

Minutes

20th Steering Group Meeting

Priority Area 9 “People and Skills” (PA9)

Date: 27th May 2021

Venue: Online

Chair:

Daria Bovkun, Ministry of Education and Science, Ukraine

Roland Hanak, Federal Ministry of Labour, Austria

Jürgen Schick, Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, Austria

Ludmila Pavlov, Ministry of Education, Culture and Research, Republic of Moldova

Welcome and Introduction

Roland Hanak, Jürgen Schick, Ludmila Pavlov and Daria Bovkun opened the Steering Group Meeting and welcomed members and participants of the PA9 Steering Group. Team of PAC9 mentioned the upcoming anniversary of 10 years of implementation of the Danube Strategy in 2021. The importance of cooperation of all the member states within PA9 in terms of recovery and resilience of the Danube Region was highlighted. PAC9 also mentioned the upcoming Ukrainian Presidency of the EUSDR in 2022 and the identification of PA9 as one of the thematic priorities of the future Presidency. A new PAC9 Team member, Sarah Fellner (Austria), was welcomed.

Adoption of Agenda

The Agenda was adopted unanimously.

General update from the EU Commission (Dorota Korczyńska, DG REGIO, European Commission)

Dorota Korczyńska provided a short update with regard to the state of play of the next programming period of the EU Macro-Regional Strategies 2021-2027 (MRSs). The Agenda of the EU MRSs for 2021-2027 indicates implementation of the European Green Deal, digital transition, COVID-19 recovery, civil society and youth, reboosting tourism and cultural sector as priority topics to be addressed during the next six years. Ms. Korczyńska also stressed the

importance of reinforcing the participation of the civil society and youth in the governance of the MRSs. Find the presentation via the [link](#).

Particular attention was drawn to the Youth Manifesto document ([Manifesto for Young People by Young People to Shape the European Cooperation Policy](#)), notably the promotion of regular exchanges between the governance structures and NGOs. The main target is to ensure the involvement of youth in governmental activities.

Another aspect is the digital targets that are expected to be achieved by 2030, in particular the establishment of digital infrastructure and the digital transformation of private sector and public services. The targets are related to the PAs 7-11 of the EUSDR.

At the end, Dorota Korczyńska announced upcoming events, including the Conference on the Future of Europe, European Week of the Regions and the Cities, 109th Session of the International Labour Conference.

Up to date information from the Danube Strategy Point (Mihaela Florea)

The Danube Strategy Point (DSP) presented the activities conducted during the first semester of 2021. The DSP is currently developing activities for supporting the coordination among EUSDR stakeholders, the EUSDR monitoring and evaluation as well as the capacity building. Also, the EUSDR DSP is supporting the Embedding process, is engaged in communication activities such as the promotion campaign of EUSDR in social media platforms as well as in developing a mobile application for EUSDR.

Mihaela Florea also shared the DSP vision on the process of identifying EUSDR Strategic Projects. The main goal is to provide a practical tool for all the member states to foster projects and processes of a strategic character, as well as to highlight the progress achieved in order to strengthen the internal and external cooperation.

Update on Education, Labour Market and Social Policies in each country

Tour de table

AT – Roland Hanak (Labour Market): Roland Hanak commented on the labour market situation in Austria, which was dramatically affected by the Covid-19 crisis. As of 24 May 2021, 321.325 were registered as unemployed. After the end of the most recent lock-down, unemployment fell and reached levels before the crisis. Since the beginning of 2021, 175.000 unemployed could be brought back to the job market. Hanak explained the measures taken by the Austrian government, the most important of which is short-time work model. Short-time work means that the working hours of all employees in a company are reduced (by a maximum 90%) for a certain period of time, within which the working time should be reduced to an average of 10-30% of the initial working time. Short-time work is granted for 3

months and can be extended to a maximum of 6 months. By 24 May 2021, 323.518 persons in Austria were working under this scheme, which is almost a million less than in May 2020.

