

Minutes of the 25th Steering Group Meeting of Priority Area 9 ,People and Skills' (PA9)

Date: 28 November 2023

Venue: Online

Chair

Roland Hanak, *Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy, Austria*

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

Oleksandra Husak, *Ministry of Education and Science, Ukraine*

Nadija Afanasieva, *Ukrainian Institute for International Politics, Ukraine*

Anna Gherganova, *Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, Republic of Moldova*

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

Welcome and Introduction

Roland Hanak, Jürgen Schick, Oleksandra Husak, Anna Gherganova and Ludmila Pavlov opened the Steering Group Meeting (SGM), welcoming the Steering Group members, speakers and participants of today's meeting. Jörg Mirtl was introduced by Roland Hanak in his new role at the Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy. The Austrian PACsg informed on the recently started Austrian EUSDR presidency, highlighting 'Boosting skills and competences' as one of the presidency's objective and the related role of Priority Area 9. They expressed their solidarity and gratitude for the work done under these challenging circumstances under the war provoked by Russia. The Ukrainian PACg thanked all partner countries for their day-to-day support and underlined the importance on putting the focus on education, training and youth in times of recovery. The ENI leftovers were highlighted, as EUR 1.3 million were passed to Ukraine and EUR 1.2 million to the Republic of Moldova.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted unanimously.

Update from the Austrian Presidency and thematic priorities (Jutta Moll-Marwan)

Jutta Moll-Marwan informed about the Austrian EUSDR presidency, its priorities and objectives. Austria took over the EUSDR presidency from Slovenia on 1 November 2023 for the next 14 months until the end of 2024. The slogan of the presidency is '*Shaping Transformation, Creating Opportunities: A Prosperous, Resilient and Secure Danube Region*'. In the preparation of the Austrian presidency programme a bottom-up approach was chosen, creating a task force consisting of representatives at federal and regional level, social partners and other stakeholders being active in the Danube Region Strategy in Austria. The presidency programme is based on the understanding of the presidency as a process to ensure continuity in the cooperation processes, as this is when cooperation can build up on. The presidency is seen as a possibility to draw attention to certain topics, and to seize the moment, as contributions to next year's publication of the Cohesion Report, and to the preparation of the regulations for the next programming period could generate a value added.

The presidency is also seen as a platform to inspire people, aiming to organise meetings, and inviting experts from outside of the key EUSDR stakeholder community, allowing for different formats to facilitate the exchange of stakeholders.

Regarding EUSDR governance the Austrian presidency considers the governance structure being in place (see the governance architecture paper attached), but next steps are needed to increase the efficiency of the EUSDR focusing on the implementation into practice, including the understanding of roles and improvements of the interfaces between different levels (PAC, EC, NC, SG, political level). In this regard, it is planned to intensify discussions within the core EUSDR stakeholder group.

The Austrian presidency aims at promoting and increasing the political attractiveness of the EUSDR to become a relevant player by identifying hot topics and bringing the EUSDR closer to up-to-date political topics. In this regard, the objective is to launch a process identifying arguments and input of the value added of cooperation.

The thematic and strategic orientation of the presidency consists of one political and two thematic priorities, a cross-cutting theme, and institutional and governance objectives:

- The political priority is based on the geo-political context, with the objective of contributing to stability and security, and a clear European perspective for the whole Danube Region, focusing on accession of Western Balkan countries and eastern European countries, and finding ways how to support stability and recover of Ukraine, and supporting the Republic of Moldova.
- The thematic priorities focus on fostering innovation, skills and business opportunities in the Danube Region, and Enhancing the Danube Region Ecosystem, water and green transition management.
- Outreach was identified as cross-cutting theme to enable the participation and involvement of Youth, Civil Society and regional and local stakeholders of people working in the context of the Danube Region Strategy but not considered key EUSDR stakeholders;
- Institutional and governance objectives include addressing new funding opportunities, political commitment,

The Austrian presidency informed about four thematic events relevant for the PAg: the Vienna Tech Summit (12 December 2023), Danube Business Talks (spring 2024), PAg Stakeholder Conference (23 May 2024) and the High-Level DR Business Forum (autumn 2024).

Up-to-date information on the Austrian EUSDR presidency is available on a dedicated website¹ including the presidency programme and providing information on past and upcoming events.

Update from DG REGIO, European Commission (Elisa Cocco)

Elisa Cocco congratulated the organisers of the recent PAg Stakeholder Conference for a very interesting conference on well-chosen and very vital subjects under the present circumstances. She thanked colleagues from PAg and DRP for the good collaboration resulting in the provision of the ENI leftovers, illustrating that cooperation matters. She invited to save the date for the MRS week on 12-14 June in Brussels. It is planned to have a more participatory and dynamic concept in five parallel WS on enlargement, cluster and social economy, post-2027 consultation, sea basin strategies and citizens engagement.

¹ www.eusdr2024.at

The idea is to organise these WS in collaboration with stakeholders from the 4 MRS. The MRS week will also facilitate new links, inviting line DGs to the event giving the opportunity to get in contact with MRS and PAs. There will also be some space for a youth plenary session on European values and democracy, organised by the Youth Councils themselves. It will also include a project exhibition, in cooperation with strategic points of the 4 MRS to select 3-4 projects and showcasing them in Brussels at the MRS week.

