

11th International Stakeholder Conference of Priority Area 9 “People and Skills” of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region

Towards more resilient, safer and smarter Danube region

13-14 November 2023

Online

Report

The 11th International Stakeholder Conference (SHC) was hosted by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Institute for International Politics in partnership with the Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy and the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research of the Republic of Austria, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research and the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Republic of Moldova, and OeAD – Austria’s Agency for Education and Internationalization.

Objectives

The general objective of the conference was to raise the discussion related to the latest challenges within the thematic priorities of Priority Area 9 (People and Skills). Dealing with the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as coping with the war in Ukraine are among the main threats that countries from the Danube Region currently face. Education, social and labour systems have been under significant pressure for several past years and thus require innovative approaches and increasing resilience to respond to these challenges. EUSDR PA9 wanted the SHC to become an inspiring platform to stimulate discussion and best practice exchange among EUSDR stakeholders.

Welcome speeches

Dmytro Zavhorodnyi, Deputy Minister of Education and Science of Ukraine for Digital Development, Digital Transformations and Digitalization

Dmytro Zavhorodnyi thanked the members of the governments and stakeholders of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region for their support as Ukrainian bravery, innovation and resilience would be unthinkable without their continued and firm support of Ukraine throughout challenging times.

The Ministry highlighted adaptability and resilience amid challenges like migration, economic shifts from war, and budget limitations. They prioritize the safety and continuity of education for all, especially the underprivileged. Efforts are ongoing to make the education system more flexible and responsive. In the context of the Danube Region Strategy, Dmytro emphasized shared goals and challenges, underscoring the importance of cooperation and dialogue among nations, organisations, and individuals in the Danube Region. The 11th Stakeholder Conference aimed to foster an open and collaborative platform for capacity-building, learning, and experience sharing within the EU Strategy for the Danube Region.

Iryna Postolovska, Deputy Minister of Social Policy of Ukraine for European Integration

Iryna Postolovska extended a warm welcome to the participants of the Stakeholder Conference. She emphasized the importance of human capital for sustained economic growth, particularly in the context of the aftermath of the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine, which severely impacted lives and human capital in the Danube Region. She also highlighted the responsibility to create conducive conditions for people in Ukraine to live and return safely. This includes developing social support systems, addressing

poverty through targeted assistance, and transitioning from cash assistance to more focused programmes that encourage labour force re-entry. The Ministry of Social Policy of the Ukraine focuses on reforming social services: i.e., the delivery and financing of social services, including digitization for efficiency, inclusivity, and accountability. This includes engaging both public and private service providers. Mental health support is of great importance to Ukraine: Iryna presented the All-Ukrainian Mental Health Programme, introducing resilience services for communities, psychosocial support, and training. She outlined social adaptation services for veterans and their families to aid their transition to civilian life. Iryna provided details of efforts to support individuals with disabilities through comprehensive rehabilitation services, prosthetics provision, legislation encouraging their employment, and reducing reliance on institutional care for children in favor of family-centered care within protective communities. She also mentioned the alignment of these reform priorities with the Ukraine Facility's plan, demonstrating a comprehensive approach to address various critical areas. Overall, the focus is on rebuilding human capital, addressing social challenges, and implementing reforms across various sectors to support individuals affected by the conflict and foster inclusive growth in Ukraine.

Introduction by EUSDR PA9 Priority Area Coordinators (PACs)

1. Roland Hanak, Head of Staff Position, Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy, Austria

Roland Hanak welcomed the participants on behalf of the Austrian Presidency that commenced on November 1st 2023. Austria's collaboration with East and Central European neighbors began in the early 90s, primarily focusing on labour market exchanges. This exchange extended to include the Baltic States, Romania, Bulgaria, and later, Moldova, aligning naturally with the launch of the EUSDR in 2011. Engagement with Ukraine in Priority Area 9 started in 2020, a period marked by challenges, starting with the COVID-19 pandemic and followed by the armed conflict. Despite these obstacles, Austria and partners pioneered online conferences, recognising the necessity of digital collaboration. Austria's cooperation contract spans six years till the end of 2028, including the Ukraine, Moldova, and Austria in Priority Area 9 'People and Skills'. Recently, Austria successfully allocated €2.5 million from the remaining DTP funds to support Moldova and the Ukraine, which is a significant amount under the current circumstances, where every bit of support matters. Roland Hanak affirmed unwavering solidarity, support, and friendship and wished for peace to return to the region, enabling Europe to collectively rebuild Ukraine and the entire area.