AT – Jürgen Schick (Education): Since 17th May 2021, schools in Austria have shifted back to the regular attendance mode. Austria actively works for reforming the education system. At the end of April, the Austrian government approved the National Reform Program 2021 and Austrian National Recovery and Resilience Plan for 2020-2026. Improving digital skills at all levels of education is considered a top priority in the educational sector, especially since the COVID-19 crisis. Austria is implementing an 8 point plan for digital education which includes i.a. the provision of digital devices for learners and schools as well as the upgrading of teachers` digital skills. With respect to improving equal opportunities and to counteract the threat of educational losses due to the pandemic, the Austrian government has launched several measures, including making available mobile devices for disadvantaged students, providing additional learning support and organizing summer schools in 2020 and 2021. As a part of the reform processes, a pilot project “100 schools – 1000s opportunities” was launched, which provides additional resources and support packages (e.g. extra-teaching staff, social workers etc) to socially disadvantaged school sites.

HR – Loredana Maravić (Education): The Croatian parliament has developed a national strategy until 2030. With respect to higher education, the key issue is to increase the number of residents with a higher education degree, since rates in Croatia are currently below the EU average. For this reason, Croatia introduces special grand schemes for several categories of students in the form of scholarships. Another policy issue in the educational sector is the adoption of amendments introduced to the Act on Qualification Framework, which aim to facilitate the procedure of accessing the qualification standards. With respect to the internationalization of higher education, the Croatian government encourages its universities to participate in students` exchange programs along with the universities of other EU member states. With regard to the primary and secondary schools, the government introduced the e-school project, which aims to support the digital transformation of schools that is in line with the comprehensive curricula reform. The other key policy is the introduction of whole-day schools, since in Croatia pupils spend less time in primary schools in comparison to other EU member states. Croatia established regional competence centers that are co-funded by the European Social Fund. Their goal is to introduce the new curricula oriented towards the labour market needs.

HR – Filip Miličević (Labour Market):

In March 2020, the Croatian government introduced job reservation measures, in particular the wage subsidies. Wage subsidies are financed by the cost of national resources and ESF funds. Such measures are oriented towards saving workplaces and are already turning out to be successful. Generally, the employment rate remains stable, however the unemployment

rate increases. The government is currently working on the preparation of the recovery plan. There are several reforms envisaged with regard to protection of vulnerable groups and rising of minimum wage. The government is highly interested in attracting targeted investments in the employment sphere.

CZ – Ondřej Krýsl (Labour Market): COVID-19 still has a significant impact on the labour sector. The unemployment rate has increased from 2.8 to 3.2% as compared to the last year. However, starting from January 2021 this rate has begun to fall gradually. The Czech Republic lost its long-lasting leading position in the lowest unemployment rate in the EU in favour of Poland. But it remains close behind in the second place. The Antivirus Employment Support Program introduced by the Czech government has made a major contribution to such a positive result. It was created as a temporary measure to support the employers in the conditions of the pandemic crisis. Antivirus program has supported over 1 million employees by partial wage compensations during the first year of its operation. It is highly recognized by trade unions and employers. Currently, the Czech government is trying to introduce the same measures on a permanent basis in the form of amendments to the Employment Act. It is designed to help companies in times of economic recession, natural disasters, pandemic situations, etc.

CZ – Kateřina Maláčová (Education): The pandemic situation badly affected the educational systems of the Czech Republic. It has the longest period of distance learning in the EU. Higher education facilities were closed in November 2020 and started to reopen in May 2021. The Ministry of Education has recently issued a document called Support for Mental Health in Schools. Also, the Ministry has prepared the instructions for summer camps which aim to reduce the negative impact of the pandemic on children. Summer camps are free of charge and the government encourages parents to use this opportunity for their children.

DE – Tilmann Späh (Labour Market and Education): Germany is currently going through a period of economic recovery. The pandemic-related unemployment rate is falling steadily, which is, in particular, to a certain degree dependent on the active vaccination programme. In the field of school-based education in Baden-Württemberg, it is hoped that all schools will be reopened after the summer break. Among other measures, vaccination is perceived as an important element among other steps taken to tackle the pandemic in general and to foster the possibility to provide regular schooling for all pupils in the new school year to come. It is expected that one of the main tasks will also be to introduce additional learning support and organizing summer schools, escorted by supporting schools with mobile devices and other digital equipment.

