

**12th International Stakeholder Conference of Priority Area 9 “People and Skills”
of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region**

**Fair, Green and Digital Transition in Education and Labour
Market Policies in the Danube Region**

Date: Thursday, 23 May 2024

Venue: Flemings Hotel Wien-Stadthalle, Vienna, Austria

Report

The 12th International Stakeholder Conference focused on challenges and opportunities of a fair, green and digital transition on the labour market and in the field of education in the Danube Region. The conference was hosted by the Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy and the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research of the Republic of Austria in the framework of the 2024 Austrian Presidency of the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region.

The Conference was carried out in a hybrid format, allowing speakers and Steering Group Members to follow the conference online in case they could not attend the conference on site in Vienna.

Graphic recording

Graphic designer **Eva Rudofsky** from **Totally Dare** was keeping track of the contents and results during the day, visualising key statements and messages immediately on the spot.



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Moderation

The conference was moderated by **Nina Kraft**.

Objectives

The conference was held in light of the ongoing Fair, Green, and Digital Transition in the Danube Region, resulting in profound transformations on labour market and education systems in the Danube Region. Four key factors were identified:

- The **Green Transition** is fundamentally reshaping both education systems and the labour market. Developing green skills is essential for filling Green Jobs, which are pivotal for fostering a climate-neutral and sustainable Danube Region.
- **Digital technologies**, particularly artificial intelligence, are revolutionising how we work and learn. Adapting to ongoing digitalisation demands acquiring new skills to navigate its challenges and seize its opportunities effectively.
- In this dynamic landscape, **ensuring inclusivity** is paramount. Given the significant economic and social disparities in the Danube Region, the success of its digital and green transitions hinges on their fairness. Priority should be given to integrating vulnerable groups in the Danube Region.
- Moreover, it is imperative to involve the **voices of the youth** in shaping the future of a fair, green, and digital Danube Region.

Participants

A total of **95 participants** attended the conference on 23 May 2024, (89 onsite, 6 online), from eleven countries: Austria (50), Romania (6), Republic of Moldova (5), Slovakia (5), Ukraine (5), Republic of Serbia (3), Croatia (3), Montenegro (3), Hungary (3), Czechia (1) and Slovenia (1). Ten out of the 95 participants represented the European Commission (3), the Danube Youth Council (3), the European Training Foundation (1), ERI-SEE (1), the Danube Region Programme (1) and the Danube Strategy Point (1).

Participants' background included ministries of labour, ministries of education, ministries of social policy, NGOs, social partners, EU institutions and agencies, private sector and educational institutions.



Official Opening of the Conference



Martin Kocher (*Federal Minister of Labour and Economy, Austria*) welcomed His Excellency Alexei Buzu, Minister of Labour and Social Protection, Republic of Moldova, His Excellency Dmytro Zavorodnii, Deputy Minister of Education and Science, Ukraine, Ms. Doris Wagner, Director General in the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research here in Vienna, Austria and all participants at the 12th International Stakeholder Conference of

the Priority Area “People and Skills” of the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region. Minister Martin Kocher emphasised the longstanding and ongoing close cooperation of the Ministry of Labour and Economy of Austria with neighbouring EU member states and candidate countries in the Danube Region on relevant topics of the labour market. The Strategy puts them on an equal footing and enables a fruitful exchange and mutual learning. Against the background of the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine, he expressed his respect and solidarity with the people of Ukraine, which serves as a reminder of the core European values of freedom, peace, democracy and striving for an ever closer Union that stands for social rights and welfare, including fair and good labour markets.

Labour markets are changing under the influence of the twin green and digital transition, which, in addition to the effects of phenomena such as demographic change and related labour shortages, is reshaping the labour market requirements as well as reskilling and upskilling initiatives and the economy as a whole. This enormous task poses crucial challenges and it is up to politics to react and make sure that no one is left behind, but at the same time it also provides novel and innovative options and opportunities to be explored. Green, digital and technological skills are expected to become more and more important in the future and vulnerable groups to be presented with new opportunities to access the labour market, thus highlighting the importance and potential of the resources they bring in. With this in mind, it is important to work together towards a peaceful, prosperous, sustainable, innovative and smart Danube Region.



