

13th International Stakeholder Conference of Priority Area 9 “People and Skills”
of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region

Towards an Innovative, Resilient and Inclusive Danube Region through Unity and Cooperation

Date: 12th and 13th May 2025

Venue: online

Report

The 13th International Stakeholder Conference of Priority Area 9 (PA9) “People and Skills” of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) focused on the current issues with regards to an innovative, resilient, fair and inclusive transformation of the educational, social and labour market spheres in Danube Region countries. The conference 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, Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection and the Federal Ministry of Education of the Republic of Austria, the Ministry of Education and Research of the Republic of Moldova, the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Republic of Moldova, OeAD – Austria’s Agency for Education and Internationalisation and L&R Social Research.

The conference was carried out in an online format.

Speakers’ presentations can be accessed via this [link](#)

Moderation

The conference was moderated by **Nadija Afanasieva**, director of the Ukrainian Institute for International Politics.

Objectives

The conference was held considering the middle- and long-term consequences of the war in Ukraine as well as the EU accession process of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and the Western Balkan states located in the Danube Region, resulting in profound transformations on education, social and labour market systems in the region. Four key issues of supporting the innovative, resilient and inclusive transformation of the Danube Region under such circumstances were considered:

- How is the process of EU accession transforming the education and labour market spheres in the Danube Region candidate countries?
- How can vocational education and training (VET) attractiveness and visibility be increased for key audiences in the Danube Region through improving aesthetical, organizational, communication, inclusion and other factors of VET systems and institutions?
- What governmental and civil society initiatives in the fields of upskilling, reskilling, lifelong learning and inclusion of vulnerable groups are there for guaranteeing the transition to greener, fairer and more prosperous economies in the Danube Region?
- What cooperation opportunities and financial instruments are there in the Danube Region and the EU for resolving all the previously mentioned issues?

May 12th, Day 1 of the Conference

Official opening of the Conference

Dmytro Zavhorodnyi (*Deputy Minister of Education and Science of Ukraine for Digital Development, Digital Transformations and Digitalization*) welcomed members of the governments and stakeholders of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region and thanked them for their support to Ukraine and its educational sphere. He highlighted one of the country's most critical transformations in the education sector: the renewal and modernization of vocational education and training (VET) system. Vocational education is increasingly recognized as a strategic pillar for human capital development, both during the war and in the long-term recovery phase. Ukraine is experiencing an urgent and growing demand for skilled workers (such as hands-on professionals in construction sphere) that is shaped by the ongoing war anticipation of large-scale reconstruction efforts. Governmental reform is essential to bringing skilled workforce that is not only vital for immediate recovery efforts but will remain in high demand during the post-war reconstruction phase as well. In response to these needs, the Ukrainian government has made significant investments in vocational education infrastructure. Specifically, over 120 modern workshops and laboratories across the country were established with advanced machinery, drone labs, and state-of-the-art training equipment. These efforts ensure that vocational training environments reflect modern industry standards and technologies required for training qualified electricians, builders, and other professionals.

Importantly, a new law on vocational education is currently under development in Ukraine. It aims to enable the scaling of dual education programs, combining theoretical learning with practical, workplace-based experience. It also aligns Ukraine's vocational education system with European standards, in line with ongoing collaboration with international partners. Dmytro Zavgorodnyi summarized that Ukraine's commitment to modernizing its VET system and institutions reflects a forward-looking approach to national recovery. The strong emphasis on this sector in both national policy and international dialogue, including at this conference, demonstrates its pivotal role in rebuilding Ukraine's human capital and supporting sustainable development.

Iryna Postolovska (*Deputy Minister of Social Policy of Ukraine for European Integration*) extended a warm welcome to the participants of the stakeholder conference. She noted that Ukraine is laying the foundation for national recovery, with human capital development positioned at the core of its strategy. Amid ongoing challenges caused by Russia's aggression, the government is prioritizing inclusive policies and systemic reforms. Specifically, initiatives are underway to strengthen support systems in the areas of childcare, elder care, and services for people with disabilities. These efforts aim to create a socially inclusive environment where every Ukrainian citizen is empowered to contribute to the rebuilding of the country. Two significant strategies have been adopted. Firstly, a reform to uphold every child's right to grow up in a family environment. Secondly, a reform of psycho-neurological institutions, with a broader goal of transforming care systems for vulnerable populations. Both reforms represent a shift from institutional to community-based models of care.