HU – Gabriella Tölgyes (Labour Market): The main goal of the Hungarian government in the sphere of the labour market is to overcome the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis. Due to

the effectively introduced crisis management measures, the unemployment rate in Hungary is the lowest in the EU and does not exceed 3.3-4%. Although the rate of people employed abroad significantly decreased since the start of pandemic crisis, the general employment rates in Hungary remain steady. These rates are a result of the implementation of a number of measures, including the introduction of wage subsidies which are financed by the EU and national sources. For further development of labour sphere, the Hungarian government has continued the Job Protection Action Plan which sets the subsequent measures in order to keep stable and improve the overall employment situation.

MD – Ludmila Pavlov (Education): The main activity in the field of policy development is Elaboration of the Education Strategy 2030, aligned to the Agenda 2030 and the Programme for its implementation. In this process, we receive the financial support of the Global Partnership for Education. There is an extensive consultation process that involves various stakeholders, actors and beneficiaries.

The Republic of Moldova has recently introduced a number of reforms in the educational sector. Notably, the procedure of passing exams by pupils and students was revised with a view to adapting to the current pandemic conditions. Professional exams for bachelors have been also introduced. The Ministry of Education has drafted a new model of the diploma and diploma supplement in order to correspond to the EU requirements. With a view to facilitating the process of online learning, the national digital program for teachers was introduced in form of summer trainings. It was successfully tested last year and is expected to be upgraded this year. The Ministry is currently developing the program which is aimed to achieve better connection between education and labour market.

RO – Daniela Placinta (Education): The main measures taken by the Romanian government were aimed at ensuring a safe, resilient and accessible online learning environment for students and teachers. Starting from March 2020 digital trainings were introduced for teachers in order to facilitate the process of using various digital platforms, like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, etc. A part of government funds, along with the financial support of private partners, were spent on the IT equipment, with Internet access provided to schools and disadvantaged students. Currently there are introduced two scenarios for the preschoolers and students – 1) face-to-face activities implemented when the pandemic situation is relatively safe and the rate of COVID-19 incidence is equal or less than 1/1000 cases; 2) online activities when the rate of COVID-19 incidence exceeds 1/1000 cases. The Romanian government is currently developing the Strategy for Digitalization 2021-2027, the main objectives of which are developing of digital skills for pupils, digital training for teachers, addressing the learning gaps due to the lack of digital infrastructure and developing of digital educational tools.

RS – Danijela Stojanović and Boško Latković (Labour Market): Despite the COVID-19 crisis the situation on the labour market of Serbia remained stable in 2020. Since the beginning of the 2021 the number of unemployed (in the National Employment Service records) increased by 11.7%. In order to improve the situation, the government introduces economic measures in order to support the employers and employees. The government has also adopted the New Employment Strategy for 2021-2026 and the following Action Plan for 2021-2023. The main goals of this initiative are to achieve the growth of employment rate by 2026, to improve the position of unemployed people on the labour market, to develop the lead framework of employment policy in Serbia, to improve the labour market conditions for vulnerable groups of people.

SK – Lucia Auxtová (Education): Slovakia has gradually been reopening the educational facilities. New phase of reopening is directly related to the vaccination of teachers and students. Kindergartens, primary and secondary schools were allowed to reopen in May 2021, however higher schools and universities still operate under restricted conditions. The government finances the summer school programs in order to reduce the negative impact of pandemic situation on education process, and encourages primary and secondary schools to organize the volunteer spring schools. The government also spends funds on digital equipment for schools in order to enable and simplify the online learning process, as well as on organization of digital trainings for teachers.