The post-2027 consultation was launched in October targeting citizens, young people and stakeholders. Strategic Points were also already contacted to make sure MRS are involved. Interact and DG REGIO developed a toolkit to design this consultation. Consultation will be done online, through WS, etc. The EC will publish the results in 2025.

Update from the Danube Strategy Point (Cristina Cuc and Irene Schnait)

Cristina Cuc and Irene Schnait provided an update on the activities and the role of the Danube Strategy Point (DSP). The DSP focuses its activities on providing support to PACs, SGs, NCs, including the organisation of SGM, thematic and technical support for the (hybrid) events, and cross-PA and cross-MRS exchange. The DSP organizes 'Unfolding EUSDR' workshops for all newcomers, including PACs, PAC staff, SG members, NCs, providing an introductory WS on the EUSDR. The DSP also offers targeted design for events for NC, for SG, for PACs and process-driven frameworks for PACs. PAC Team building seminars are organised by the DSP every three years to support the horizontal coordination and implementation by increasing mutual trust, cooperation and ownership. Daily activities include maintaining DSP calendar and contact lists, with the aim of keeping the information flow high.

This year in June, the 2nd EUSDR Embedding Week was organised, an event that will also be held next year. MA Network meetings were also organised dedicated and focused on actions and activities for embedding funding towards PA. The outcomes of the embedding process are being analysed, and will be published in an interim (2025) and final (2028) report.

The post-2027 process will be discussed in an Interact working group (cross MRS) on 4 December 2023 and under the Austrian presidency.

Regarding M&E in spring 2024 the PAC reports covering the periods 2022 and 2023 will be submitted to the DSP. It will include questions on the progress and the achievements of the PAs, questions from the EC and the DRP.

Regarding evaluation, the evaluation plan 2023-2028 was developed in close cooperation with the SG DANUVAL. It is available on the EUSDR website. Two evaluations will be conducted in this programming period. The process/implementation evaluation to be conducted in 2024 and 2025 will focus on the strategic dimension, governance and technical implementation, while in 2027 and 2028, a policy evaluation focusing on the policy impact, embedding and funding will be conducted.

The Danube Strategy Flagships are meant to promote and show the results of the Danube Region Strategy. 28 flagships were selected in 2023. The production of 12 promotional videos dedicated to EUSDR PAs as well as one general EUSDR video and three videos promoting the Danube Youth Council is ongoing. This will be followed by online media campaigns, the first one starting in 2024.

The development of a capacity building framework includes the conduction of a Capacity Building Assessment (CBA) in order to develop a CB framework for the EUSDR core stakeholders in respect to their roles and responsibilities. Questionnaires will be sent out and PACs will be contacted for interviews early next year. Based on this, six training sessions will be provided (1/year).

The Danube Youth Council was established about a year ago. Possible ways of meaningful involvement of NYC members in PAs may include: letting the NYC give their input in documents, projects and processes, involving the NYC in drafting reports, studies, agendas, and inviting the NYC members to meetings, conferences and events. The goal is that the cooperation leads to a mutual beneficial exchange, both PAs and NYC members profiting from each other.

25 out of 28 first-generation NYC members decided to prolong their mandate to a second year. The long-term financing concept of the NYC was elaborated during the Slovenian Presidency in collaboration with EC/DG REGIO, DSP and DRP, and endorsed by NCs in July/August 2023. The concept foresees that the on-site participation of 1 selected NYC member in at least 1 SG meeting per PA per year is covered from the respective PAC budget. The DSP will send out a feedback survey about NYC involvement, to learn how NYC members were involved in the respective PAs.

Update from DG Employment, European Commission (Clara Boitel)

Clara Boitel gave an update on the ongoing European Year of Skills, lasting from May 2023 until May 2024. The overall objective is boosting efforts to promote mindsets of upskilling and reskilling for the labour market. It includes four Specific Objectives, being (1) Increased, more effective and inclusive investment (2) Strengthening skills relevance by close cooperation, (3) Matching people's aspirations and skills-set with labour market opportunities and (4) Attracting people from third countries in the skills needed. Six flagship events were planned during the European Year of Skills, of which four already took place:

1. The European Year of Skills Festival (9 May 2023) was the opening event, showcasing projects and good practices in upskilling and reskilling, with 6,500 attendees online;
2. Making Skills Count Conference (8-9 June 2023), with representatives from EU institutions, MS, social partners and stakeholders to discuss how to make skills count, how to make skills matter to individuals and to organisations at system level. It was attended by 1,300 people.
3. Vocational Education and Training Week (23-27 October 2023), including meetings, events and information session and campaigns on education and vocational training at local and regional level, including a conference by the Spanish presidency.
4. Employment and Social Rights Forum (16 and 17 November), including a session on AI skills and digital skills.

Two flagship events will be organised in 2024:

1. The innovative Meet the Champions event (23 February 2024) addresses mostly young people, to inspire people about VET opportunities by meeting champions from the Year of Skills Competition. The event will feature a marketplace, some skill demonstrations, panels and parallel sessions.
2. A concluding event will take place on 30 April 2024.