Next, Iryna Postolovska acknowledged that Ukraine faces a projected labour shortage of up to 4.5 million people by 2035, driven by negative demographic trends due to the war that are shared across the region. In response, Ukrainian government has launched a comprehensive demographic strategy aimed at mitigating these long-term risks. Another key point made by Iryna Postolovska was social inclusion of persons with disabilities that remains a national priority in Ukraine in the light of increasing number of war-related disabilities among the veterans and civilian population. Deputy Minister informed the audience that the Ukrainian Parliament recently passed a landmark law to guarantee the right to work for persons with disabilities, to align labour policies with EU standards, to expand employment opportunities in both public and private sectors, to provide professional adaptation services and social support and to allocate state funding for workplace adjustments.

Iryna Postolovska summed up by reaffirming Ukraine's commitment to building an inclusive social policy and resilient labour market, which is unfathomable without cross-border cooperation in the Danube Region.

Welcome speeches from EUSDR PAg Coordinators

Roland Hanak (*Head of Staff Unit, Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection, Austria*) welcomed participants with a message of solidarity, admiration, and recognition of the extraordinary resilience, unwavering commitment to regional cooperation and constructive engagement shown by the Ukrainian team hosting the Conference. He acknowledged that this event brought together representatives from the European Commission, representatives from the Danube Region EU Member States and candidate countries, and from various EU-funded projects active in the region.

Roland Hanak emphasized that optimism, as demonstrated by Ukraine, is an act of resilience that reflects a belief in gradual, but meaningful progress. This attitude is essential for building the foundation for the post-war recovery of Ukraine, human capital development and reconstruction efforts, including efforts to address the need for trained professionals and skilled workers.

Roland Hanak emphasized that the conference is a crucial contribution to long-term efforts in rebuilding societies, developing regional talent, and strengthening educational spheres and labour markets in the Danube Region. He also noted that the conference is a platform to exchange best practices, align priorities, and foster mutual support among various

stakeholders of the Danube Region. Lastly, Roland Hanak encouraged participants to make the most of the fruitful discussions during the conference that would reinforce shared commitment to building a more inclusive, skilled, and future-ready Danube Region.

Jürgen Schick (*Deputy Head of Department, Federal Ministry of Education, Austria*) recognized the resilience and leadership shown by the Ukrainian colleagues in facilitating meaningful dialogue and stakeholder engagement in the Danube Region and reaffirmed the continued support for Ukraine during the ongoing Russian war of aggression.

He emphasized that the topics of education and skills are becoming increasingly important at EU and EUSDR level and have become a “strategic interest”. The European Commission’s recent launch of the Union of Skills highlights the need to invest in people to address skills and labour gaps and stay competitive. Education systems must become more equitable, adaptive, flexible and inclusive in order to prepare learners for a rapidly changing world and the demands of a digital society and world of work.

In this context, Jürgen Schick underscored the value of Priority Area 9 “People and Skills” of the EUSDR as a collaborative platform that connects policy makers and practitioners and serves as a framework for over 250 projects and initiatives, thus facilitating the exchange of best practices and innovative approaches across the Danube Region. He added that PA9’s contributions to regional education and skills development are aligned with EU-level strategies, reinforcing their relevance and impact. Summing up, Jürgen Schick expressed gratitude to all contributors, including representatives and project partners from within the Danube Region and beyond.

Anna Gherganova (*Head of Department, Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, Republic of Moldova*) extended warm greetings to all participants of the 13th Stakeholder Conference of Priority Area 9 “People and Skills” of the EUSDR. She emphasized the critical importance of resilience and regional cooperation for the Danube Region to maintain regional competitiveness and advance human capital development, particularly considering recent geopolitical and economic challenges.

Anna Gherganova informed the participants that the Moldovan government is actively pursuing reforms and programmes aligned with the European Union’s Union of Skills initiative, focusing on several key areas: ongoing promotion of upskilling and reskilling, lifelong learning and micro-credentials programmes for job seekers, and expanding efforts to support workers at risk of unemployment. Moldova is investing in strengthening the VET sphere, expanding dual education, including in the higher education sector. Particular focus has been placed on developing soft skills training as well as on bringing inactive population from rural areas into the education system. Anna Gherganova also noted that Moldova plans to improve basic skills education, including curriculum updates and teacher training, and promote STEM careers.

In the field of cross-border cooperation, Anna Gherganova emphasized the need for closer collaboration between Ukraine and Moldova and joint efforts to integrate refugees into the labour market and educational systems, given the significant number of Ukrainians currently residing in Moldova due to the war. In conclusion, she expressed hope that the conference would serve as a platform to identify shared priorities and collaborative opportunities, particularly between Moldova and Ukraine. Gratitude was extended to the Ukrainian and

Austrian partners for organizing the event, along with best wishes for a productive and impactful conference for the participants.