SK – Drahuša Kalmanová (Labour Market): The situation on the labour market in Slovakia seems to improve compared to the situation which arose at the beginning of pandemic crisis. The government introduces crisis management measures in order to decrease the unemployment rate and stabilize the labour market. For instance, in April 2021 there was introduced a project aimed at providing assistance for employers, including self-employed people, whose businesses were forced to close during the lockdown periods. The government has drafted the Strategic Priorities for Developing Employment in the Slovak Republic by the end of 2030 in order to foster the overcoming of crisis.

UA – Daria Bovkun (Education): In 2021 the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine established a new structural unit – Directorate on Digital Transformation, the main goal of which is to reform the existing educational system with a view to digital needs. The government has promoted several initiatives in order to ensure equal educational opportunities. In particular, there were introduced such innovations as the state electronic class journal, several manuals for educational facilities, teacher's office web platform. During this year it is expected to introduce the mobile app which will provide a possibility to download the additional materials for lessons. The other sphere which is of the main priorities is to improve the level of digitalization in schools. For instance, last year there was

launched a pilot project for evaluation of digital capacity of schools which intends to help the educational facilities to identify their strengths and weaknesses in digital sphere. Also Ukraine continues to implement the EU-funded program “EU4Skills: Better Skills for Modern Ukraine” which addresses the development of modern educational standards and modernization of educational infrastructure.

UA – Ihor Tereschenko (Labour Market): In order to reduce the impact of the COVID-19 crisis the government introduced several measures aimed to support unemployed people, as well as employees and individual entrepreneurs who suffered financially during the quarantine period. The government has introduced educational and skill-development trainings for unemployed people. Starting from 2020 there has been launched a new digital service for successful employment of Ukrainians called Educational Portal of State Employment Service. Also the mechanism of partial employment benefit was introduced as a kind of compensation for lost wage of employees and individual entrepreneurs during the quarantine period. Along with this program, there was introduced a one-time assistance program – financial support for employees and individual entrepreneurs.

UA – Olha Dubovyk (Social Policy): The government has approved the Human Development Strategy which is aimed at building an educated and innovative society, ensuring access to equal education, using digital technologies. It is expected that the realization of the Strategy will result in improvement of live expectancy, quality of life and living standards. The government also introduced new legislative measures focused on improvement of working conditions for disabled people.

State of Play EUSDR and PA9: news, recent projects, and events

Embedding process and starting of the new financial period 2021-2027 for ERDF, IPA and NDICI
Barbara Willsberger (L&R Social Research, Austria) commented on the ESF+ activities, which deal with the Danube Strategy. She emphasized that EUSDR topics are going to be embedded in the upcoming ESF+ programs. The main issue of interest is the introduction of transnational cooperation text modules into the programmes. A joint text module was developed within the ESF+ with respect to the topics of PA9 of the Danube Strategy. At the end, Ms. Willsberger announced a new project “SIPLUS” which was launched in a partnership with Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany (Baden-Württemberg) and Slovenia aiming to foster social innovation in the Danube Region and beyond.

The European Commission currently places a clear emphasis on the incorporation of the objectives of macro-regional strategies into the relevant programming documents (so-called embedding) when preparing programming documents at the national level for the period

2021-2027. The proposal for a Regulation on common provisions of the European Parliament and of the Council (CPR) **Article 22(3), point d)(i)** explicitly declares the preconditions for operational programs: inter alia at the level of specific objectives with regard to macro-regional strategies.

The European Commission warns that **operational programs that do not make a real contribution to macro-regional strategies will not be approved**. It will also monitor more closely the contribution of operational programs to macro-regional strategies in the implementation phase.

To facilitate the whole embedding process, as well as to focus on the most important areas of the Danube strategy, at the level of coordinators of priority areas of the strategy, 36 goals (areas - shortlist strategic topics) were selected from the 85 objectives of the action plan to be embedded.

Carlos Bolaños (TESIM ENI CBC) reported that the ENI CBC is currently being reorganized into the Interreg NEXT (2021-2027). The countries concerned are ready for shifting. Carlos Bolaños mentioned four core implications introduced in order to simplify the process of joining the Interreg:

- a common legal framework with other CBC;
- all-in-one legislative package;
- all funds managed by the same DG;
- continuity of the key specificities – e.g. the prefinancing and co-financing project systems.

