

12th Meeting of ESF Network in the Danube Region

Date: 25-26 September 2025

Venue: Clarion Congress Hotel | Bratislava

Summary

Welcome and Introduction

Eva Masárová | Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of Slovakia

Claudia Singer-Smith | EUSDR Priority Area 10 “Institutional Capacity”

Jörg Mirtl | EUSDR Priority Area 9 “Investing in People and Skills”, Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection of Austria

In the introductory statements, Eva Masárová, Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of Slovakia welcomed the participants and stated the ESF meetings are a great opportunity to exchange knowledge and follow good examples. She presented the meeting topic to be young people, especially young people who need protection and help. She also added that with this occasion one representative of the Danube Youth Council was also invited to participate online. She wishes fruitful discussions forward.

Claudia Singer-Smith, EUSDR Priority Area 10 Coordinator, proceeded to extend a warm welcome to the participants and thanked the organisers for hosting the meeting. She proceeded to praise the development of the network, now encompassing candidate countries as well, and stated there are many mutual learning opportunities in the area of social policy and innovation.

Jörg Mirtl, EUSDR Priority Area 9, Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection of Austria, expressed his gratitude to the organisers, the hosts, as well as to the participants. He stated that he looks forward to the information that will be presented and the technicalities that come with each topic.

The participants then proceeded to a tour de table.

Mutual Learning Session – Youth Guarantee

Incorporating the Youth Guarantee in the Programme Slovakia 2021-2027

Marek Korec / Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of Slovakia

Marek Korec, Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of Slovakia, presented “Incorporating the Youth Guarantee in the Programme Slovakia 2021-2027”. He offered insights into the policy framework in Slovakia, specifically into Policy Objective 4, under which the special priority of Youth Guarantee lies. Mr Korec then gave an in-depth overview of Priority 4P4 Youth Guarantee, what it covers, the responsibilities as well as main target group and main goal.

He stressed that it is important that young people do not lose trust in the democratic institutions, thus new measures need to be found to help them. These measures include: individualised counselling at local

employment services (e.g., Banská Bystrica local office, individualised counselling – a project implemented throughout Slovakia), sustainable jobs (methodology creation for national labour offices to determine what jobs are sustainable for young people), types of financial contribution, redistributed by the national labour office, as well as reskilling and upskilling, including digital and green skills. Additional measures for local governments and NGOs were also presented, including integrated information and consulting services for NEETs in One-stop shops.

A clarification was made that "sustainable jobs" in this case refers to long-term employment, not specifically green jobs and it was mentioned that in Austria, green jobs are increasingly also seen as sustainable. Slovakia is currently in the organisational phase of developing green jobs with relevant stakeholders. Regarding private sector engagement, the Public Employment Service manages employment related calls and communicates with employers. Projects outline how long employers must retain employees. The national project focuses on green and digital jobs for all age groups, excluding young people with higher education degrees. In regions with high unemployment, local labour offices help young people find jobs.

Overall, employment measures are interconnected, starting with individual assessments and linking candidates to employers. Local employment services offer personalised support, involving social workers and psychologists. As a result, Slovakia's unemployment rate has decreased from 14% to 10%.

One-Stop-Shops for Young People & ALMA Pilot Project

Viera Melagová & Kristína Adamovská | Development Agency of Banská Bystrica Self-Governing Region

Viera Melagová presented the project "SPACE: One-Stop-Shops for Young People in Banská Bystrica Self-Governing Region" which is implemented by Development Agency of the Self-Governing Region and is a continuation of the previously completed national project "Verification of the model of youth work centres in BBSK", which was implemented from 2021-2023 (the first spaces were opened in 2022). The outcomes of the project were also presented and they currently include a high number of young people who have gained employment and some that went back to formal education. Currently, there is a lookout for methods to measure soft outcomes such as changes in oneself, higher self-esteem and self-awareness.

Regarding regional partnerships, questions were raised about coordination and regular meetings. A discussion on measuring soft outcomes (like personal development) followed, with ideas developed in collaboration with the University of Linz, Austria to be considered. In Slovakia an expert team is currently working on methodologies for measuring soft outcomes.

In the Czech Republic, the labour office is opening up to cooperation with organisations and is seeking good practice examples—the SPACES project could be one such example. Contact details will be shared later if there is interest. Finally, the SPACES one-stop shop initiative requires continued support from regional governments to maintain momentum and expand its good practices across Slovakia.

Kristína Adamovská continued with a presentation of the ALMA mobility project in Slovakia, covering its goals, consortium, and structure, which includes three phases: preparation, mobility, and follow-up. The project has shown strong results, with 64% of participants re-entering the job market or education after their mobility experience. Additionally, participants demonstrated significant improvements in financial literacy, life skills, education, employment readiness, and communication skills.

Cooperation with UNICEF on Youth Guarantee

Olena Sakovych & Marleen Renders | UNICEF

Marleen Renders presented, on behalf of the UNICEF Office in Slovakia, the cooperation with UNICEF on the Youth Guarantee: Unlocking its potential to align education, skilling and employment pathways. The presentation reflected on the Youth Guarantee through insights gained from implementing the Pathways Programme, which focuses on young Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia and neighbouring countries. The Pathways approach was also presented in more detail. Pathways is a regional initiative to support Ukrainian adolescents and youth (aged 10-24) inside and outside Ukraine in accessing opportunities for continued education, skills building and a successful transition to employment.