Introductory input – Union of Skills

Patrick Paquet (*Head of Unit, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL), European Commission*) provided a detailed presentation on the newly launched Union of Skills initiative. This ambitious and far-reaching policy effort aims to close the skills gap, boost competitiveness, and remove barriers to labour mobility across the EU and beyond.

The Union of Skills was among the first 100-day initiatives of the new commission under Ursula von der Leyen, reflecting its strategic priority status. It is closely aligned with the recommendations of Mario Draghi's competitiveness report and aims to address the urgent skills mismatch across Europe. The urgency is clear, as over half of EU employers struggle to find skilled workers, two-thirds of small and medium enterprises face skills shortages and one in three companies reports significant mismatch between worker skills and job requirements.

The Commission outlines four main pillars for action under the Union of Skills:

1. Stronger educational foundations, considering alarming decline in basic skills, including with digital literacy, shortage of graduates in STEM disciplines and double-digit decline in PhDs in mathematics, statistics, and information and communication technology.

Planned actions feature the Basic Skills Action Plan, the STEM Education Strategic Plan, with concrete goals in mind: To reduce underachievement in basic skills to less than 15% by 2030 and to increase the number of university students in STEM disciplines to at least 32%, with gender-specific targets.

2. Upskilling and reskilling, considering 40+ occupations in the EU that face shortages, especially in the fields of construction, transport, and healthcare, with only 40% of adults engaging in training, falling far behind the 60% target.

The Union of Skills initiative aims to double the number of skilled people to 50 million by 2030. Measures include expanding the Pact for Skills and launching EU Skills Academies.

3. Skills portability and recognition, considering inconsistency with recognition of qualifications across EU member states.

The Commission plans to launch a Skills Portability Initiative by 2026 to enable automatic recognition of qualifications. Intended outcomes are enhanced labour mobility, return migration with enhanced skill sets and improved access to a larger talent pool for employers across the EU.

4. Attracting and retaining global talent with a vision of the EU as a global skills magnet to draw external talent to support Europe's demographic and economic needs.

The EU Talent Pool and Visa Strategy are upcoming initiatives to facilitate the entry of students, researchers, and skilled workers from third countries to the EU. Additionally, high-level governance structures will be established, including a European Skills High-Level Board with CEOs, education and training providers, and social partners as well as a European Skills Intelligence Observatory to anticipate future needs.

Additional emphasis under the Union of Skills is placed on cross-ministerial collaboration, particularly between education and labour ministries. Overall, the Union of Skills is seen as a co-production effort, requiring coordinated action from policy-makers, businesses, and social stakeholders.

Summing up, Patrick Paquet highlighted that the Union of Skills comprises 38 concrete actions and targets every level and form of education, all types of learners, and both domestic and international labour markets. Echoing the Draghi Report, he affirmed:

"Competitiveness today is less about relative labour cost – it is more about knowledge and skills embodied in our labour force."

Patrick Paquet concluded his introductory speech with thanks to the conference organizers and a wish for fruitful proceedings.

Panel Discussions

Panel Discussion 1. Education and Labour Market Policies in the Context of EU Accession of the Danube Region Candidate Countries

The panel discussion was moderated by **Nadija Afanasieva** (*Ukrainian Institute for International Politics*).

Dmytro Zavhorodniy (*Deputy Minister of Education and Science of Ukraine for Digital Development, Digital Transformations and Digitalization*) provided an overview of Ukrainian VET sector transformations during the EU accession process. Ukraine is undergoing a major transformation of its vocational education system to make it more appealing, modern, and relevant to current labour market demands. The VET sphere in Ukraine remains underutilized, with only 35% of students pursuing this path after the 9th grade and just 10% entering initial vocational programmes. The Ukrainian government is addressing this through substantial investment in modern equipment and curricula updates, aiming to align training with new industry needs – especially those arising due to the war, such as in defence manufacturing. Legislative reforms are a core part of VET revitalization efforts, with a new vocational education law expected by mid-2025 to provide greater institutional autonomy, involve businesses in school governance, and simplify bureaucratic and licensing procedures, thus giving schools more control over strategy, curriculum, and teacher salaries – especially for specialized technical instructors. The VET reforms in Ukraine also aim to expand dual education programmes, which currently involve only 5% of VET students, by offering financial incentives to both students and businesses. These changes are in line with Ukraine's European integration agenda and aim to build a flexible and modern VET system capable of addressing labour shortages and economic shifts, while making vocational paths more attractive and impactful nationwide.