The transitional period is planned to be finished by 2024. The Interreg Regulation and NDICI Regulation are expected to be adopted in June 2021. The following implementing acts will be drafted and further adopted in September 2021.

Update on the DTP 2 financial planning (Stephen Halligan, project officer, Danube Transnational Program)

The next programming period of DTP (2021-2027) consists of four investment objectives, in which priority objective 3 (PO3) is focused on a more connected Europe.

Mr. Halligan reported that PO3's focus is to enhance the effectiveness and inclusiveness of labour markets and the access to high quality employment by developing social infrastructure and promoting social economy in the Danube region.

PO3 focuses on the following priorities with a view to the employment sphere:

Focus 1 – the integration of vulnerable groups into the labour market, with special attention to regions that display high proportions of disadvantaged populations. The main idea is to broaden the understanding of vulnerable groups (minorities, people with disabilities, old people, youth, women, etc.) and to increase the number of tools aimed at avoidance of discrimination.

Focus 2 – retaining skilled labour and developing a more sustainable migration of educated people. The main issue is to understand the existing problems and to find proper solutions.

Focus 3 – capacity building for employment support bodies (information and data systems; coordination; training e.g. in social economy). The main target is to look for new approaches in the social economy and innovations sphere.

In the educational sphere the priorities are as follows:

Focus 1 – developing innovative educational models, programs, practical tools and materials for disadvantaged learners, including early school levels.

Focus 2 – maximizing the use of existing knowledge and experience to develop best practices in inclusive education policy and advancing education and policy reform.

Focus 3 – innovative approaches to encourage and improve inclusive vocational education and training and lifelong learning.

Danube Region Platform of Centers of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs)

Jürgen Schick (PAC9, Austria) reported that on the basis of discussions conducted with the members of the PA9 Steering Group, a draft concept note and a questionnaire to further develop the initiative were sent to PA9 Steering Group members in December 2020. Responses to the questionnaire were received by a total of 10 Danube Region countries, all of which welcomed the idea of establishing a Danube Region Platform of CoVEs with potential thematic priorities of green skills and social inclusion. Mr. Schick noticed the favorable experience achieved thanks to the collaboration of PA9 with the ETF and expressed a desire to develop further the cooperation. A first meeting of to kick-off the platform could be envisaged for the second half of 2021.

Georgios Zisimos (European Training Foundation) announced the beginning of the funds allocation in the ERASMUS+ program, which is expected to broaden the existing opportunities for applicants and member states. The ETF is launching the sub-initiatives within two priority areas – green skills and social inclusion. They will operate as small groups of stakeholders to work in a specific area, which are financed with the small targeted funds. The expected outcome is to prepare the basic line and to come up with specific recommendations for future projects implementation. In order to ensure the effectiveness of the sub-initiatives, the ETF is going to open workshops (2021-2022) for all parties concerned in order to provide understanding of sub-initiatives` activity and operation peculiarities of the initiatives.

eTwinning Conference 2021 on School Cooperation in the Danube Region (10-11 June 2021)
(Frederic Bayersburg, OeAD – Austria’s Agency for Education and Internationalisation)

Frederic Bayersburg noted that eTwinning is one of the largest online communities for teachers and schools in Europe, which provides the possibility to implement online projects, develop learning processes and enhance cooperation between schools.

The upcoming eTwinning conference on 10-11 June 2021 will focus on the cooperation of schools in the Danube Region. It will bring together teachers, school principals and representatives of eTwinning agencies from the countries participating in the EUSDR. The aim of the event is to enhance transnational cooperation among teachers and schools and to initiate new eTwinning projects in the region.

International Stakeholders Conference 17-18 June 2021 (Nadija Afanasieva, PAC9 Support Team, Ukrainian Institute for International Politics)

The 9th International Stakeholder Conference of EUSDR PA9 "A Resilient Danube Region through Digitalization, Inclusion and Education" is hosted by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine in partnership with Austria and the Republic Moldova. The key objective of the Conference is to discuss the development of strategic areas of the PA9, notably digitalization, social inclusion and VET.