Director-General Doris Wagner (*Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, Austria*) welcomed all participants on behalf of Martin Polaschek (*Federal Minister for Education, Science and Research, Austria*) and emphasised that education is the best investment in the future of the region. Educational cooperation in the Danube region has been a cornerstone of the Austrian Ministry of Education for many years and has received

additional momentum since it assumed the role of Coordinator of the Priority Area on Investing in People and Skills in 2011. On behalf of the Ministry, Austria’s Agency for Education and Internationalisation (OeAD), implements numerous cooperation projects with Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and the countries of the Western Balkans.

Director-General Wagner reiterated the solidarity with Ukraine and underlined the significance of the EUSDR as a key instrument for pooling knowledge and sharing insights on educational developments towards a cohesive and inclusive European Education Area. The cooperation fostered within the EUSDR provides a platform for mutual support and inspiration, crucial for enabling young people to actively participate in social and economic life. It has resulted in significant achievements so far, including over 200 international projects implemented under PA 9, the flagship initiative "Danube Region Platform for Centers of Vocational Excellence" and the annual Erasmus+ eTwinning conferences promoting projects between schools, teachers, and students.

Director-General Doris Wagner highlighted the relevance of this year's conference theme, being a testimony to our collective commitment to addressing the challenges and seizing the opportunities of a fair, green, and digital transition in education and labour market policies. In times of profound transformation and in response to labour and skills shortages, it is even more important to work on resilient, adaptable, and forward-thinking education and skills policies. Collective efforts and a large number of initiatives are already underway in the Danube Region that support a sustainable future for Europe and the Danube region.



Alexei Buzu (*Minister of Labour and Social Protection, Republic of Moldova*) thanked everyone for the invitation to the conference and the ongoing support to his country as well as the solidarity and support to Ukraine, himself acknowledging the bravery of the men and women of Ukraine and the sacrifices they make fighting for their land and freedom. In his speech, Alexei Buzu highlighted the importance of public policy in accompanying the green and

digital transition. The notion of transition implies the presence of challenges, but at the same time also the ability to overcome them in time. This requires an ongoing work of transformation based on close cooperation between key stakeholders within a framework of enabling public policy. Due to outward migration, the population of Moldova decreased by 12% over the last decade, while the working age population decreased by 20%, which on the one hand is a result of demographic change, but at the same time also the need of better policies. Increased inequality in society is too ascribed to political choice and policy has the agency to shape these forces. Changing the legal framework and creating decent work conditions is necessary to attract skilled workers, foremost in the areas of care and social work, recognising the value of these frontline professions for society.

In view of the ongoing transformation and the challenges faced throughout this process, it is important to follow a purpose, and for Moldova this purpose represents EU integration. On this note, Alexei Buzu thanked again for the opportunity to embark together with Ukraine on the journey to become part of the European Union.

Dmytro Zavgorodnii (*Ministry of Education and Science, Ukraine*) thanked the speakers for the warm welcome and regretted not being able to join the conference in person. In the Ukraine, since the beginning of the war, 4,000 educational institutions were damaged, and more than 360 completely destroyed. While trying to continue the work under the present circumstances, the Ukraine faces numerous challenges, including the ongoing bombing and the resulting large number of internally displaced persons, many of them staying in dormitories of educational institutions. Many regions can only provide online or blended learning in a mixed format, as institutions need to have proper shelters. They are not only a safety requirement, but a place where children spend several hours each day. The Ukraine is making large investments to prepare the shelters properly, as now they are places where pupils need to learn. Still, in many areas it is impossible to participate in offline learning. Over 500,000 children are learning online only for more than two years now. Efforts are made to invest in the online learning platforms, in training digital skills of teachers and providing digital devices to children of vulnerable groups, to enhance the quality of online learning.



In relation to green transition, and as a result of heavily damaged energy infrastructure, the Ukraine is investing a lot in green energy, preparing institutions to increase their energy efficiency, and investing in solar panels to increase resilience. In relation to greening VET this includes setting up labs for green skills (e.g. solar panel installation). At the same time companies are challenged with the huge effect of mobilization, displacement of persons, and the expected demographic changes in the country.

Keynote Speeches

Maryna Tverdostup (*The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (wiiw)*) presented trends and developments in education and labour market in the Danube Region countries, illustrating developments in formal education, Lifelong Learning, ICT skills and basic competences. Key indicators were presented by socio-demographic characteristics and in comparison to EU and cross-regional trends.