Furthermore during the European Year of Skills 200 other events were organised by the European Commission and its agencies, for instance the EU Green Week, the high level event of the European Alliance for Apprenticeships, the Skills!Skills!Skills! event related to challenges and opportunities related to skills, and the European Week of Regions and Cities organised by DG REGIO.

At national level, more than 1,500 events were planned and labelled with the European Year of Skills, of which more than 800 were already conducted, spread across 38 countries. At national level a network of National Coordinators was established being the bridge between the EU and national level. They meet regularly to discuss about the Year and drive and share the Year at national, regional and local level.

Participants of today's meeting were encouraged to get involved and participate in the Year of Skills. All information is published on the Year of Skills website. It includes country specific information, providing information on training opportunities, mapping of events and activities. There is also page where testimonials share their stories of successful projects. More recently the campaign 'Real People, Real Skills' was launched, that aims to celebrate stories of individuals, who reshaped their careers, based on upskilling or reskilling stories. Steering Group members were invited to contribute to the Year of Skills by proposing such stories through the dedicated website, uploading thematically relevant events on the Year of Skills website and using the Year of Skills branding, joining EU events and sharing successful stories and compelling testimonials.

Update on the 2nd call of the Danube Region Programme and the Seed Money Facility (Johannes Gabriel & Natalia Liholot)

Natalia Liholot summarized the 2nd call of the Danube Region Programme. The call will be a one-step procedure. Projects have to include at least three partners, with at least one county from EU MS. The whole territory of UA is eligible, but UA partners cannot be Lead Partner in the second call. The opening date of the 2nd call was 2 November 2023. The call will be open until 29 March 2024, 2pm CET. The estimated starting date of the projects is January/February 2025, with projects duration of up to 36 months. The estimated budget allocation of SO 3.1 and SO 3.2. is of 4.5 million respectively, and 6.1 million EUR for SO 3.3. There are topics, institutions, focus areas not covered to the expected extent in the first call, which are very much welcomed in the second call. Under SO 3.1., this includes focus area 3 (capacity building for employment support bodies), Public Employment Services. Under SO 3.2., this includes focus area 3 'Innovative approaches to encourage and improve inclusive vocational education, training and lifelong learning'. Under SO 3.3., while a wide variety of topics were covered, there was a lack of side topics (e.g. improved accessibility; digital and technology integration).

Johannes Gabriel informed about the first call of the Seed Money Facility. It is a project generation facility being a tool for kick-starting development of strategic projects and large-scale initiatives for the EUSDR. Projects have to be in line with the EUSDR Action Plan and clearly address at least one EUSDR Priority Area. The co-financing rate is of 20%. The overall budget is EUR 3.6 million, EUR 0.3 million by Priority Area. There are three compulsory outputs, the 'Report of State of Play', the 'Main Projects Work Plan' and the 'Report on funding possibilities'. Additional preparatory activities are newly introduced with

this SMF call, and can be charged, increasing the overall project budget up to EUR 100,000. They should clearly relate to the other outputs, not being alone-standing issues. The call is open from 27 November 2023 until 29 March 2024, 2:00pm CET, expecting a critical number of projects under each Priority Area providing the extended time frame. The duration must not exceed 12 months. The assessment of the project includes a first assessment of the PAC, assessing the relevance of the proposal, whether it is fitting under the PA and the EUSDR Action Plan. The DRP MA/JS is assessing the rest of the assessment questions. The decision will be taken by the Monitoring Committee at the end. In case there are EUSDR PAs with leftovers, and there are still projects on other priority areas above 60% the MC can decide to further select projects based on an overall ranking list based on scoring. The DRP MA/JS will organize webinars for interested LA explaining the rules of the scheme (7 December). PACs can organize thematic webinars, with MA/S contributing. A strong coordination between PACs and MA/JS is necessary.

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

Tour de table

HR – Petra Reiner (Education): Within early and pre-school education, the major reform is related to raising its accessibility by ensuring infrastructural capacities. In June 2023 the 2nd call was published for constructing and extending kindergartens. A new model of financing early and pre-school education has been adopted, which will enable the co-funding of municipalities and cities of a weaker fiscal capacity to cover the costs of constructing kindergartens and their regular activities, to ensure equal conditions in all parts of Croatia. Within primary education, the whole-day school model has been recently prepared, aiming at increasing the number of teaching hours in key literacies and improving educational outcomes. A public call for participating in the pilot project was announced and a selection process of schools has finished. The objective of the pilot project is to evaluate the feasibility, benefits, and potential challenges of transitioning to whole-day school for all primary schools in Croatia. The e-School project has recently finished and has significantly contributed to the transition to online education brought about by COVID-19 by putting in place local computer networks and e-services. All schools in Croatia have been connected to ultra-fast internet.

In relation to VET, the project 'Modernization of the Vocational Education and Training System' is currently carried out by the Agency for Vocational and Adult Education, aiming to achieve vocational education and training as attractive, innovative, and relevant, enabling participants to acquire competences for personal and professional development. Specific goals of the project are related to developing innovative and flexible sectoral and professional curricula based on LM needs. The project will end by the end of the year and so far, 130 professional curricula have been developed.