Dariia Andriunina (*Director of the Department of Employment of the Ministry of Economy of Ukraine*) highlighted the Ministry of Economy's efforts to address labour market challenges in Ukraine. The Ministry is focusing heavily on vocational education and adult reskilling as part of Ukraine's European integration strategy. A major initiative has been the voucher

programme, which enables individuals to gain new qualifications. The government is currently working to expand access by reforming eligibility criteria through a new draft law awaiting parliamentary consideration. Additionally, a pilot programme targeting women's entry into traditionally male-dominated professions has been launched, with training tailored directly to employer needs. These efforts are paired with a broader reform of labour market policies, including the drafting of a new Employment Strategy aimed at stimulating the economy, as well as upskilling and inclusivity. In parallel, Ukraine is advancing work on the Human Capital Resilience Charter, a collaborative initiative with EBRD and Korn Ferry to promote socially responsible and inclusive business practices, expected to be presented at the upcoming Ukraine Recovery Conference in Rome. European integration remains a key driver of reforms, with the Ministry of Economy focusing on alignment with chapter 2 (freedom of movement for workers), chapter 3 (right of establishment and freedom to provide services), and chapter 19 (social policy and employment). Recommendations are already in place for some chapters, with others forthcoming. The Ministry of Economy of Ukraine emphasized that EU membership is not merely a political objective, but a comprehensive strategy to build a resilient, inclusive, and competitive economy that contributes meaningfully to the EU's prosperity and security.

Johan Magnusson (*Team Leader and Senior Expert, Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO), European Commission*) emphasized that EU enlargement remains a top priority across all macro-regional strategies, including the Danube Region Strategy. Speaking from his recent experiences at the Adriatic-Ionian Forum, Johan Magnusson underlined the importance of thematic cooperation in areas such as transport, skills, education and training, highlighting the unique strength of macro-regional strategies in fostering inclusive and flexible collaboration across countries and administrative levels. Unlike other EU structures, macro-regional strategies allow stakeholders – ministries, NGOs, and private actors – to cooperate on equal footing, enabling innovation and integrated action. He stressed that these strategies can be especially impactful at the local and regional levels, where education and infrastructure must go together to support recovery, especially in the Ukrainian context. He further noted that the European Commission's biennial report on macro-regional strategies will be released shortly and will highlight how these strategies contribute to key EU priorities: The green, digital, and fair transitions – all of which require investment in skills and training. Johan Magnusson called for increased cooperation and joint initiatives among the macro-regional strategies, particularly as skills development will be essential to future EU cohesion policy goals such as competitiveness, resilience, and energy security. He concluded by reaffirming that education and training are cross-cutting enablers of Europe's strategic ambitions.

Liina Carr (*International Relations Officer, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL), European Commission*) provided a comprehensive overview of the EU enlargement process and its implications for five countries in the Danube Region: Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Montenegro. She emphasized that enlargement is grounded in the Copenhagen Criteria – with a focus on political stability, economic functionality, and alignment with the EU Acquis in areas such as labour market policy, education, and social protection. Special attention was given to the alignment and implementation of EU standards in labour markets, skills development, and

vocational education. Liina Carr informed the audience that structural issues persist across the EU candidate countries, including skills mismatches, high levels of undeclared work, gender gaps, and weak social dialogue. The 2024 Enlargement Package identifies human capital development as a key priority in all relevant support instruments, including the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, and the Reform and Growth Facility for the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, all of which combine funding with reform conditionality. Liina Carr also introduced upcoming commission initiatives, including a new Action Plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights (expected in 2026), a EU Quality Jobs Roadmap, and the Union of Skills. The Pact for European Social Dialogue, signed in March 2025, aims to reinforce the role of social partners at national and EU level. Country-specific updates on the EU accession process were shared across the five candidate countries in the Danube Region. Liina Carr concluded by emphasizing that a strong, inclusive labour market – rooted in effective education systems, modern vocational training, and social dialogue – is essential for economic convergence and a successful enlargement process.