2. Jürgen Schick, Deputy Head of Department, Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, Austria

Jürgen Schick acknowledged the commitment of Ukrainian and Moldovan partners under the challenging circumstances, emphasizing the significance of the conference during Austria's EUSDR presidency. One focus of the Austrian presidency is on boosting skills and competitiveness, being vital for smart recovery and building a resilient Danube Region. Priority area 9 emphasizes cooperation in education and training, highlighting initiatives promoting high-quality education, vocational training, digital and green skills, learning mobility, and inclusive education. Over 200 cooperation initiatives exist, including two flagship projects: a platform for vocational excellence and an initiative bringing the Danube Region into classrooms. Austrian side commended participants for contributing to cooperation, emphasizing the collective effort to address common challenges and recognized the added value of collaboration in addressing shared difficulties.

3. Ludmila Pavlov, Deputy Secretary General, Ministry of Education and Research, Republic of Moldova

Ludmila Pavlov extended warm greetings to the participants of the conference. She admitted that Moldova faces challenges from both the COVID-19 pandemic and the refugee crisis stemming from the conflict in the Ukraine. To tackle these issues, Moldova emphasizes the importance of ongoing communication, cooperation, and concerted efforts to establish resilient education systems and labour markets. The country advocates for partnerships and collaboration with the business sector through dual education programmes, actively engaging with employers to align educational offers with labour market demands. Modernizing the education system with IT, ICT, skilled teaching staff, and conducive learning environments was highlighted as crucial for skill development among youth. Moldova is working on improving the normative framework to support collaboration with the private sector, particularly focusing on laws regarding sector committees and dual education, as well as enhancing the capacity of centers of excellence in vocational training. Moldova seeks to learn from others, to share experiences, and to collaborate for the improvement of the education system and labour market in the region, highlighting the significance of the efforts of Priority Area 9 for facilitating these efforts during stakeholder conferences.

Panel discussion 1 "Promoting digital skills in the Danube Region and beyond"

Moderator: Mykhailo Omelchenko, Ukrainian Institute for International Politics

1. Dmytro Zavhorodnyi, Deputy Minister of Education and Science of Ukraine for Digital Development, Digital Transformations and Digitalization

Dmytro Zavhorodnyi put focus on the immense challenges the Ukraine is facing in its educational system due to the war in Ukraine and the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 360 educational institutions have been completely destroyed and over one million children are studying online due to the war, with many having little to no physical access to schools, especially in regions near the conflict zones. This has resulted in a blended learning approach where students attend school only on certain days or for specific subjects due to capacity issues and safety concerns.

The digital strategy in the Ukraine is divided into five components: equipment and connectivity, electronic content, digital skills, data management, and electronic services and processes. Efforts have been made to provide devices and connectivity to schools, with a focus on regions still primarily engaged in distance learning. Additionally, over 250,000 teachers have undergone digital upskilling programmes to adapt to distance or blended learning environments. Dmytro mentioned the support of Ukrainian partners and international organisations, such as Google, Microsoft, UNESCO and UNICEF, in preparing for digital upskilling programmes or online courses that Ukraine has received. Various platforms and tools have been launched to support education, including online schools, vocational education platforms. More than 70% of the educational institutions in the Ukraine have transitioned to electronic systems for services and reporting.