Regarding Adult Learning, the Ordinance on recognition of prior learning is being prepared and public consultation is expected in December 2023.

In the field of Higher Education, the project of digital transformation of higher education is carried out, focusing on investing in digital infrastructure and enhancing the digital maturity of HEIs.

CZ - Nikola Strašek (Social Policy) (sent via e-mail): The share of unemployed persons stays at 3.5% in October 2023, being the lowest in the EU. One of the most discussed agendas in the CZ is the pension reform. It will adjust the retirement age, but also set up sustainably fair pensions. Retirement will be linked to the demographic indicators in the country and will no longer be capped at the age of 65. The reform will almost double the minimum basic and percentage amounts of the old-age pension and the third-degree disability pension to the equivalent of 20 % of the average wage. As announced during our last meeting, the parental allowance will be increased from the new year on (2024). However, it will now only be available for three years instead of the previously four years. In the field of employment and social care, great strides were made in terms of digitalisation, meaning that applying for benefits online is no exception anymore.

HU – Edit Krisztina Olach (Labour Market): The Hungarian labour market shows a positive outcome despite the difficult economic conditions. The latest labour market data show an all-time-high employment rate in Hungary. Over the past year, the number of people at work has increased by more than 20,000, to 4,759,000 – the second highest level since the early 90s. The number of full-time employees has increased by 48,000, while the number of part-time employees has decreased by 23,000.

Over the past year, the number of people in public employment has fallen by 6,000, to 67,000, which is a quarter of the highest ever data of 250,000. At the same time, more people find employment in the domestic primary labour market, mainly in the private sector.

Compared to pre-pandemic levels, most new jobs have been created in the “professional, scientific and technical activities” sector and in construction. Employment in both areas has increased by 45,000. In addition, employment has broadened significantly in the IT and financial sectors. The former employs 36,000 more people, the latter 34,000 more people than before the outbreak.

Record high employment is accompanied by persistently low unemployment rate, which fell to 3.9% in September. With this, Hungary remains among the countries with the lowest unemployment rates in international comparison, ranking at seventh position in the EU. The number of job seekers according to the register of the National Employment Service is slightly more than 200,000. At the same time, demand for labour is invariably high, meaning that the tightness of the Hungarian labour market has not eased substantially in the recent period. The number of vacancies has been stable, around 80,000 so far this year. The most workforce is absent from the industrial sector with 20,000 empty posts, while more than 10,000 employees are needed in the field of administrative services, and the shortage is of a similar magnitude in the health sector.

MD – Ludmila Pavlov (Education)

A set of policy documents was approved that align national with European policies, including the Education 2030 development Strategy, the amendment of the Education Code and the approval of the National Qualifications Framework.

Currently three national programmes are implemented, focusing on strengthening inter-ethnic relations, promoting equal access of Roma children to the educational system; and

learning of the Romanian language by national minorities. It is expected that the National Program for inclusive education (2024-2027) will be approved very soon.

Regarding the improvement of human resources in education several initiatives are in place, including the establishment of the National Institute of Education and Leadership, the implementation of the programme 'Investing in Teachers' that provides teacher training, the implementation of a mentoring programme, and improving conditions for teachers (salary increase and provision of unique allowances for skills development).

The improvement of the physical and digital learning and school environment is an ongoing process, including the infrastructure, the management information systems, the provision of ICT and a new e-admission system in higher education from September 2024.

Regarding Vocational Education and Training, the normative framework that supports cooperation with the private sector was improved, including new laws regarding sectorial committees and dual education, the NQF, and activities to strengthen the capacities of centers of excellence in the field of professional training. The objective is to double the number of students in dual education compared to September 2023, reaching 2,000 in September 2024.

Regarding Erasmus+, five Capacity Building in the field of Vocational Education and Training (CBVET) projects including 5 Moldovan VET institutions were funded in 2022 and 2023, with the involvement of 5 VET institutions from Moldova. Furthermore, in 2023 a record number of Erasmus+ projects was selected involving Moldovan partners: 4 Jean Monnet projects, 6 capacity building in higher education projects, and 3 capacity building in the field of vocational education and training projects.

In the field of research, the new National Programme for Research and Innovation (2024-2027) was developed.

The signing of the Association Agreement of the Republic of Moldova to the European framework programme for research and innovation 2021-2027 and the inauguration of the National Office "Horizon Europe" in May 2023 will ensure a more extensive involvement of researchers from the Republic of Moldova in international projects at the European level.

At the moment, the Republic of Moldova has a success rate of 25.97 % participation in Horizon Europe with 33 signed grants and net EU contribution of 3.65 million Euro.

MD – Anna Gherganova (Labour Market):

The revised law on employment support aims at activating jobseekers and beneficiaries of social assistance. The definition of what is a suitable job has been revised, including new provisions, such as a monthly reporting by jobseekers on activities realized to find a job. The reform of the PES started already, including measures, such as establishing performance-based management within PES, improving labour market analyses at local level by training of Local PES in developing regional labour market profiles for better targeting of ALMP. So far 10 out of 35 labour market profiles were developed. In addition, the EU directives on free movement of workers are currently being analysed to update the national legal framework in the field of migrants' rights.