The analysis showed that many countries in the Danube Region (mainly non-EU) still lag behind in formal educational attainment, digital skills and basic competencies. Decades-long demographic decline, fuelled by outmigration and stagnating fertility, will face Danube Region with demographic outlooks even more grim than EU-27 overall, resulting in widening already looming skill gaps and shortages further. Narrowing within-region education/skill divide and addressing gender, migration-driven and socio-economic disparities in skills and competencies is essential to support inclusivity and welfare growth, and to provide the economies with workers, equipped with skills and knowledge needed and rewarded on the labour market.

The Danube Region Monitor, including indicators on the education and labour market, can be accessed [here](#).



Marie-Sophie Attems (*Regional Centre of Expertise on Sustainable Development (RCE), Vienna University of Economics and Business*) presented possible solutions for transformative action addressing challenges that emerge from the climate crisis. On the policy level, an important tool to achieve the green transition within the EU is the European Green Deal.

Green skills are a necessary component of the green transition and encompass the knowledge, abilities, values and attitudes needed to live in, develop and support a sustainable and resource-efficient society. They are not solely limited to technical skills, but also most notably include transversal skills as well as skills related to operation management and monitoring. For enabling a systemic change within the framework of the green transition, green jobs focusing on providing decent work conditions and contributing to preserving or restoring the environment play a key role. Systemic change responds to multifaceted societal challenges and reshapes every sector of the economy by creating new jobs, at the same time eliminating or substituting other jobs, but most and foremost transforming most existing jobs. In order to achieve this change and equip the workforce with the newly required skill sets, tailored reskilling and upskilling initiatives that employ transdisciplinary learning techniques are essential. A proven means to foster transdisciplinary learning are real-world labs to be found for instance in vocational training or lifelong learning settings, which in order to tackle complex challenges combine a broad spectrum of different transversal skills. Two good practice examples from higher education programmes applying the concept of real-world labs are showcased in more detail in the presentation.

Panel Discussion

Nina Kraft (*moderator*) introduced the topics for discussion and the speakers of the Panel Discussion.

Egbert Holthuis (*Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, European Commission*) acknowledged the struggles faced by the Ukrainian people in particular also children by referring to the opening statement of Dmytro Zavgorodnii. He recalled the need and urgency to ensure a socially fair and just green and digital transitions and to strengthening the Union's sustainable competitiveness, but also the management of public budget in the Eurozone and in candidate countries. Through cooperation and mutual learning, action plans can be devised fast. Furthermore, he sees an opportunity in the fact that the required frameworks for enabling the transition are already in place, most notably the EU Skills strategy, qualification and training frameworks, the digital competences framework as well as the EU funds and the cooperation agreements within the Danube Region. He argued that we should work together and fully use all these tools because we have no time to waste, also because of increasing labour shortages in critical sectors, while there is considerable scope to integrate more people in the labour market, in particular young people, women, and people with a migrant background.



Egbert Holthuis mentioned the European Year of Skills as an example that supports the transformation process, because investing in people pays off for the individuals, for employers as well as for the society as a whole. The year aims to find good quality employment for young people and to expand their employment opportunities. However, in order to implement these frameworks, public and private funding is required and this is where the

ESF+ programme and the European Regional Development Fund come in, to relieve the already strained public budgets and to ensure the necessary infrastructure. The allocation of funds is based on comprehensive needs assessments with an important role of local and regional stakeholders including social partners, business and training providers, and stands in relation with the defined priorities of the programmes to promote skills development.

Tina Šarić (*Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE)*) addressed the challenges of the twin transition from the perspective of the five Danube Region countries involved in ERI SEE and pointed out mainly the lack of awareness about the green agenda and green transition in the Western Balkans. Although she recognised understanding for the green agenda at the policy level, the general population and in particular the training and education sector are not fully aware of the agenda and how they can contribute to it. Drawing on the opening statement of Egbert Holthuis, she too mentioned the challenge of time in connection to the emerging needs and to this end recommended to combine the approaches of the formal, nonformal and informal education sectors. From the perspective of the formal education, these challenges can be tackled by developing the new occupation and qualification standards at the systemic level. At the same time, it is crucial to involve the nonformal or adult education sectors (in re- and upskilling), but also the informal education sector represented by companies, which play a key role in meeting the skill demands and organising on-the-work learning – for instance by means of training academies. Finally, she pointed out the challenge of anticipating future needs in the medium and long term and as a part of the solution proposed to focus more on the key competences that are conveyed at the level of primary education, such as creative thinking, innovative learning and out-of-the-box thinking, in order to set the basis that will help us tackling the problems of the future.