However, despite these efforts, challenges persist, especially in conflict-affected areas like Kharkiv, where schools have been moved to underground metro stations due to ongoing shelling and bombings. This extreme situation demonstrates the resilience of Ukraine's education system in the face of adversity. The Ministry of Education continues to work tirelessly to provide services, devices, and digital content to alleviate the burden on students and teachers during these difficult times. The dedication and resilience of educators and students inspire the Ministry to persist in its efforts to support education despite the challenges presented by the war and the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Bela Kardon, Inclusion4Schools (a Horizon-2020 project), Regional Centre for Information and Scientific Development

The key mission of the project Inclusion4Schools is to identify and address social inequalities to create more inclusive communities within educational settings. It emphasizes the importance of enhancing cooperation among various stakeholders, including researchers, developers, educators, social partners, NGOs and teachers. The project aims to generate networks and share knowledge through a knowledge-sharing platform. Overall, the project is focused on building inclusive practices and policies within educational settings and engaging various stakeholders in this pursuit. Challenges include global challenges like those posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and difficulties in engaging external partners who might not have planned resources for collaboration. The approach applied in the project includes research activities, creating spaces for dialogue, organising events, and disseminating results and transformative knowledge to reverse inequalities. The project is also working with best, good, and transformative practices to create inclusive cultures, practices, and policies. Among the Inclusion4Schools achievements are six awareness-raising events, engagement with numerous schools, and the establishment of a knowledge-sharing platform. Bela Kardon invited participants to a conference in Budapest at the Central European University on November 28th and 29th. This conference will feature peer-reviewed presentations and is open to all stakeholders interested in the project's objectives.

3. Jussi Okkonen, “Digital Literacy Post Covid” (a European Social Fund project), Tampere University

Jussi Okkonen presented his project “Digital Literacy Post Covid”. Digital literacy is defined as “confident, critical and responsible use of, and engagement with, digital technologies for learning, at work, and for participation in society. It is defined as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes.” Project’s outcomes are reducing the strain on the daily work of teachers, reduced workload, and enabling teachers to better focus on teaching activities. Additionally, the project managed to increase the opportunity for parents/guardians and teachers to influence the development of digital literacy skills and practice, as well as increase competence as well as to create functional and practical materials that support digital literacy in schools and promote equality in basic education in a changing operating environment.

4. Claus Hoffmann, ZD.BB Stuttgart, Priority Area 8 of the EUSDR

The working group “Digital Danube” comprises of seven EU and three non-EU states, including members from universities, companies, regional catalysts, political bodies and NGOs. Its expertise lies in fostering digital innovations, particularly in qualification programmes for employees and developing digital business models. Innovation is closely linked with digital skills, which are vital for an adapted and qualified workforce. Over the years, the group has focused on various digital technologies such as cloud computing, social media, mobile, analytics, Artificial Intelligence, Internet of things, and upcoming technologies like 5G, bioinformatics, and quantum computing. Alongside technology, there is a strong emphasis on cultivating a digital and open mindset within organisations and adapting to changing working methods.

WG “Digital Danube” projects span various sectors, including agriculture, where ‘farming personnel is trained to utilize 5G edge cloud computing for optimising agricultural processes, aiming for higher efficiency and reduced resource usage. Additionally, initiatives like using tomato stems for packaging material, repurposing batteries in the car industry for energy storage, and developing circular economy business models reflect the group’s innovative endeavors. Currently, ‘they are working on a toolbox for circular economy business models, combining tools for modeling, AI-based value chain generation, simulation, implementation, and training methods. The focus on training and computer skills development showcases the group’s dedication to enhancing digital competencies. Overall, the group’s work encompasses innovation, technology adoption, and the development of digital skills across various sectors, aiming for sustainable and forward-thinking practices.

Panel discussion 2 “Lifelong learning in the Danube region and beyond”

Moderator: Jakob Weiss, OeAD

1. Ulrike Damyanovic, ETF

Ulrike admitted that she has been involved with the EUSDR and PA9 since the very beginning of the strategy. Austria has assumed the EUSDR presidency as of November 1st, marking a new phase. One of the key strengths of this platform is its macro regional collaboration involving Member States, Western Balkans, Ukraine, and Moldova. In light of the recent European Commission’s enlargement package, there is a clear emphasis on the importance of upskilling. The ETF has long championed lifelong learning, not just for the youth but also for adults. ETF’s initiatives span from skills reviews to excellence centers, Erasmus Plus collaborations, job surveys, and more, all centered on the concept of lifelong learning. ETF would share insights on qualifications and micro-credentials, being crucial aspects in this landscape.