ME – Ivana Šučur (Labour Market): During 2023 the recovery of economic activities including the labour market continued. Administrative data indicate that in the first eight months of 2023 the average number of employees was 243,050, which is 9.4% higher than

in the same period last year. Employment growth in the indicated period was recorded in all sectors, being highest in the information and communication sector - 40.9%, real estate business - 31.8%, accommodation and food services - 13.3%, construction - 12.4 %. The unemployment rate was at 16.2% by the end of September 2023.

For the category of young people aged 15-29 who belong to the category of young people who are neither employed nor in the education or training system, the NEET rate in 2023 at the end of September, there were about 7,000 young people aged 15-30 on the unemployment register, which accounts for 18.6% of the total number of registered unemployed persons.

In the current year, the coverage of unemployed persons in the programmes is at the level of 4% and above all, it is determined by the available funds for financing the realization of the programme which for 2023 amounted to 4 million € (€3.1 million in 2022).

Preparatory activities for the implementation of the Youth Guarantee pilot project planned for 2025 were started, including two EU co-funded projects related to capacity building and the information management system.

The Strategy for the Development of the Social and Child Protection System and the Strategy for Deinstitutionalization in Montenegro were developed with the support of UNICEF and UNDP. It is planned to adopt a new Law on Social and Child Protection, which will improve the system of quality of service provision and specify the method of financing services from the state and local level in order to ensure the sustainability of services in the system. The implementation of the project 'Reform of the National Disability Determination System' is underway. It aims to establish a single body for determining disability (the Agency) and unique national criteria (according to the social model) for determining disability.

RO – Carmen Clapan (Education) (sent via e-mail): In autumn 2023 two education laws for pre-university education and higher education entered into force. At the pre-university level, Romania concentrates on measures for early education and care, as well as on several reforms for all pre-university education. For higher education, it is intended to ensure the flexibility and attractiveness of the programmes and strengthen the development of university dual system.

Regarding VET, there is a focus on measures that will assure a complete career pathway for higher technical and dual education. The Ministry of Education initiated a call for projects, financed through the National Programme of Recovery and Resilience (PNRR). The objective of the call is to develop and equip integrated professional consortia to contribute to the development of Vocational Education and Training, both by increasing the number of qualification fields and graduates, and by ensuring a complete educational pathway for students enrolled in dual education. The total financial allocation of the call for projects is EUR 338 million. 33 projects were submitted in the call, of which 29 projects (18 municipalities and 11 universities) were declared eligible for the development of regional dual education consortia. 16 projects were accepted for financing, (an average of 2 projects/region).

The project EQAVET-NRP-RO-2021, flagship EUSDR project labeled in 2022, will continue until 2026. The project focuses on the support of VET schools for the implementation of their activity plans and peer review activities and evaluations, strengthening the

collaboration among stakeholders involved in initial VET, and reviewing the methodology and working tools for developing and monitoring strategic planning at regional and local level.

RS – Boško Latković (Labour Market): The Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs is currently fully engaged in the introduction of the Youth Guarantee. The Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan, prepared with the support of the International Labor Organization, was approved by the EC. It is expected to be adopted by the Government of Serbia by the end of this year at the latest. After the implementation of the basic preparatory actions, the piloting of the Youth Guarantee will begin in January 2024 and will last until the end of 2026. Implementation will first start in three pilot branch offices of the National Employment Service, which is important because it will gradually enable the full implementation and expansion of the Youth Guarantee on the entire territory of Serbia, thereby creating the conditions for stable and sustainable growth of youth employment.

SK – Lucia Auxtová (Education):

Parliamentary elections were held end of September 2023, resulting in a new government since the end of October. Slovakia launched the first implementation plan of the inclusive education strategy 2030, which was adopted in December 2021. Through the amendment of the education act a legal entitlement was introduced for all children to kindergarten from September 2024 at the age of 4 years, and September 2025 at the age of 3 years. The objective is to increase the participation of children in pre-primary education, in particular those from marginalized communities and children from socially disadvantaged background. In March 2023 a new curriculum was approved, changing education system at elementary schools from two to three cycles, and a shift from teaching information to teaching skills and mindsets. The new curriculum should be mandatory starting from September 2026.

The project 'teachers for the 21st century' was initiated, as part of the curricula reform under the resilience and recovery plan of Slovakia. As of September 2023, a network of 32 regional centers already exist, staffed by practicing teachers, which can become pedagogical leaders and help their colleagues to adopt innovative practices in their own schools. The preparation and implementation of projects for equipping schools with digital devices is under way to ensure development of digital skills for all students. More than 300 schools have school digital coordinators, launched in September 2021, a project being co-funded by the ESF.