ERI SEE tries to be as concrete as possible in its operations and currently participates in a project relying on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans and aiming to supporting the needs in the region. A main goal of the project is to raise awareness among the general population as well as among the education and training communities about what the Green Agenda means and what individual actions can be taken. Specific steps taken so far are focusing on developing new learning materials which will cover the new emerging skills. For this purpose, a broader labour market analysis is being conducted in the Western Balkans in order to identify needs related to skills. Further materials are currently being produced for schools about how these can implement sustainable learning in their own environments and become green schools as well as about how they can become more aware of social and gender equality issues.

Doris Wagner (*Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, Austria*) emphasised the need to act fast in order to catch up and deal with the existing challenges appropriately. She

highlighted achievements of the ministry such as redesigning the curricula for primary and secondary schools. She agreed that the primary education level is crucial for conveying key competences and stressed the importance of basic competences such as reading, math and science, but also that of digital skills. To this end, an eight-point strategic plan is in place, which, inter alia, equips all pupils with digital end devices. Furthermore, she pointed out the importance of soft skills and of targeted actions to develop the pupils' communication, creativity, critical thinking and collaboration skills. Austria has a long tradition in vocational education and training. In this area, her ministry closely works together with the Ministry of Labour and Economy and with companies with the goal to identify and foster skills that are needed in the work place. Another pillar of this cooperation is adult education in the form of lifelong learning, reskilling and upskilling.



Among Austrian best practice initiatives to promote green skills and learning against the backdrop of the green transition are efforts to establish overarching topics that are not concentrated on one subject. Green skills and future jobs in the middle segment are addressed, for instance, through special STEM schools focusing on science, technology, informatics and mathematics in the secondary school sector. Another noteworthy project at

the secondary school level in the area of vocational education and training is the Green Skills Competence Centers. This label is awarded to schools that meet certain criteria and focus on developing an understanding of green skills and green jobs as well as of needs for the workforce of the future.

Gyula Cserey (*Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, European Commission*) emphasised the relevance of the points raised by Doris Wagner and found it very reassuring to hear about the policy coherence and synergies used within the framework of cooperation between the Ministry of Education, Science and Research and the Ministry of Labour and Economy of Austria. Together with his colleagues, he tries to emulate this collaboration at the European Commission level as well and thus aims to achieve a lifelong learning continuum instead of compartmentalising different levels of education. The main contribution of the European Commission towards facing these challenges is the European Education Area, which aims to facilitate tackling these hot issues through policy and funding as well as to encourage members and the constituency to use the resources at their disposal. At the moment, the greatest challenge for the European Commission is to ensure that young people in Europe can get the best education and training and can move freely and work freely in Europe.

Against the background of the last decade being riddled with multiple crises, from economic and migration crises followed by the Corona crisis to geopolitical calamities and changing international division of labour in addition to the massive transitions discussed today, the European Commission observes a trend of downgrading basic skills in European countries. What the European Education Area can do in this regard is to research, identify and explore these issues and determine how they impact individual countries. In a next step, it can help countries to better calibrate their investment strategies as well as to identify and prioritise policies that proved successful in the past. These efforts will be continued in the next

legislative term of the EU. The new European Agenda will restate the European Education Area, the Skills Agenda, the Digital Education Action Plan, the Green Deal and other tools that can help European countries to cope with these problems. However, this is a demand-driven exercise, therefore the EU can only ensure added value if the individual needs of the countries are understood and a crucial prerequisite for this is cooperation and collaboration.