Panel discussion 2 “Increasing VET Attractiveness and Visibility in the Danube Region”

The panel discussion was moderated by **Dragana Ilić-Đotunović** (*OeAD – Austria’s Agency for Education and Internationalisation*)

Tina Šarić (*Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE)*) addressed the critical issue of enhancing the relevance, attractiveness, and visibility of vocational education and training (VET) in the Western Balkans. She stressed that attractiveness and visibility must be grounded in relevance – VET systems must be closely aligned with labour market needs through active engagement with employers, labour market surveys, and strategic foresight. Curricula should balance theoretical and practical components while embedding key competences such as critical thinking, communication, and digital literacy. Flexibility is essential, with options for modular learning, short-term courses, and on-the-job training. Strong but manageable quality assurance mechanisms are needed to ensure high standards without overburdening providers. Despite high enrolment, VET is still not often the first choice for students in the region, revealing the need for better communication of its benefits. To improve attractiveness, Tina Šarić advocated for transparency on VET outcomes, including employment rates, career progression, and income levels. She emphasized the importance of clear progression pathways to higher education, the recognition of prior learning, and increased investment in training centres and dual education models. Visibility, she argued, should be driven by dynamic media campaigns, skills competitions, peer engagement, and real-life success stories that challenge outdated perceptions. Finally, she proposed exploring dual certification models that combine general and vocational qualifications, offering broader academic and career opportunities. In conclusion, Šarić underscored that relevance, attractiveness, and visibility must be interlinked for VET to become a first-choice, future-proof path for young people in the Western Balkans.

Anton Leodolter & Kathrin Wenny (*OeAD - Austria's Agency for Education and Internationalisation*) introduced a new project “VET CONNECT”, which aims to strengthen the VET systems in Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova by fostering systemic

improvements with a focus on work-based learning and sustainable cooperation between education and industry. The project has a unique cross-border design, also involving expert contributions from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and the European Training Foundation. Building on successful experiences from Western Balkan initiatives, VET CONNECT was officially launched in May 2025 in Chişinău, coinciding with Europe Day. The project is structured in two phases – Phase 1 runs until 2026 and includes defining the coordinators' role, developing guidelines and training curricula, and piloting the role in nine VET schools each in Ukraine and Moldova. Phase 2 (2027–2028) will scale up successful practices. A major focus is establishing the role of “VET business coordinators” in schools who act as liaisons with companies, manage workplace learning arrangements, gather employer feedback, and support curriculum alignment and career guidance. The project began following a study visit of a Ukrainian delegation to Austria in 2023, where key takeaways highlighted the need for stronger school-business cooperation and a dedicated contact point within VET institutions. During the Chişinău kick-off event, this relevance of the project was further emphasized by local companies and businesses. The project team includes representatives from the OeAD, national ministries, VET institutions, chambers of commerce, and both local and international experts. In 2025, activities shall include country webinars, in-person workshops in Uzhhorod and Chişinău, and a joint conference scheduled for November 2025.

Yuliia Yepifanova (*Swisscontact, "Public-Private partnership to improved professional education in Ukraine" (EdUP)*) introduced a project “The New VET. A Guide to Renovation Works in Vocational Education Institutions”. It aims to modernize vocational education in the construction sector. Through active collaboration with private companies, the project strengthens 29 vocational schools across Ukraine – particularly in frontline regions – by updating educational standards, co-developing training materials, enhancing teacher qualifications, and improving access to practical, job-relevant skills. A key principle of the project is treating businesses as strategic partners rather than donors, creating long-term engagement that benefits both industry and students. This comprehensive approach also includes competitions, upskilling programmes, and extensive training to promote collaboration between schools and the private sector. An important dimension of the project is improving the learning environment itself. Together with the Ministry, the team developed a practical guide for school renovation that integrates educational needs with modern design principles. The guide supports schools and business partners in transforming outdated infrastructure into motivating, functional, and inclusive learning spaces. Additionally, the project has initiated the development of multi-functional, safe educational shelters in response to ongoing security threats – ensuring uninterrupted practical learning even during air alerts. By combining industry cooperation with modern, student-centred infrastructure, the project contributes to making vocational education more attractive, accessible, and resilient – especially for youth, women, veterans, and others seeking professional reintegration.