2. Anatolii Garmash, ETF

Anatolii focused on micro credentials and their relevance in the context of lifelong learning and recognition of prior learning. He highlighted that micro credentials predominantly include short learning experiences, certifying upskilling through certificates attained from various formal, informal, and non-formal settings. They are associated with assessing demonstrated competence or acknowledging partial qualifications within formal education settings, often referred to as micro qualifications. The European Commission’s recent recommendation on a unified approach to micro credentials underscores their significance in skill enhancement. Mr. Garmash emphasized the need to develop valuable micro credentials that hold weight in continuing education and training, enhancing learner and market relevance. To support partner countries in this endeavor, guidelines were developed, focusing on designing, issuing, and recognizing micro credentials. These guidelines revolved around ten European principles aimed at ensuring learner-centricity, transparency, quality assurance, recognition, and portability of micro credentials.

Recommendations were outlined for micro credential providers and policy-level frameworks, advocating for learner-centered design, adherence to quality standards, transparency in the dissemination of information, streamlined recognition processes, digital issuance, common skills taxonomies, online publication, and adherence to international recognition conventions. Practical applications were showcased through a project in the Ukraine, which facilitated short training courses for internally displaced individuals and discussions with the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine to integrate micro credentials into their platforms for improved accessibility and comparability of learning experiences.

3. Olena Gachuk, Odesa Center of Vocational and Technical Education

Olena Gachuk addressed the importance of vocational and technical education in the context of providing services for primary vocational training, adult qualification improvement, and retraining, particularly amid the conditions of martial law since 2014 due to the large influx of internally displaced individuals. She introduced the Center for Vocational Technical Education as a multidisciplinary institution catering to various professions essential for the labour market. Modern educational tools like Google Classroom, teams, and simulators have been incorporated into the center to facilitate a safe and inclusive learning environment. The center’s emphasis on practical education has resulted in the creation of educational and practical centers focused on offering theoretical knowledge and practical skills using modern equipment. These centers are intended not only for traditional students but also for displaced individuals, military personnel, and unemployed specialists. Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war, the institution has strived to create critical centers for specific trades, actively participating in projects, exhibitions, and educational alliances focused on skills development, energy efficiency, and inclusive education for persons

with disabilities. The institution has been proactive in developing strategies for post-war economic recovery, focusing on vocational training to meet the labour demands during the country's reconstruction phase. The presentation concluded with an acknowledgment of the center's readiness to adapt flexibly and contribute to Ukraine's reconstruction efforts. Efforts are made to align educational programmes with industry needs, adapt to changing labour market priorities, promote gender inclusivity in professions, and cater to students with disabilities, especially those with hearing impairments. The institution has introduced extended programmes for adults and modular training for skill enhancement. It has also participated in projects supporting internally displaced persons, initiated cooking hubs for nutrition education, and introduced elements of dual education to enhance practical skills among students.

4. Lina Blažytė, Diversity Development Group

Lina, representing the Lithuanian think tank “Diversity Development Group”, presented a project focussing on the social integration of migrants in Lithuania. She highlighted the influx of over 200,000 migrants into the country over the last two years, with a majority coming from the Ukraine, followed by Belarus, Russia, and other nations. The project, funded by the European Social Foundation Agency, aimed to integrate migrants into Lithuania's labour market, particularly focusing on educated migrants. She outlined the challenges faced by migrants in Lithuania, such as physical demands in unskilled jobs leading to health issues, language barriers, cultural differences, and lack of information on various aspects of employment. Additionally, employers often held biases about migrants' qualifications and their temporary nature in the country, affecting their willingness to invest in them. The project provided various opportunities for migrants, including personalised mentorship, language learning in Lithuanian and English, lectures on local culture and laws, guidance on job search processes, and motivational sessions with psychologists.