Ivana Šućur (*Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, Montenegro*) recognised from the perspective of her ministry in relation to the digital and green agenda the importance to modernise the National Agency for Employment, which includes first of all the complete digitization of the agency. To this end, she also acknowledged the necessity to change the legislation in order to streamline the implementation of the modernization processes currently underway. Another crucial challenge for the Montenegrin labour market, but also for the European labour market in the broader sense, is the issue of youth unemployment. To this end, her ministry is working on devising better targeted active labour market measures specifically addressing the NEET population. Another challenge constitutes increasing existing or developing new prevention and protection measures in policy of safety and health at work, especially related to the green agenda. She emphasised the key role of an effective social dialogue aimed to respect the government's, employers' and employees' needs when addressing these challenges. Against this background, she also pointed out the need for a well-rounded social protection system providing healthcare, income security and social services. Last but not least, facilitating an accessible, flexible and sustainable education system aligned with the needs of the economy and society is a common goal that her ministry pursues within the framework of its cooperation with the Montenegrin Ministry of Education.



Looking at the broader context of countries in Southeastern Europe, lifelong learning, reskilling, upskilling and training programmes are becoming increasingly important in the context of the green, digital and fair transition. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive approaches involving collaboration between governments, educational institutions, employers and communities in order to create inclusive and supportive environments for lifelong learning and reskilling. However, there are significant challenges that need to be overcome. One of the main challenges in Southeastern Europe is the generational gap, as older workers are often not ready for reskilling or lifelong learning due to a lack of digital skills, fear of change or simply habits and experiences accumulated over a long working life. Another issue is a lack of adult education offers in Montenegro as well as in other countries in Southeastern Europe, especially in the rural or economically less developed areas. The digital gap also poses a significant challenge, as not everyone has equal access to the internet or digital devices, which are essential for participating in online learning. Financial barriers, as we already heard from the Commission's side, are also detrimental to the transformation process. Therefore, countries in this region need more financial support in order to increase skill capacities.

Parallel Working Groups

Working Group 1 – Green Skills

The Working Group was moderated by **Tina Šarić** (*Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE)*).

Gordon Purvis (*European Training Foundation (ETF)*) gave an introductory presentation, highlighting the main challenges of the emerging topic of green skills and the green transition. This includes the need for appropriate funding mechanisms, more research & development, the lack of sustainability awareness going hand in hand with the low base of preparedness, and the lack of data. To enable the green transition, a technological and societal shift is needed, going beyond education & skills. Furthermore, context-specific approaches are required to enable tailor-made solutions, however, they need to be holistic. The social aspect is crucial, underlining the need to ensuring equal access to re- and upskilling. Cooperation and raising the awareness are key for enabling a green transition. The European Skills and Jobs Survey (ESJS) conducted by Cedefop and ETF is an important instrument for providing the necessary evidence on green skills and green jobs.

Wolfgang Pachatz (*Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, Austria*) presented the green transition in VET-Schools in Austria. The transition is based on the National Implementation Plan 2022, which summarises measures and goals for the implementation of the Osnabrück declaration and VET recommendation. The National Implementation Plan includes 28 measures in six topics, including Sustainability – Green Jobs and is targeting the three VET areas existing in Austria (dual system (apprenticeship), full time VET schools, CVET).

To enable the transition process, Austrian competence centres for the promotion of green skills are being established, and regional cooperation in green skills between secondary and tertiary educational institutions is strengthened. The green transition in vocational schools includes regular adaption of curricula, concerning both transversal (green) skills, and technical (occupational-related) green skills. Transversal skills are considered to be key, e.g. fostering environmental awareness among young people. New curricula descriptions related to the area of resource efficiency and recyclability include Life Cycle Analysis and Environmental product declarations.

Christian Nowak (*BFI Vienna, Austria*) presented the Öko-Booster Project offering a training programme teaching green skills (electrical engineering and installation and building services engineering) to young unemployed. The project follows a holistic approach, consisting not only of a training programme, offering an extensive support structure (Needs-oriented socio-pedagogical support, workshops and culture and sports activities) and job placement. The target group consists of young people (18 to 24 years) registered with the Public Employment Service, without completed training. The project targets in particular persons entitled to asylum or subsidiary protection with German A2 or higher but in need of basic education.



More information on the project can be accessed [here](#).