István Lábodi (*South Transdanubian Regional Innovation Agency*) presented a Seed Money Facility project under the Danube Region Programme “SMF DANUBE CoVES”. The initiative aims to lay the groundwork for a future transnational Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVES) project that fosters inclusive, future-oriented vocational education and training (VET) across the Danube Region. With a focus on digital and green skills, enhanced cooperation between VET institutions and businesses, and stronger territorial cohesion, the

project targets systemic improvements that address disparities in the VET landscape. The preparatory partnership includes core partners from Hungary, Slovenia, and Serbia, and seeks to expand to a broader consortium of over 12 institutions. Their structured work plan includes needs assessments, project concept development, and funding source identification, with particular emphasis on aligning with Erasmus+ and Interreg calls. Through extensive stakeholder engagement involving students, teachers, SMEs, higher education institutions, and public authorities, the project identified key challenges such as outdated curricula, limited business collaboration, weak career guidance, and insufficient funding. These insights will inform the design of the future CoVE project, which seeks to build sustainable, practice-oriented vocational networks and improve employability across the Danube Region. Mr. Labodi also emphasized the risk of deepening territorial inequalities, noting that successful CoVEs may unintentionally accelerate youth migration to more developed areas. He concluded by inviting interested stakeholders to join the growing partnership, either as core or associated members, to ensure that the future project is both impactful and regionally inclusive.

May 13th, Day 2 of the Conference

Panel discussion 3. Upskilling, Rreskilling, Lifelong Learning and Inclusion of Vulnerable Groups through Employment in the Danube Region

The panel discussion was moderated by **Roland Hanak** (*Head of Staff Unit, Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection, Austria*)

Iryna Shumik (*Director General of the Directorate of Vocational Education, Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine*) delivered a comprehensive update on Ukraine's ongoing reform of VET, highlighting efforts to address labour market shortages, increase the attractiveness of VET pathways, and modernize institutional infrastructure. Amidst a significant skills gap – estimated at 3 million workers – Ukraine is pushing for closer collaboration between VET institutions and businesses through initiatives such as expanded dual education, flexible short-term training options, micro-credentials, institutional autonomy, and digital learning tools. More than 12 million EUR were invested in 2024 to upgrade Ukrainian VET institutions' workshops and laboratories, aiming to strengthen admissions and student engagement. Meanwhile, dual education saw an increase of 4,000 students and more than 1,000 participating enterprises over the past year. The Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine also streamlined the VET institutional network, while enhancing quality through modernization and innovation. Special attention has been given to lifelong learning and adult education through digital platforms, including VR/AR-enabled training. Over 900 courses were accessed by more than 11,000 learners in 2024 alone. Plans are underway to better accommodate vulnerable groups, veterans, and people with disabilities. Additionally, reforms include the introduction of dedicated career counselling roles in VET institutions and the proposed shift toward governance by steering boards. These reforms reflect Ukraine's broader strategy to align VET with labour market needs as well as European standards, with strong support from international partners and EU member states, including those from the Danube Region.

Olena Kulchytska (*Advisor to the Minister of Social Policy of Ukraine*) outlined current efforts and upcoming legislation reforms aimed at improving employment opportunities for persons with disabilities, a group significantly underrepresented in the Ukrainian labour market. As of 2024, only about 17% of the nearly 3 million working-age persons with disabilities in Ukraine are employed – a decline from over 20% before the full-scale Russian invasion. The current system imposes a 4% employment quota on private employers with more than 25 employees, with penalties for non-compliance. However, public sector employers have been exempted from this requirement. A major reform came with the adoption of a new law on January 15 2025, aligned with EU anti-discrimination standards, which extends obligations to both public and private sectors and mandates accommodations in the workplace for persons with disabilities. This law, which will come into force on January 1 2026, introduces an individualized approach to employment support and establishes a new Social Protection Fund for Persons with Disabilities. This fund will finance employment services, workplace adjustments, and other support measures, including those for social enterprises that employ a high percentage of people with disabilities. A particular focus is being placed on creating assisted employment opportunities for individuals with intellectual impairments, who currently face systemic legal and institutional barriers to work in Ukraine. These reforms are part of Ukraine's broader EU integration strategy, signaling a shift from punitive measures to more supportive and inclusive labour policies in line with European good practices.

Martina Klapan Štambuk (*Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, Croatia*) presented an initiative for the strategic revision of the Croatian adult education and workforce development system – in response to rapid demographic changes and technological advancements. Faced with an aging population and projected occupational shifts – considering that around 140,000 workers may need to change occupations by 2030 – Croatia has boosted upskilling and reskilling processes. The country previously faced low participation rates in adult education, well below the EU average. To address this, Croatia launched a flexible voucher-based training system in 2022, replacing the rigid public procurement model. This new scheme, which supports both employed and unemployed individuals, funds formal and non-formal education programmes aligned with the Croatian Qualification Framework, connecting education and labour market needs as defined by employers. The voucher programme is largely financed through Croatia's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), with an allocation now totalling 60 million EUR. It aims to provide training to 40,000 individuals, including 12,000 from vulnerable groups, with 60% of funding directed towards enhancing digital skills. Over 37,000 vouchers have been issued so far, with a significant proportion going to employed individuals. Croatia has also introduced several digital tools, including a self-assessment platform, a green and digital skills catalogue, and a labour market tracking portal that aggregates data from multiple ministries. The programme is also viewed as a transitional step toward an Individual Learning Account (ILA) system. While the initiative has shown promising early outcomes, including a 60% job placement rate among unemployed participants, challenges remain – particularly regarding increasing participation among vulnerable groups and expanding education provider engagement. Croatia's experience underscores the importance of digitalized, agile and data-informed systems in building a resilient workforce in the Danube Region.