The objective was to engage 50 migrants in the project, with an aim to have half of them employed or enrolled in educational activities afterwards. The majority of beneficiaries came from Ukraine, some from Belarus, and Russian Federation, with various professional backgrounds like medicine, culture, finance, management, education and science. The project aimed to address the misconceptions and attitudes of migrants, especially regarding lifelong learning, language acquisition, and adapting skills to a new cultural environment. Ms. Blažytė shared achievements of the project participants, with 30% finding higher qualification jobs, 14% starting learning programmes, 8% engaging in work practices or fellowships, and 14% becoming self-employed. However, 34% were still in the learning phase, especially focusing on improving their language skills to meet local standards.

The conclusion emphasized the need to leverage the potential of migrants in the labor market by addressing challenges, offering support, and educating stakeholders.

Wrap-up of day-1 of the conference

Nadija Afanasieva, Ukrainian Institute for International Politics

Practical issues of the macro regional cooperation have been discussed during the panel discussions on the first day. Priority Area 7 and 8 are closely cooperating with PA9 to bolster knowledge sharing and best practices exchange. Nadija hoped that participants received a lot of practical experience during the panel discussions. She wished everyone a nice day and reminded of the second day of the stakeholder conference.

Day 2 of the Conference

Panel discussion 3 “Enhancing cooperation between vocational education and training and labour market in the Danube region”

Moderator: Jörg Mirtl, Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy of Austria

1. Galina Rusu, State Secretary of the Ministry of Education and Research of the Republic of Moldova

Galina Rusu told that connecting education to the demands and needs of the labour market from the perspective of sustainable development, by restructuring the human capital development mechanisms is a priority of the Ministry of Education and Research of Moldova. She presented Moldova’s development strategy “Education 2030” and its key pillars:

- Connecting the quantitative (number of graduates) and qualitative (content of qualifications) aspects to labour market demands;
- Leveraging institutional capabilities to train highly skilled individuals for competitive labour market integration;
- Creating the State Order based on Labour Market Observatory insights and national development strategies;
- Rethinking and diversifying education offerings in line with current and future market needs;
- Enhancing the career guidance system to align supply and demand.
- Fostering partnerships between educational institutions and businesses to boost study quality and graduate employability.
- Promoting entrepreneurial and economic education across all education levels.
- Developing dual education as a fundamental VET organizational form.

Priority directions of actions within the Strategy are adult learning and education from the perspective of digital skills training and information technology utilization. Moreover, the NEET rate is to be reduced. The process of validating professional skills acquired in non-formal and informal education contexts from the perspective of ensuring integration on the labour market has to be strengthened too.

The methodology within the Strategy involves a working group comprising academic representatives and labour market stakeholders to identify skills relevant to qualifications. They consult draft standards with training providers and economic agents. Validation occurs through a commission involving sectoral committees, ministries, employers, and educational institutions, ensuring qualifications align with labour market needs based on evidence and consultations.

2. Tiina Polo, European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, Unit B.2: Skills Agenda

Tiina Polo shared that she has a long working history with EUSDR with a special focus to lifelong learning and skills development for the needs of the labour market. She has worked with a working group conducting the comparison work of the European qualifications framework and Ukrainian qualifications framework.

3. Yuliia Hrytsku-Andriyesh, Deputy Head of Chernivtsi Regional Military Administration

Yuliia Hrytsku-Andriyesh presented a vision of enhancing cooperation between VET and labour market in the Chernivtsi region. Since full-scale invasion, Chernivtsi military administration has worked 24/7 organizing online and mixed forms of education for students, providing shelter for IDPs in the region and volunteering and helping Armed Forces of Ukraine. This region’s response to humanitarian crisis in Ukraine included using infrastructure of VET education for shelters (10 institutions from the first days are providing shelters for IDPs and more than 4,000 people found place for staying for short- and long-term period. As for November 2023 there are more than 500 IDPs in Chernivtsi region. Currently 143 IDP students are studying in VET institutions of Chernivtsi region.