The **three main conclusions and take-aways** are:

- One of the main challenges in relation to the identification of green skills is the lack of data. Several options/ sources of information for bridging this gap were discussed: Public Employment Services, European Commission and employers.
- The green transition increases the relevance of re- and upskilling programmes. The Austrian Ökobooster project is addressing this need, training unemployed young people registered at the PES for green jobs with very good prospects for employment. A key success factor of the measure is the preparatory module, consisting of many accompanying measures (language training, excursion to companies, support with cultural topics, assistance in finding a job).
- The green transition results in the need of greening curricula. It is important that this process goes hand in hand with training for teachers and the preparation of supporting material. It is essential to cooperate between different levels (employers, trade unions, etc.) to achieve successful and sustainable results.

Working Group 2 – Digital Skills



The Working Group was moderated by **Nadija Afanasieva** (*Ukrainian Institute for International Politics*).

Anna Nowshad (*Deloitte, Austria*) presented findings from a study on digitalisation of the labour market from a corporate perspective. She reflected on research on the global capital trends and the digital skills for all areas. She presented three paradigms which skill-based organisations follow: such organisations think

of work in terms of skills instead of jobs, they see employees as individuals with skills and potential, and they rely on skills as a basis for decision-making and process design.

Hannah Diernhofer (*European Office of the Board of Education for Vienna*) introduced the project DigiMe, dedicated to improving the digital and media competences for pupils and teachers. The aim of the project was to prepare students in the best possible way for meeting the requirements of future jobs. A strong focus was on encouraging girls to pursue technical professions. An important achievement of the project was the development of an eLearning platform for teachers, containing learning materials and video tutorials aimed to facilitate lesson preparation.

Olha Dubovyk (*Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine*) presented new developments in relation to the digitalisation of social services in Ukraine, such as the launch of a unified information system of the social sphere or the operation of digital learning centres. This initiative is being implemented in cooperation with the Ministry of Digital Transformation for a faster and more customer-oriented provision of social benefits and services to citizens. To this end, new services were introduced that are being delivered either in person or online through the Diia portal, Social portal or by the Social Protection Authorities. These services relate for instance to eVolunteering, cyber security, humanitarian aid and information exchange and are part of the unified information system of the social sphere.

Andreas Polsterer, (*ipcenter, Austria*) presented the project IDEAL - Innovative Digital Language Learning for the Healthcare Sector, which focuses on the use of digital tools for improving German language skills in the healthcare sector. More specifically, the project addresses job-relevant German skills by providing language courses to foreign-speaking professionals in this field. For this purpose, user manuals for teachers and learners were created, as well as an online learning portal with 10 learning videos on relevant everyday topics in nursing work.

The **main conclusions and take-aways** are:

- Digital skills are required in our society in order to access the labour market, education and social services. Digital skills should be improved by means of lifelong learning. Specifically, in the world of work, all jobs are (to a different extent) supported by digital tools, which nowadays makes digital skills a prerequisite for any job description.
- Driven by urgent needs, digital skills are being boosted in times of crisis, as previously shown during the pandemic, and currently against the background of the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine. The use of digital tools can save lives and improve the well-being of citizens. At the same time, there is still a need to further improve the skills of citizens, and to permanently monitor new emerging needs in the areas of healthcare, social security, education and work, for which new services must be provided.
- We need to work together to exchange best practices in the Danube Region and to use common instruments for ensuring adequate digital skills for the everyday life.

Working Group 3 – Vulnerable Groups and a Fair Transition

The Working Group was moderated by **Jörg Mirtl** (*Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy, Austria*) and **Barbara Willsberger** (*L&R Social Research*).

Within the working group we defined vulnerable groups as persons belonging or perceived to belong to groups that are in a disadvantaged position or that are marginalised. We discussed the topic along the following four presentations:



Andrey Ivanov (*Equality, Roma and Social Rights Unit, Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA)*) presented challenges Roma are facing in access to education and employment – and contributing factors. He identified the following key points:

- Deprivation in education and employment are elements of a vicious circle of multiple vulnerabilities
- Measures addressing single dimensions only rarely bring sustainable results
- The situation is changing very slowly over time
- The gap between Roma and the general population is still huge
- Prejudice, housing deprivation and poverty emerge as key factors

In the discussion it was emphasised that housing is a basic need. In order to support vulnerable groups, it is necessary to recognise their basic needs. Only once these needs are satisfied further steps can be taken.