Jelena Zlojutro (*Adult Education Centres Vienna*) presented the AMARO DROM initiative – an impactful project focused on supporting Austria’s Roma population. She emphasized that promoting employment and talent development among disadvantaged communities is key to achieving both social inclusion and sustainable economic development. Roma populations in the Danube Region continue to face systemic discrimination, disproportionately high unemployment rates, low access to quality education and a growing digital skills gap. In response, Austria adopted a national directive (2020–2030) to support Roma employment through sustained funding, aligned with the EU Roma Strategic Framework. Within this national effort, the AMARO DROM project provides free, holistic support to unemployed or precariously employed Roma individuals, including career counselling, job coaching, CV preparation, visa and childcare assistance, and access to lifelong learning. Since its launch in 2019, the initiative has supported over 400 individuals, demonstrating measurable success in labour market integration. Jelena Zlojutro underlined that upskilling and reskilling the Roma population is not only a matter of social justice, but a strategic imperative for a resilient and innovative Danube Region. The presentation concluded with a call to action for governments, employers, NGOs, and educational institutions to collaborate in scaling similar initiatives, thereby building truly inclusive education systems and labour markets across Europe.

Panel discussion 4. Cooperation and Financial Instruments to Support Innovative, Resilient and Inclusive Transformation of the Danube Region

The panel discussion was moderated by **Mykhailo Omelchenko** (*Ukrainian Institute for International Politics*)

Gordon Purvis (*European Training Foundation, ETF*) highlighted the ETF’s longstanding commitment to human capital development in the Danube Region, particularly in the Western Balkans, Moldova, and Ukraine. With over 30 years of experience, the ETF continues to focus on promoting education and labour market policies through initiatives such as the Jobs and Skills Survey, which collects employer feedback to guide future skills planning. The ETF also plays a critical role in supporting the Youth Guarantee, ensuring that all young people have access to education, training, or employment opportunities. Gordon Purvis emphasized the ETF’s work with diverse partners in the Danube Region – including governments, social partners, and NGOs – to support policy reforms and improve qualification systems and vocational training outcomes, which is especially crucial in the context of EU accession and post-war recovery efforts in Ukraine. A key focus of the presentation was the ETF’s growing role in supporting a network between Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs). With over 330 members across 50 countries, the ETF Network for Excellence promotes innovation, skills development, and institutional collaboration through peer learning, regional partnerships, and research. The ETF underlined the value of linking education systems with industry and academia to accelerate green and digital transitions and to respond to rapidly evolving labour market demands. Emphasis was placed on creating regional ecosystems for skills excellence and ensuring that best practices, such as those from Erasmus+ projects, are integrated into national systems. Finally, Gordon Purvis reiterated the ETF’s commitment to supporting Ukraine and also Moldova, as well as

continued support to partners across the Danube Region through quality assurance, social inclusion, and lifelong learning strategies.

Anders Bergström (*EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), Coordinator of Policy Area Education*) shared insights on the evolving role of macro-regional strategies in EU integration and cooperation processes in the spheres of education and labour market. He emphasized the strategic shift from project-based implementation to deeper stakeholder engagement, reflecting the growing relevance of these strategies. Notably, Anders highlighted how stakeholders increasingly bring their own funding and resources to join collaborative initiatives – demonstrating the value they see in the macro-regional cooperation framework itself. He also underscored the importance of mainstream funding programmes in supporting the strategic objectives of macro-regional strategies. The speaker shared that managing authority networks and alignment with cohesion policy instruments have been key tools for unlocking this cooperation potential. Anders also featured two concrete success stories in his presentation. The first one described the development and regional transfer of Youth Guidance Centers – a proven model for supporting NEETs – which have now been implemented in several countries, including Poland and Lithuania. The second example focused on Ukraine, where cooperation between Policy Area Education and Policy Area Secure supported the establishment of a non-formal education centre training emergency responders. The centre has already trained 85 trainers and over 55,000 responders, including military personnel. These examples demonstrated how the macro-regional strategy framework can offer agile, demand-driven, and impactful responses to both long-term challenges and urgent needs.