SK – Drahuša Kalmanová (Labour Market):

The Slovak labour market is affected by the war provoked by Russia and the inflation remaining at a very high level. On the other hand, Slovakia reported the lowest unemployment in history at 3.9%. Labour shortages continue to be an issue in specific sectors due to the lack of domestic workforce, resulting in an increased demand for employees from non-EU countries, as Slovak employers report positive experiences with them. As a result, the number of employed foreigners exceeded 100,000 people. The amendment of the Employment Services Act simplified the process of getting employed for third country nationals. The accelerated process is mainly applied in those sectors affected

by labour shortages, like health professions, IT and truck transport. The dynamics of the labour market are changing, through technological advancements such as AI, which also leads to increased skill requirements for workers. It is predicted that nearly 25% of jobs will be disrupted or eliminated over the next five years due to technological innovation. Labour market statistics indicate a positive development this year, with the unemployment rate decreasing to 3.9% in October 2023. Almost 2.6 million people were in employment in the second quarter 2023. There is a positive trend for school graduates finding employment, and their numbers in the register of job seekers decreased in October. The number of vacancies is 81,344 and the number of vacancies suitable for graduates is 39,940. In November the ministry launched the ALM 'Support for municipalities affected by the recent earthquake', implemented by selected labour offices. The aim of the project is to help municipalities affected by a natural disaster in the restoration of damaged infrastructure, buildings, and public property of municipalities. The national project "Do not lose your job, educate yourself" launched in February 2022 and targeting not employed but also self-employed and people on maternity or parental leave supported 31,725 people. It will finish by the end of this year.

UA – Oleksandra Husak (Education):

The Ukrainian education system remains stressed due to Russian military aggression, migration, dynamic economic changes, and chronic lack of financial and budget restrictions. There are strong efforts to adapt the education system becoming more flexible and responsive. The implementation of a new school reform is ongoing, implemented in September 2023 in grade 6 and 7.

New regulations were issued facilitating learning for Ukrainian refugees in EU Member States, providing the flexibility for their reintegration into Ukrainian schools after their return, and provision of distance schools at regional level in the Ukraine.

To ensure safe conditions for educational institutions, budget was shifted to local authorities for the build-up of bomb shelters in schools and for school buses. This school year started in September, with 30,000 schools operating, of which about half in face-to-face mode. As of September 2023, 85% of schools are equipped with civil protection facilities, namely bomb shelters.

In the VET area, 88% started the school year in September 2023, of which 23% in face-to-face mode, 30% in remote learning, and 47% in a hybrid way.

To ensure the continuity of education and learning in areas where institutions were destroyed, digital learning centers are established, being educational spaces providing access to distance learning and ensure socialization of children most affected by the war.

In June this year the arrangement between the European Commission and the Ukraine was signed, which includes the provision of school textbooks, promoting Erasmus+, facilitating recognition of qualifications, and enhancing Ukrainian participation in the EC Working Group. Following this, Ukraine received the invitation to join the Eurydice network as of January 2024. It is expected that this will contribute to deepen understanding of the European and Ukrainian education system and cooperation in the sector in the general. Ukraine will join seven of the EC Working Groups.

Regarding qualifications, the procedure of referencing the NQF to the EQF was launched, and it is expected to be presented by the end of next year. In this regard a newly established NQ agency was created.

About 800,000 persons are enrolled currently in educational institutions in the European Union, according to data reported by the EU.

UA – Olha Dubovyk (Social Policy):

Olha Dubovyk thanked the European partners for their unconditional support of Ukraine and Ukrainians who were forced to leave their homes due to Russia's military aggression and move to the EU.

The number of people in need of support from the state increased significantly. At the same time, part of the economy is not working, and therefore the resources for social protection in the country are not enough. There is a transition process from cash assistance to a more targeted cash assistance programme with stimuli to return to the labour force, complemented with a strong care component.

New ways of financing and delivering social services with the establishment of a purchasing agency were introduced as a result of a reform, engaging public and private providers of social services.

In addition, the government of Ukraine is implementing a comprehensive disability reform to ensure individuals have access to effective and timely services delivered by multidisciplinary rehabilitation teams, comprising health and social workers. The provision of prosthetics is a key element of the rehabilitation process.

The government of Ukraine has designed (and already piloted) social adaptation services for veterans and their families to support their return to civilian life through the delivery of a week-long social rehabilitation course and provision of social adaptation services in the community. A week-long social rehabilitation course with the family is aimed at preserving and restoring social ties, stabilizing the psycho-emotional state, and resistance to combat. Social adaptation services are provided directly in the community, which includes assistance in determining basic needs or potential problems, and ways to solve them, assistance in the organization of physical recovery, recovery of cognitive processes, and provision of information on issues of social protection of the population.

Despite the difficult situation in Ukraine, a Plan for the Recovery of Ukraine is currently being developed for rebuilding the country. There will be a massive need of social investment programmes and investments in people, including programmes to stimulate entrepreneurship.

The focus of the Government's actions on the restoration of Ukraine is, first of all, the restoration of human capital, which includes:

- strengthening the state's ability to provide its citizens with high-quality physical and psychological rehabilitation.
- provision of proper education and access to health care.
- creation of conditions and incentive packages for the return of displaced persons.
- a broad set of steps aimed at ensuring that our citizens can live a quality life, recover from the horrors and stress caused by war, regain their ability to earn their own income and live a fulfilling life.

Also, within the framework of the Recovery Plan of Ukraine, the Ministry of Social Policy will carry out reforms to improve the rehabilitation of persons with disabilities, improve the system of social infrastructure and deinstitutionalize care, and will also continue the pension reform.