Sabine Albert and **Jure Purgaj** (both *University College of Teacher Education Vienna*) presented the project Inclusive Vocational Education (I-VET) in the Republic of Moldova. The I-VET project promoted inclusive education in the Republic of Moldova. In inclusive education, attributions of deficits, labels and categorizations must be eliminated and instead of concentrating on constructed differences in performance levels, the focus should be on the development potential of the pupils. In co-operation between Austrian and Moldovan experts, a handbook was developed and made available to all 89 vocational training institutions in the Republic of Moldova. The handbook is intended to encourage teachers to discover and use their resources and to go their own way. You can find the manual under the following [link](#).

Jelena Zlojutro (*Wiener Volkshochschulen (VHS)*) introduced two projects, NEVO DROM - Career and educational Perspectives for Roma and EmpoR- EmpowerRoma: Equal opportunities through qualification.

Both projects have a project duration from 1.1.2023 to 31.12.2024 and are financed with funds from the Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy, Austria. NEVO DROM is aimed at adult Roma who are inactive, unemployed, deskilled or in precarious employment. Roma should be supported in entering the Austrian labour market and the Austrian education system. Furthermore, attention should be drawn to the situation, concerns and needs of the Roma ethnic group in the majority population in order to contribute to better mutual understanding. Till April 2024 58 women and 25 men participated.

EmpoR is a pilot project, which offers free qualification courses for housemaids/boys with accompanying educational and job coaching. The aim is to train 16-24 people to work in a hotel through a three-month course. The target group are Roma with or without compulsory school certificate and with little knowledge of German or illiterate.

Michaela Bruckmayer and **Barbara Glinsner** (*Center for Social Innovation (ZSI)*) presented the transnational project MEntal Well-being in Education for disadvantaged YOUth (MEET).

The project is financed by Interreg Danube Region Programme and runs from 1.1.2024 till 30.6.2026 with 15 partner organisations across 11 countries. In 2019, 10-12% of young people aged 10-19 years in the Danube Region (DR) were affected by mental disorders. Multiple crises and challenges (COVID, Ukraine war, Climate change) are an increasing threat to young people's mental health and well-being. Therefore, a transnational approach is needed and the project focuses on three key priorities:

- SO1: Building capacities of stakeholders in (non)-formal education to implement measures for the mental health of young people by increasing knowledge and establishing new forms of cooperation between health and education domain in all PP countries.
- SO2: Advancing integration of mental health activities in (non)-formal education by jointly developing, piloting and assessing inclusive and innovative educational tools for educators and learning materials for youngsters in AT, BA, BG, HU, MD, RO, RS, SI, SK, UA.

- SO3: To contribute to inclusive education policy, designing 1 transnational strategy and 11 Local Action Plans for the integration of mental health promotion into (non-)formal education and to enable the uptake of the project's outputs at policy level.

During the discussion it was emphasised that the collaboration between the different stakeholders and the involvement of the target groups – already during the project development – are relevant success factors.

It should not be forgotten that vulnerable groups are an essential part of our society – after all, all people are just people!

Working Group 4 – Green and Digitally Skilled Youth Accessing the Labour Market (hosted by EUSDR Danube Youth Council)

The Working Group was moderated by **Maty Mihal'ko** (*Danube Youth Council*) and **Flavia Enengl** (*L&R Social Research*).

Within the framework of the working group, the members of the Danube Youth council presented select results of an own survey conducted on the topic of understanding green and digital skills from the youth's perspective and assessing the relevance and application of these skills in the context of youth employment. The survey served as input for the group discussion.



Irina Apostol (*Danube Youth Council*) provided an introduction to the survey by illustrating the methodological approach. The survey was conducted in May 2024 and addressed young people aged between 17 and 29 years from EUSDR countries that are focusing on entering the labour market. The survey consisted of a mix of open- and closes-ended questions that were subjected to quantitative and qualitative analyses. The survey followed the main goals of

determining the current green and digital skills of the youth, evaluating the educational coverage of these skills in the Danube Region as well as illustrating desired skills for enabling job improvement and reaching career goals and identifying challenges and helpful resources for young job seekers.

Viktorija Ćosić and **Biljana Popović** (*both Danube Youth Council*) presented the main findings of the survey. The survey received 45 responses from young people from 11 EUSDR countries. The majority of the respondents achieved higher levels of formal education and ranged between 21 and 26 years.