In addition, it was enquired on how to keep young people motivated to keep on this path rather than go work illegally. For those under 18, staying in education is the safest and most supportive option as it offers learning, social connection, and stability. Daily support around schooling is key to helping them remain engaged and on the right path.

Youth Guarantee in Action: Progress, Outlook, and Macro-regional Contributions

After the presentations a group discussion commenced where participants shared the current status quo of Youth Guarantee in their countries.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is currently completing the plan for the next four years, at this stage a concrete overview cannot be given. However, the topics and issues discussed today are very important and show the commitment to the issues. Thus, all the issues discussed at the meeting will be taken into account and brought back to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Serbia is currently piloting the Youth Guarantee in areas covering around 20 municipalities, with full implementation planned for January 2027, funded through the Operational Programme for Employment, Skills, and Social Inclusion. The pilot is financed via IPA, and preparations are underway for a direct grant application and new strategic documents for 2027–2029. There is interest in learning more about the one-stop shop model, especially related to who delivers outreach services. Also, civil society involvement is seen as crucial, and further clarification is requested on this topic.

Montenegro launched the Youth Guarantee initiative on 1 January 2025, starting with pilot programs in diverse regions. The goal is to ensure that every young person receives a quality offer for employment, training, or education within four months of leaving school or becoming unemployed. The initiative involves many ministries and the employment agency and is supported by national funding and International Labour Organisation. Key focus areas include education, employment, social inclusion, and support for vulnerable youth, with efforts to reduce dropout rates and improve youth engagement. Furthermore, a new implementation plan is being developed for 2027–2028.

Similarly, in Serbia, a team of five ministries and the employment agency is also implementing the Youth Guarantee, supported also mainly by national funding and the International Labour Organisation. Activities are progressing as planned, and a new implementation plan is being prepared for 2027–2028.

In Croatia, youth measures focus on education, integration, and employment, mainly coordinated by the Croatian Employment Service which also coordinated the one-stop shop centres. Success often depends on regional staff engagement. The ALMA project is also being implemented and is planned in the future but faces challenges as it is shifting from a direct to an open call, and there's low enthusiasm due to perceptions of limited impact. The importance of showing broader benefits beyond employment statistics to secure support was also stressed. Additionally, the importance of dedicated people and a low circulation of personnel were identified as success

factors of initiatives. The issue of personnel changes was also acknowledged to be present in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Moreover, the approach implemented in Slovakia was appreciated for connecting project-level work with systemic change at both ministerial and regional levels, helping avoid reliance on individual persons. When designing youth strategy projects, it's important to consider how they can also strengthen the broader system. Additionally, it was mentioned that the NGO sector might be better equipped to handle such topics especially in a project format, as they are more experienced with the structure and implementation of projects.

Finally, as the current funding period is coming to an end the question of where would we want the youth guarantee to go from here and what should change for the next funding period arose. Various points of view were discussed including:

- One-Stop-Shops and youth spaces/centres in unused spaces
- Education, upskilling and reskilling
- Green skills and skills that connect the region
- Implementation of Youth Guarantee as accession path to EU for Ukraine
- Promote and enable more deep cooperation within the youth programmes (Erasmus) and for example with Pathways. At the moment, it is focused more on social inclusion and more focus on youth could be suggested
- Focus on the importance of youth work as part of the Youth Guarantee and see it as a key to its success
- More responsibility at regional level and for representatives to take responsibility for their inhabitants
- Create a habit of cooperation between the sectors (private, public, NGOs) and not rely only on state aid, as there are many resources available
- Investment in businesses and through the investment to take care of the social responsibility; other funds (ERDF) should also include social responsibility, social infrastructure; mainstreaming social responsibility policy
- Clear focus from ministries
- Social housing for young people as part of youth guarantee (e.g., possibly Serbia's operational programme for young people leaving residential housing areas)
- Strengthen cooperation and coordination among employment and adult education sectors; models to cooperate across areas

Implementing Simplified Cost Options/Financing Not Linked to Costs

Zoltán Bárdoš | Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of Slovakia

Zoltán Bárdoš, Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of Slovakia provided an overview of the implementation of Simplified Cost Options (SCO) and financing not linked to costs in Programme Slovakia (2021-2027).

As a follow up an example from Serbia was given, which their approach at the moment, is to calculate unit costs per participant, which was seen as a better example, as it is more process orientated and takes into account the salaries of individuals. On the other hand, caution was also shown when calling something the best approach, as there are also other approaches that fit better for financing projects.

Tomke Trávníčková | Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of the Czech Republic

Tomke Trávníčková presented how SCO was applied in the ALMA initiatives. The goal of ALMA is to actively include more young people in the job market and society in general, using international mobility as a key tool for

their professional and personal development. A note is given that some points in the presentation might not be up-to-date at the moment due to the changes in the regulations.