AT – Jörg Mirtl (Labour Market): Austria is in a recession and the shortage of skilled labour force persists. The unemployment rate is at 5.5%, with unemployment rising in industry and construction sectors, meaning that it is rising in particular in industrial regions and also among men. In Vienna it is higher, at 10%.

There is a new approach of the Public Employment Service, shifting the focus from professions towards competences. Therefore, a digital tool was created to improve the matching between job seekers and available jobs, based on the existing/requested competences. This is also in line with the ongoing digital transitions and changing labour market. It will enable the Public Employment Service to respond to the new challenges in a new job market.

AT – Jürgen Schick (Education): One of the ministries priorities for the current school year is to improve reading skills and promoting reading literacy. The new curricula, which include the overarching topic of "language education and reading", ensure that reading is promoted in all subjects and that all teachers feel responsible for promoting reading. Current and future teacher shortages are addressed in a long-term strategy through a variety of measures. Approx. 20,000 FTE new teachers are needed over the next 5 years mainly due to retirement. Measures include improving the forecasting system, improving human resource management, and application procedures. To address the short-term needs career changers are brought into the system, accompanied by various measures to make the teaching profession more attractive. This already resulted in an increase of 17% new students enrolled in teacher studies.

Digitalisation of schools continues to be a priority, with 270,000 end devices delivered to pupils in the last two years and the installation of fiber optics and wireless internet at all federal schools. The new compulsory subject digital basic education was fully rolled out this school year. The topic of Artificial Intelligence in education is currently the subject of intense debate. New legislative acts were adopted to fully roll out the national standardized instrument to assess core competencies (iKM+), which will i.a. improve the provision of targeted support to pupils.

State of Play PA9: news, initiatives, and events

Mykhailo Omelchenko informed about the workshop 'Skills for the future of European Macro-Regions' at the European Week of Regions and Cities in Brussels on 10 October. The Workshop focused on digital skills and innovation in education and VET. Speakers from very different background were invited to the panel, including Roland Hanak (AT), Iryna Shumik (UA), Merle Andrashko (EUSBR), and Alexander Zier (DE) and Nadija Afanasieva (UA) as moderator. Discussions included topics such as brain drain and trends within the Danube and Baltic Region on VET.

Furthermore, Mykhailo reported on the 11th Stakeholder Conference, which was held on 13 and 14 November online, under the slogan 'A more resilient, safer and smarter Danube Region at Challenging Times'. It included four Panel discussion dedicated to specific issues in the Danube Region, with interesting presentation of projects and good practices from the Danube Region and the Baltic Sea Region.

Jakob Weiss provided an update from the Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence. The Platform focuses on two topics: Going green and social inclusion. Currently 13 Danube Region countries are participating in the Platform. In the last months the cooperation with ETF was strengthened, resulting in the joint webinar of GRETA (Greening Responses to Excellence through Thematic Actions) and participation in the side event of the Forum of Vocational Excellence in Amsterdam. A questionnaire was launched among policy platform members in June to collect information on the greening of VET and VET excellence in the Danube Region countries. In September results were analysed and presented at the joint GRETA meeting. Results provided evidence on the awareness of the importance of greening of VET & VET excellence in all Danube Region countries, both EU and non-EU, with different pace & level of implementation. Countries share the need for reforms based on demand and skills shortages. It is also considered key to increase attractiveness and to promote VET as desirable career choice. Many countries have started to respond to the emerging needs, updating curricula, establishing CoVEs and new apprenticeships, etc.

Transnational exchange has a clear added value for all countries, including mutual learning, exchange of good practices, EU-funding (E+), transformation of emerging skills & occupations. When it comes to VET sectors, results of the survey illustrate focus on energy-related skills/occupations/training and cross-sectoral importance of sustainability to address existing challenges. Challenges were also mentioned, mostly in related to E&T and teachers, but also funding, to a lesser extent the development of strategies and stakeholders' involvement and professional development of teachers. The results of the survey are seen as a confirmation of the work so far and the need to continue the efforts in this field in the Danube Region. For the further development, it is planned to focus on specific VET sectors.

Jürgen Schick and Jörg Mirtl gave an outlook on the upcoming events and activities:

- A dedicated PA9 info-session on the Seed Money Facility will be held on 13 December, 10:00-12:00 CET.
- The 3rd meeting of the Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence will take place in the third week of April in Vienna, date and time still to be confirmed.
- The 12th International Stakeholder Conference will take place on 23 May in Vienna, under the slogan: 'Fair, Green and Digital Transition in education and labour market policies'
- The 26th Steering Group Meeting will be organised in the first half of 2024.
- The next eTwinning seminar, our current Danube Strategy Flagship, bringing together teachers within the EUSDR, will be organised on 6 and 7 June in Austria.
- The 13th EUSDR Annual Forum will be held in Vienna, 20 and 21 June 2024

- The next ESF MA Network Meeting will be organised in the first half of next year in cooperation with PA10.
- The Danube Region Monitor, available on our PA website, including a report and an interactive dashboard on education and labour market statistics will be updated in the course of 2024.