Update of the "Danube Region Monitor – People and Skills" (Monika Schwarzhappel, Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies)

Ms. Schwarzhappel from the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (wiiw), which was commissioned with the update of the Danube Region monitor, reported that the new edition of the Danube Region Monitor will focus on economic and social effects of the COVID-19 crisis and will analyze key indicators on labour market and educational spheres. Wiiw is an independent non-profit research institute specialized in Central, East and Southeast Europe.

Guidance Paper for identifying and listening EUSDR Strategic Projects/Processes (Sarah Fellner (OeAD – Austria's Agency for Education and Internationalisation))

Sarah Fellner made reference to the draft version of the Guidance Paper, which had been prepared by the DSP, and highlighted issues for preliminary discussion, such as terminological aspects, as well as the scope and criteria for EUSDR strategic projects/processes. It was announced that a request for the submission of written comments would be sent to the members of the Steering Group after the meeting. All inputs received would be collected and a coordinated response would be sent to the DSP.

Publication "Ten Years of Investing in People and Skills" (Jörg Mirtl, L&R Social Research)

The publication is aimed at commemorating and providing an overview of the last ten years of collaboration in labour market and educational policies, as well as the inclusion of marginalized groups. It will encompass and highlight particular measures and actions taken in

these spheres since the start of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region in 2011, as well as reflect upon what could be further achieved in the future. SG Members were invited to submit proposals to contribute texts to this publication.

Adoption of the rolling Work Programme PA9 (Daria Bovkun)

The rolling Work Programme PA9 was adopted.

Any other Business

Steering Group members were asked to review the Steering Group contact list and inform PAC9 of any updates or changes (if any).

Conclusion and Next Steps

Daria Bovkun, Roland Hanak, Dorota Korczyńska, Jürgen Schick, Ludmila Pavlov, Nadija Afanasieva delivered concluding remarks and closed the Steering Group Meeting.

Participants of the 9th SG meeting of the PA9 EUSDR:

First Name	Last Name	Institution	Country
Frederic	Bayersburg	OeAD – Austria’s Agency for Education and Internationalisation	Austria
Sarah	Fellner	OeAD – Austria’s Agency for Education and Internationalisation	Austria
Roland	Hanak	Federal Ministry of Labour	Austria
Jörg	Mirtl	L&R Social Research	Austria
Monika	Schwarzappel	Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies	Austria
Jürgen	Schick	Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research	Austria
Barbara	Willsberger	L&R Social Research	Austria
Carlos	Bolaños	TESIM ENI CBC	Belgium
Dorota	Korczyńska	DG REGIO, European Commission	Belgium
Loredana	Maravić	Ministry of Science and Education	Croatia
Filip	Miličević	Ministry of labour, pension system, family, and social policy	Croatia
Ondřej	Krýsl	Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs	Czech Republic
Kateřina	Maláčová	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports	Czech Republic
Tilmann	Späh	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of Baden-Württemberg	Germany
Stephen	Halligan	Danube Transnational Program	Hungary
Gabriella	Tölgyes	Ministry of Innovation and Technology	Hungary
Georgios	Zisimos	European Training Foundation	Italy
Ludmila	Pavlov	Ministry of Education, Culture and Research	Republic of Moldova
Mihaela	Florea	Danube Strategy Point	Romania
Daniela	Placinta	Ministry of Education and Research	Romania
Boško	Latković	Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs	Serbia
Danijela	Stojanović	Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran’s and Social Affairs	Serbia
Lucia	Auxtová	Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family	Slovakia
Drahuša	Kalmanová	Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family	Slovakia
Nadija	Afanasieva	Ukrainian Institute for International Politics	Ukraine
Daria	Bovkun	Ministry of Education and Science	Ukraine
Olha	Dubovyk	Ministry of Social Policy	Ukraine
Ihor	Tereschenko	Ministry of Social Policy	Ukraine