Yuliia presented sectors of the economy that are key to the recovery of Ukraine, such as construction and architecture (builders, designers, architects, engineers); other work specialties (welders, carpenters, bricklayers, painters, locksmiths, electricians); transport and logistics (drivers, transport operators, procurement managers); retail (sellers, cashiers, consultants, administrators); agriculture specialists. Regional administration helps VET in providing vouchers for education that are an opportunity to receive free education in 123 specialties at free leading institutions of Ukraine for citizens aged 45+ who are not registered as unemployed. They could complete training under a voucher at the expense of the Fund of compulsory state social insurance of Ukraine in case of unemployment. In addition to persons over 45 years of age with insurance experience of more than 15 years, this document for free training can be obtained by IDPs, persons with disabilities, persons released from military service, persons deprived of personal freedom as a result of armed aggression against Ukraine, after their release, as well as those who were injured, contused, crippled or diseased during the period of martial law in Ukraine. Also Yuliia shared information on projects and initiatives such as EU4Skills, “System of professional training of qualified workers for the management of remotely controlled devices in the field of radioelectronics”, “Creative Workforce for Cross-Border Future” and “SMART4YOUTH – Support Mobility and Arts for youth across the Border Romania-Ukraine”.

Eduard Staudecker, Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research of Austria

Eduard Staudecker is a Head of Department for VET Policy and Implementation of European VET policies in the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research of Austria. The Austrian VET initiatives respond to the Osnabrück declaration, the European Skills Agenda, the Green Deal and the Council Recommendation on VET, focusing on green transition, mobility, quality assurance and internationalisation. Key projects in the National implementation Plan (NIP) are e.g. the GREENOVET project and the Green Skills Competence Centres. The European Qualification Framework and Erasmus+ are considered important cornerstones to reach the objectives in terms of mobility and internationalisation. The promotion of VET is also considered to be key to overcome the mismatches on the labour market and related skills shortages.

Social Innovation is one of the investment priorities (IP) of the ongoing ESF+ programme 2021-2027. The objective is the piloting of innovative measures, with the possibility to test new ways of reskilling and upskilling people and bringing them into the labour market.

In relation to Erasmus+, the objective is to increase the number of Erasmus+ projects related to VET, and to promote the international mobility of apprentices. It is also planned to promote Erasmus+ among target groups not yet covered sufficiently, enabling equal access to European mobility programmes for all.

Panel discussion 4. Resilience, safety and rehabilitation in the Danube region

Moderator: Nadija Afanasieva, Ukrainian Institute for International Politics

1. Ugo Guarnacci

European Health and Digital Agency is a programme that encompasses various grants and procurement totaling €5.3 billion. It focuses on crisis preparedness, health promotion, health systems, workforce, digital transformation, and cancer as a cross-cutting theme. The speaker highlighted Ukraine's involvement as an associated country and its full access to EU for Health funds since January 2022. The programme includes grants for NGOs, action grants, joint actions with Member States, and direct grants to international organizations. They emphasized the importance of mental health support for vulnerable groups, particularly refugees and displaced individuals from Ukraine, outlining specific indicators and projects aimed at their psychological well-being. Additionally, they explained joint actions, urging public entities in Ukraine to participate and highlighted co-funding rates and exceptions within the programme. There are four distinct projects coordinated by different entities, focusing on vulnerable subgroups within refugees and displaced individuals from Ukraine. Specifically, these projects address the psychological well-being of women, children, and unaccompanied minors who have arrived in EU-hosted countries. One notable tool, "I Fight for Depression," was translated into Ukrainian and Russian, leveraging digital platforms to promote suicide prevention—a critical need highlighted due to the traumatic experiences of young people from Ukraine following Russia's aggressive war.

2. Oleksiy Shaforostov, Director of Educational and Methodical Center for VET in Ivano-Frankivsk region

Oleksiy Shaforostov addressed the challenges faced by the education sector in their region following the full-scale war initiated by the Russian Federation against Ukraine in February 2022. He highlighted the profound impact on education, including threats to safety, destruction of infrastructure, displacement of students and educators, and the transformation of educational institutions into aid centers. The discussion centered on the education development strategy for 2023-2027, aiming to stabilize and enhance education quality by focusing on teacher development, labour market balance, and institutional upgrades. Statistics revealed significant disruptions, such as the temporary displacement of school-age children and an increased number of internally displaced persons. Efforts to maintain educational continuity were emphasized, including regulations for internal academic mobility during martial law and creating safe learning environments in institutions. The speaker expressed gratitude for international support, cooperation, and access to educational resources during this challenging period, emphasizing the collective endeavor to innovate and sustain Ukraine's development amidst adversity.

