did you become involved with IAOS?**

I was invited to join the IAOS in the ISI Congress in Beijing in 1995 by Hallgrimur Snorrason. He came to me after my presentation and he said that the IAOS needs people like me. Later I served during the presidency of Mr. Paul Chung as a member of the EXCO. In 2009 I was appointed as the IAOS president.

**INTERVIEWER: As President, is there any one project that you feel you will be able to look back on and say that it was your favorite project?**

Certainly, it was the IAOS Conference and the first Governance workshop in Chile in 2010. At the one-

<sup>26</sup>The award was given “for outstanding and dedicated leadership and service to ISI and the international statistical community in Statistical Capacity Building developments and innovations, including: ISI leadership workshops and meetings across Africa; Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data; UN World Data Forum, Cape Town, January 2017; and ISI side events to UNSC.”

day Governance workshop leaders from Statistical offices of Latin America were exchanging their views on selected governance issues with the counterparts from the other regions. At Chile’s IAOS conference, which was devoted to Environmental Statistics, we had more than 400 participants. Among them three ministers and a special exhibition was opened by the Minister of Environment. The Chilean NSO also organized the Children’s festival. It was also special because the revised ISI Declaration on Professional Ethics (DPE) was launched at the 21th of October and we organized a round table devoted to this important event. It happened that at the same day was also the World Statistics Day. Our Chilean colleagues as well as my colleagues from SURS did a great job to make the conference and the governance workshop a success. It was also unforgettable from my personal point of view. Later after Chile I visited Eastern Island which was really a mystic experience.

**INTERVIEWER: How do you see IAOS can have an impact on official statistics?**

As the ISI family as a whole, also the IAOS can offer an independent platform to discuss the issues related to not only to the producers of official statistics (NSOs and others in the national statistical systems and international organizations) but also to data providers, policy makers, academia, media, private sector and others. In the so-called data revolution, data ecosystems have many players dealing with data and statistics and the IAOS can help to encourage the necessary dialog and partnership among them. It is important to find the relevant themes of common interest for further research and implementation of the innovations. For example, in addition to big data analytics, data privacy and ethical issues are certainly among the important topics.

**INTERVIEWER: Overall, what are some of the challenges you see facing statisticians working in government settings?**

In addition to “classical” challenges, such as financing, human resources and technical and process capacities there are “new” challenges. Governmental statisticians are losing the monopoly to be the only producer of statistics used by policy makers. Modern technology and the balk of data sources create the opportunity to make statistics and to share data in a real time by

many others. Official statisticians usually need more time to produce results. One of the opportunities is to combine and integrate different data sources (surveys with admin data and big data). In my opinion data is next to water the most important commodity. Who will be able to have it, understand it and use it will be in advantage. One of the challenges is also data presentation on one hand and readiness by policy makers to use it. Everyone should be able to “read” at least basic data. And here statistical and data literacy come along. Data also make the invisible visible and that is the most important if the world would like to fulfil the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)<sup>27</sup> and the Agenda 2030 motto: to leave no one behind. Data and statistics were never more at the spotlight of all who want to make a difference for a better life of the people. Some data needed are still not available in the official statistical production. It is inevitable that other producers outside official statistics are stepping in this process. In my opinion, compliance with Fundamental Principle of Official Statistics (FPOS) and the ISI Declaration of professional Ethics (DPE) have to be applied by those as well. EU has just recently strongly regulated individual data by the General data Protection Regulation.<sup>28</sup> How this will influence the work of statisticians in different environments?

**INTERVIEWER: Has the field of statistics changed since you received your education? If no, what has sustained it, if yes, in what ways did it change?**

I understand the term statistics in a very broad sense. I learned during my schooling about statistics as a method, product and how to find and use the data. When I became an employee of SURS I also learned

about the data sources, production process and cooperation with other stakeholders. I learned about new and internationally comparable methodological, ethical, data dissemination, technical and organizational standards. Digital world, globalization, open data and SDGs among others representing a new context where statistics need to find new solutions concerning methods, sources used, modernized processes and maintaining partnerships.

**INTERVIEWER: Do you have any words of wisdom for students preparing for working in the world of official statistics?**

I spent my whole working life in statistics. It has been a challenging and an interesting life. I worked in different political, economic and social contexts but statistical facts always helped me to better understand what has been going on. I am also happy that I had an opportunity to contribute to the development of statistical work in my country and abroad. After all my experience with work in statistics I would recommend to young people to get involved in the world of data and statistics. It is an interesting subject which gives many work and life opportunities. Statistics has been defined as the sexiest job of the 21 Century.<sup>29</sup> While statistics is an international language it could help anyone to better understand the world we are living in. I strongly believe that if data and statistics are properly used it could make a real difference in the life of the people and the planet.

**INTERVIEWER: Thank you again for taking the time to talk with me regarding your life and experiences. This will conclude our interview.**

<sup>27</sup>For more information on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), please see: <https://www.eugdpr.org/>.

<sup>28</sup>For more information on GDPR see – <https://www.eugdpr.org/>.

<sup>29</sup>Davenport and Patil, Harvard Business Review, 2012 – <https://hbr.org/2012/10/data-scientist-the-sexiest-job-of-the-21st-century>.