Pavol Krempaský (*European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), Erasmus+ Capacity Building for Vocational Education and Training (CBVET)*) introduced the Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Vocational Education and Training (CB VET) action, targeting improved access, quality, and relevance of VET systems. The CB VET action belongs to the Erasmus+ programme. Usually, the deadline for submission of applications is in February or March and around 70 projects are selected every year. While the applicant can only be from an EU country or six third countries associated to the programme, partners can be from almost all over the world. The presentation emphasized that CB VET projects must support systemic capacity building rather than merely developing curricula. Projects should prioritize cooperation among VET providers, private sector actors, and other stakeholders to enhance institutional capabilities. Activities may include developing networks, improving training delivery, and facilitating mobility, although the latter must remain a complementary element. The speaker highlighted the importance of aligning project proposals with national needs analyses and existing VET country reports produced by the European Training Foundation in case projects have partners from these regions: Western Balkans, Neighbourhood East and South Mediterranean countries. In case of Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean the Global Gateway is the priority. Pavol Krempaský also provided practical insights on funding for EUSDR PA9 stakeholders, with grants ranging between €100,000 and €400,000 for 2–3-year projects, and noted the increasing competition: from 299 applications in 2024 to 611 in 2025. He concluded by stressing the need for demand-driven, well-justified projects with equitable grant distribution, and encouraged attendees to consult the Erasmus+ results platforms for inspiration and

partnership building. In case of questions, please contact EACEA-EPLUS-CBVET@ec.europa.eu.

Svitlana Shytikova (*Coordinator, National Erasmus+ Office in Ukraine*) presented the EUSDR PAg stakeholders with an overview of Ukraine's engagement in Erasmus+, which has been actively supported through partnerships between the European Education and Culture Executive Agency and the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine. These collaborations have enabled targeted efforts in promoting mobility, cooperation, and capacity-building projects for Ukrainian VET providers. Through platforms such as eTwinning, EPALE, and the European School Education Platform, Ukrainian stakeholders are increasingly accessing open resources, establishing partnerships, and participating in professional networks, all of which are critical for strengthening the VET sector amid wartime challenges and recovery. Since 2014, Ukraine has significantly expanded its role in Erasmus+, benefitting from exceptional measures introduced by the European Commission after the Russian invasion. These measures have opened access to all Erasmus+ sectors – including school, higher education, adult education, youth, and sport – facilitating mobility and institutional partnerships even for institutions near frontline areas. Recent projects have focused on micro-credentials, digital and green skills, renewable energy, and inclusive education. Ukrainian VET institutions, often in collaboration with partners from Germany, Latvia, Italy, Bulgaria, and others, are not only modernizing curricula and teaching methodologies, but are also co-developing digital platforms, methodological frameworks, and innovative learning resources. This growing participation is supported by a rich database (see link [here](#)) of funded projects and continuous training initiatives aimed at building the capacity of Ukrainian organizations to engage in Erasmus+ effectively and sustainably. There are about 40 calls for proposals where cooperation is possible under the EU's Erasmus+ Programme, and Ukrainian VET institutions are looking forward to partnerships and contacts from VET providers from EU member states for long-term collaboration".

Wrap-Up of the Conference

Roland Hanak (*Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection, Austria*) expressed deep gratitude for the successful conference that addressed the crucial topic of qualification from many valuable angles. He reiterated that qualification as well as skilling, upskilling, and reskilling remain central to securing a stable and prosperous future in the Danube Region. He expressed his hope that participants of the Conference could take this knowledge back to their countries, institutions, and daily work. The Conference has not only become a platform for exchange but also an opportunity for continued learning – something PAg EUSDR must never stop pursuing. Roland expressed his impression with Ukrainian resilience and determination during historic times and once again expressed Austrian solidarity and support. He concluded by reminding the participants of the next opportunity for in-person meeting in Sarajevo later in 2025.

Mykhailo Omelchenko (*Ukrainian Institute for International Politics*) wrapped up the Conference with warm appreciation extended to all speakers and participants taking part in the online event. Mykhailo thanked Austrian partners for their role as excellent co-hosts,

acknowledging their continued invaluable participation, support and dedication in organizing the Conference. He expressed hope that this two-day event provided participants with a comprehensive overview of EUSDR's potential in the areas of education, the labour market, and social policy, and opened doors to future collaboration and innovative partnerships.