3. Anastasia Nekrasova, LDF Director, Harthill Consulting, Head of Supervisory Board of Folk High School "Vovchok"

Anastasia discussed a focus on popular education as a response to the challenges posed by the war in Ukraine. She highlighted the transformative role of vocational education in shaping the Ukrainian population amidst the war, considering it as a catalyst for change. She delved into the concept of popular education, drawing inspiration from the Scandinavian tradition of "folk bildung" and emphasizing its non-formal educational approach. The primary objective is to support individuals and communities in war-affected regions, primarily focusing on occupied territories and areas near conflict zones. Ukrainian Bildung Network was established, collaborating with Scandinavian and Nordic countries, and the first folk high school to foster popular education in Ukraine was created. Addressing challenges where the state's assistance was limited due to war priorities, they partnered with international organizations like the Swedish Civil Contingency Agency, facilitating tactical and emergency medical training for civilians. Their efforts aim to build resilience and psychological strength within communities, viewing popular education as a democratic vehicle and a means

to engage citizens actively in shaping their future. Anastasia underscored the importance of post-war community development and emphasized the collaboration with various countries and macroregional strategies, including the Baltic and Adriatic-Ionian regions, to leverage popular education for fostering active citizenship and democratic development.

4. Anton Sytnykov, Instructor of EORE Tactical Medicine School

Anton, an instructor and project manager at a high school in Ukraine, discussed his role in teaching tactical medicine and mine safety to civil institutions like the Ukrainian national emergency service, firefighters, police, and more. He highlighted their substantial impact, estimating their training reach to be over 15,000 individuals, emphasizing that the actual number might be even higher. He portrayed their team efforts as a collective of activists driven by a desire to make a difference, stating their influence extends beyond training, influencing various spheres they engage with. Anton mentioned their upcoming trip to Finland to exchange experiences and collaborate with ministries of civil protection, aiming to learn from each other's expertise to find effective solutions.

Wrap-up of the Conference

Gerhard Eisl, Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs of Austria

Gerhard Eisl expressed his gratitude for being part of the meeting, acknowledging the excellent stakeholder conference and the collaboration between Ukraine, Moldova, and Austria. He highlighted the priorities of the Austrian Presidency, emphasizing the focus on innovation, skills, and business opportunities, aligning with the discussions held during the meeting. He stressed the importance of showcasing concrete examples of cooperation and translating academic discussions into practical outcomes for the benefit of societies in the Danube region. Mr. Eisl outlined upcoming events such as the EUSDR Annual Forum in Vienna in June 2024 and the Business Region Forum in autumn 2024, both aimed at addressing skills and aligning with the presidency's objectives. Gerhard Eisl expressed appreciation for the exiting conference and looked forward to continued cooperation in the following 14 months.

Nadija Afanasieva, Ukrainian Institute for International Politics

Nadija drew parallels between various regional strategies, highlighting the similarities in priorities despite different regional situations and challenges, from safer and remote areas like the Alpine region to more complex situations in the Balkans, Ukraine, and Moldova. Nadija urged attendees to stay connected after the event, to subscribe by following EUSDR PA9 Facebook page and website for updates and discussions related to the conference. Nadija expressed gratitude to the team, including Mykhailo and the UIIP, and extended a warm welcome to the upcoming stakeholders' conference organized by their Austrian partners.

Roland Hanak, Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy

Roland Hanak expressed deep gratitude for the successful conference, acknowledging the efforts of Ukrainian team and extending thanks to the deputy ministers, secretary of state from Moldova, and the entire team from Moldova, Ukraine, and Austria for their outstanding work. He highlighted the pivotal role of speakers in enriching the conference with valuable content. Mr. Hanak assured continued support and thanked everyone and invited every participant to the Steering Group conference in May and the Annual Forum in June in Vienna.