The general consensus among the surveyed young people was that green skills are skills for a sustainable future and thus highly relevant on the labour market, however, they are difficult to grasp and define – this applies to respondents with backgrounds both in social sciences and technology. A large share of the respondents is barely or not at all confident in their green skills and reports that green skills are insufficiently covered in formal education.

In reference to digital skills, the respondents assess their competences higher, especially concerning information and data literacy. Possible reasons why digital skills are wider spread than green skills among young people are the prevalence of digital media and tools that young people use on a daily basis as well as the better coverage of digital skills in formal education.

The results of the survey are described in more detail in the presentation.

The **main conclusions and take-aways** are:

- One of the main challenges concerning young people's understanding of green and digital skills and their confidence in their ability to use these skills is the limited coverage of green skills and to a lesser degree digital skill in formal education. Proposed solutions for this issue are the comprehensive integration of green and digital skills in school curricula, but also the tackling of green and digital skills through informal education and support received from peers and mentors.
- Provided that digital and green skills are gradually improved among young people, another problem to take into consideration is the skills mismatch emerging from this development. Against the background of a very heterogeneous Danube Region, this problem is more prevalent in more traditional labour markets that therefore lack suitable jobs or specialisations utilising specific green or digital skills. This in turn gives insufficient incentives for young people to pursue new green or digital skills, also limiting their ability to foster innovations.

Conclusions & Outlook

Anna Gherganova (*Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, Republic of Moldova*) highlighted the very good and fruitful cooperation with the fellow coordinators of EUSDR Priority Area 9 "People and Skills" from Austria and the Ukraine. She expressed her appreciation for the chance to be involved in an international cooperation project and exchange views with colleagues from different countries and is eager to continuously involve the Republic of Moldova in the EU Strategy for the Danube Region. She looked back on many interesting and successful events hosted together with her colleagues, today's conference being the most recent one in a long series of events.



In conclusion of today's conference, it succeeded to touch upon such an important and actual topic as skills, in particular green and digital skills. She recently finalised the discussions within the framework of the European Year of Skills where she was involved as a National Coordinator and is pleased to observe that the conclusions drawn from today's conference are very much in line with the conclusions of the final closing event of the European Year of Skills. Therefore, it is essential to focus on addressing skills shortages and we are fortunate to have many take-aways from today's conference on how to achieve this goal, such as improving the understanding of skills and intensifying the cooperation between the labour market and the education systems. The need to employ inclusive approaches by actively involving vulnerable groups such as Roma people as well as both older and young people, was once again confirmed today.

Viktoriia Karbysheva (*Ministry of Education and Science, Ukraine*) thanked all participants for standing with Ukraine, and the Austrian colleagues for their support in the preparation of the conference. The conference is an important platform for stakeholders at different levels and from different fields to exchange information and to learn from each other. The conference is

relevant and in time in terms of emerging topics, and very useful, for cooperation. Enabling the green transition is important, both to rebuild our country in a greener and sustainable way. The digital transition will enable our learners to get well equipped with the necessary skills for the future.

Jürgen Schick (*Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, Austria*) expressed his gratitude for the good cooperation, and thanked all participants, speakers and moderators for their active contribution to the conference. The conference was a much-welcomed opportunity to learn from each other. Key take-aways are that time is of the essence to address existing skills challenges and that it is important to join forces to better grasp opportunities. It is also important to act based on evidence, as it is provided by the Danube Region Monitor People and Skills, which is a useful and unique tool to monitor trends and developments in education and training in the Danube Region.

VET and VET Excellence will have a prominent role in the future, avoiding skill gaps in the context of the green transition. It is also important to look more at Lifelong Learning and Adult Learning, as well as the provision of basic skills in general but in particular to persons from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. Challenges to be tackled include building resilience on system level and addressing the technological transformation and environmental challenges. It is important to empower individuals to develop a wide range of skills. At the same time, it is crucial to enable individuals in applying those skills, as skills as such do not translate into meaningful actions without the will to act. In this regard, the EUSDR provides a valuable framework for policy exchange, networking and the implementation of projects.

Roland Hanak (*Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy, Austria*) shared the thoughts of his fellow coordinators and thanked his colleagues and the participants for their contributions. He touched upon the good cooperation within the framework of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region. Furthermore, he emphasised the need for new education, skills and jobs as well as for ensuring that these transformations occur in a fair manner and that no one is left behind.