Some inquiries from participants included the issues of finance for non-member states, and it was stated that non-member states need to finance ALMA models from national budgets. With regards to a methodology for Youth Guarantee SCO, there are not any unit costs which have been adopted by the European Commission (EC) yet. The participants reflected on what works and what doesn't and what the lessons learned were.

Investing in People under the Multiannual Financial Framework 2028 – 2034

Richard Broos | European Commission – DG EMPL

Richard Broos provided a presentation on the social dimension for the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028-2034. He stated that the focus of the presentation lay on three topics: a brief introduction to the MFF package; an overview of the social dimension, focusing especially on the National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs) and the state of play of the MFF negotiations.

Firstly, the MFF outlines the financial structure and rules for funding EU priorities and policies, with the EC proposing a continuation of the seven-year duration. Legislative proposals adopted in July and September 2025 include horizontal regulations such as the MFF regulation, interinstitutional budgetary agreements, and performance monitoring regulations, alongside sectoral regulations such as NRPPs and related funding regulation (including ESF, ERDF which includes provisions on Interreg).

Secondly, as Europe faces major transitions, investing in people remains essential and this is visible in the EC's proposal. The social objective will not be supported only under the nationally created pre-allocated envelopes under the NRPPs but also the EU Facility and other EU programmes. Furthermore, the NRPPs were explained as being single plans which group policies and funds into one main policy framework (single rule book) and based on this new structure, programming will be simplified, moving to only 27 plans in total.

Moreover, the European Social Fund (ESF) is set out in its own self-standing regulation and the Union's instrument of investing in people, which is implemented under the NRPPs. What is new is the way payments will be made between the Member States and the Commission, based on the Social Climate Fund and the RRF model. The programming will be steered by the European Semester and Employment Guidelines. Programmes will be replaced by NRPP's Chapters (national, sectoral and/or regional), and EU payments will be based on achieving milestones and targets.

During the discussion, the question of whether ESF falls under the aforementioned 14% social objective was asked and also where the 14% came from? Also, if a Member State decides to put all those measures in supporting farmers, is that limit fulfilled? In turn it was stated that 14% is a number given in the regulation, which has the basis of the total financial envelope of the NRPP regulation including the loans (up to 150 billion), but what is excluded is the direct support to farmers, fisheries and also the eternal assigned revenue from the Social Climate Fund. Thus, there is zero social coefficient to the direct income support to farmers. All the ESF soft measures are included in this 14%. Attention should be paid to the example given in the presentation.

Additionally, participants wanted to know if there is anything on the table for Non-Member States. Specifically, for candidate countries, this inquiry might have to be directed to DG Regio and/ or to look into Global Europe for which DG International Partnerships is the contact point. For the next meeting it might be an opportunity to take on Global Europe and discuss it in more detail. All in all, it was stated that it is important for the ideas and practical experiences from managing authorities to be channelled towards national administrations which work on the negotiations so that they have first-hand information that can be further channelled into the negotiations.

Slovak representatives shared that they are working on a new data framework which is trying to link social assistance with the current situation and are trying to find the link in the solidarity action plan for this type of measure in the field of natural disasters. This issue needs to be looked up in more detail in the legal text.

The Social Dimension in the next Multiannual Financial Framework: Perspectives from the Danube Region

Commencing the discussion with an overview of the Macro Regional Strategies (MRSs) from Austria's side the cooperation between the Members was commended. Additionally, it was mentioned that the Macro Regional Strategies social coordinators will have a meeting on 19 November in Brussels to discuss various issues. One of them being the proposal to have a common position paper which would be presented at the upcoming meeting.

Additionally, when discussing the possibility of financing a network of public and foreign services between Member States and candidate countries, it was suggested that states can include in their NRPPs measures which include transnational and cross-border cooperation. Moreover, EU Facilities and Interreg could also be a possibility to finance such measures.

When discussing future transnational cooperation, it was stated that such activities are not excluded under the ESF. Moreover, it is relevant for further reflections what transnational cooperation facilitates. The way forward is to follow discussions on the macro regional level and to reflect on the current paper to see how it can be changed and adapted to clarify the needs, taken into account the current proposal (MFF). Keeping in mind also that there is no national labour market but a transnational one, the question of the need for changing qualifications arose. How can the Commission bring the European Idea into the national plans and not only what are the national plans?

Furthermore, it was stated that there is space for transnational cooperation in the field of education. However, in practical terms, one would have to see what kind of projects this would constitute, whether it will be projects driven by the national administrations to include more countries, or projects driven by the European Commission for the exchange of experience. This would be more for the EU Facility then and the former rather under the NRPP's. Overall, the focus of the NRPPs and the broader approach to eligibility goes very much in this direction that if member states agree it will be much easier than before to define and implement measures which facilitate transnational coordination and cooperation in social matters.

Additional Information:

Upcoming conferences:

- EUSDR Annual Forum 5-6 November, 2025 in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina;
- Priority Area 9 Conference "Roma Empowerment for the Common Labour Market" 16 October, 2025 in Vienna Austria.