Updates from partners

European Training Foundation (Ulrike Damyanovic)

Ulrike Damyanovic gave an update on recent ETF activities, underlining the importance of the present context at European level for their work, such as the recently released enlargement package including the EC recommendation to open negotiations on the accession of the Republic of Moldova and the Ukraine. The consideration of the context also relates to new growth plan for the Western Balkans, which will also stimulate the accession process. Recently the ETF Annual Work Programme 2024 was approved at the ETF Governance Board Meeting. The main activities of the ETF in relation to PA9 include the continued work on CoVEs, in particular with the Danube Strategy, the running career guidance survey with UNICEF, the ongoing analysis of VET for the labour market in the framework of the Torino process and the Osnabrück declaration and the recently published ETF cross-country report on education, skills and development. In addition, the importance of linking Erasmus+ and VET policy making was highlighted. The ETF continues its support of the Western Balkan Countries on the implementation of the Youth Guarantee, in cooperation with the ILO. With regard to cooperation, ETF is happy to continue the well-established cooperation with PA9, reinforcing the role the Danube Strategy can play as a long-standing forum of exchange and well-established network in the Danube Region. Finally, the importance of reaching out to new target groups was highlighted.

Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (Tina Šarić)

Tina Šarić informed about recent activities of ERI SEE. In September there was a big international conference on Higher Education and Quality Assurance, resulting in conclusions on the future development in this area in the region.

ERI SEE recently started the project 'Renewable Energy in Standards for Education and Training' (RESET), funded by the GIZ. The project is a component of another project 'Green Agenda: Decarbonisation of the Electricity sector in the Western Balkans'. ERI-SEEs role is to prepare recommendations for TVET decision makers to accelerate the labour market and energy developments for renewable energy, and also to raise awareness and promoting TVET/education for Renewable Energy Services. ERI-SEE continues its activities in pre-tertiary education, focusing on external evaluation of institutions, funded by the Austrian Development Agency (ADA). Activities include the development of tools for external evaluators. In the VET area ERI-SEE is involved in the preparation of relevant standards, guidelines and documents. One of the ongoing activities is the preparation of material for raising awareness of social and environmental dimensions of education.

Danube Youth Council (Maty Mihailko and Viktorija Cosic)

Maty Mihailko and Viktorija Cosic highlighted that the group of NYC members participating in PA9 is one of the biggest compared to other PAs. All members have prolonged their

mandate for next year, and new members may still join PA9. The DYC members are very open to participate online and on-site at PA9 meetings, for raising the voice of young people. The DYC considers this type of participation as crucial to strengthen the role of young people. The main topic discussed at the DYC camp in Slovenia was brain drain.

Adoption of the rolling PA9 Work Programme

The PA9 Work Programme was adopted unanimously.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Jörg Mirtl and Jürgen Schick closed the meeting, thanking all participants for joining and highlighting the common understanding that cooperation and exchange is important to tackle the challenges ahead. A special thanks was also directed towards the Ukrainian colleagues for being here and continue their input and work under these challenging circumstances.

List of participants of the 25th Steering Group Meeting of Priority Area 9 of the EUSDR

First Name	Last Name	Institution	Country
Roland	Hanak	Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy	Austria
Jürgen	Schick	Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research	Austria
Jörg	Mirtl	Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy	Austria
Jakob	Weiss	OeAD– Austria’s Agency for Education and Internationalisation	Austria
Jutta	Moll-Marwan	Federal Ministry for Agriculture, Forestry, Regions and Water Management	Austrian EUSDR Presidency
Elisa	Cocco	DG REGIO, European Commission	EC
Clara	Boitel	DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, European Commission	EC
Cristina	Cuc	Danube Strategy Point	DSP
Irene	Schnait	Danube Strategy Point	DSP
Petra	Reiner	Ministry of Science and Education	Croatia
Filip	Miličević	Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy	Croatia
Dunja	Sare	Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy	Croatia
Jan	Matera	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports	Czech Republic
Dessislava	Traykova	Bavarian Ministry for Families, Labour and Social Affairs	Germany
Edit	Olach	Ministry for Economic Development	Hungary
Ulrike	Damyhanovic	European Training Foundation	ETF
Maty	Mihal’ko	Danube Youth Council	DYC
Viktorija	Ćosić	Danube Youth Council	DYC
Biljana	Popović	Danube Youth Council	DYC
Johannes	Gabriel	MA/JS Danube Region Programme	DRP
Ludmila	Pavlov	Ministry of Education and Research	Republic of Moldova
Anna	Gherganova	Ministry of Labour and Social Protection	Republic of Moldova
Tina	Šarić	Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe/ERI SEE	ERI SEE
Ivana	Sucur	Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare	Montenegro
Carmen	Clapan	Ministry of Education	Romania
Jelena	Nikolic	Ministry of Education	Serbia
Boško	Latković	Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs	Serbia
Lucia	Auxtová	Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport	Slovakia
Drahusa	Kalmanova	Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family	Slovakia

Olha	Dubovyk	Ministry of Social Policy	Ukraine
Oleksandra	Husak	Ministry of Education and Science	Ukraine
Nadija	Afanasieva	Ukrainian Institute for International Politics	Ukraine
Mykhailo	Omelchenko	Ukrainian Institute for International Politics	Ukraine
Viktoriia	Karbysheva	Ministry of Education and Science	Ukraine