

Minutes

23rd Steering Group Meeting

Priority Area 9 “People and Skills” (PA9)

Date: 23rd November 2022

Venue: Online

Chair:

Oleksandra Husak, Ministry of Education and Science, Ukraine

Viktoriia Karbysheva, Ministry of Education and Science, Ukraine

Nadija Afanasieva, Ukrainian Institute for International Politics, Ukraine

Roland Hanak, Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy, Austria

Jürgen Schick, Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, Austria (excused)

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

Welcome and Introduction

Nadija Afanasieva, Oleksandra Husak, Roland Hanak and Ludmila Pavlov opened the Steering Group meeting and welcomed members and participants of the PA9 Steering Group. Team of PAC9 expressed their solidarity and support for Ukraine during the full-scale war provoked by Russia. Oleksandra Husak, Ukrainian PAC9 member, expressed gratitude for the support Ukraine receives from every EU country. Ukraine remains committed to its European path and for implementing the key sectoral reforms in education, training and skills. PAC9 also welcomed Slovenian EUSDR Presidency. A new representative from EU Commission Elisa Cocco was welcomed.

Adoption of Agenda

The Agenda was adopted unanimously. It is available under [this link](#).

Update from Slovenian Presidency and thematic priorities (Petra Cesen-Catar)

Slovenia takes over the EUSDR Presidency after Ukraine, first non-EU country to preside over EU Strategy for the Danube Region. Slovenian Presidency will focus on the future development of the Danube Region and empowered cooperation of all EUSDR countries. Ms. Petra noted that Slovenian Presidency hopes to be on a strategic help to support for Ukraine and Moldova

as EU candidates. The EUSDR can contribute by focusing on capacity building in the areas of administrative reforms, social policy, research, education and energy security, all of which are related to the country's recovering. The priorities for the year of Presidency were divided into institutional and thematic. The institutional priorities for the year of Presidency will be:

- empowering involvement in EUSDR;
- improving the strategic governance of EUSDR and MRS;
- youth involvement and its role in EUSDR;
- embedding process - evaluation and further steps.

Slovenian Presidency would like to promote cross-regional cooperation and capacity building on joint issues and topics that all Macroregional strategies share.

Slovenian Presidency will also focus on 2 thematic priorities. First one is connected to the acceleration of green and digital transition that would steer the transformation of societies in the EU and the Danube Region. Slovenian Presidency will devote attention to the expected transformations of societies, the role of knowledge in them, professions of the future, and the mobility of labour force. To this end, a conference titled «Knowledge-driven society» is planned to be held on 16-17 May 2023. The second thematic priority will be devoted to the transport and energy challenges in the region. The Slovenian EUSDR Presidency will pay special attention to the challenges of regional transport in the future concerning sustainable and energy efficient transport, digitalization of transport and professions of the future in transport. At the end, Petra Cesen-Catar announced some of the upcoming event within Slovenian Presidency. PAC meeting is planned to be held in Slovenia on 16-17 of March, 2023. The XII Annual Forum will take place on 24-25 October next year.

General update from the EU Commission (Elisa Cocco, DG REGIO, European Commission)

Elisa Cocco provided a general update regarding Macro Regional Strategy Report. 2022 Report is expected to be published in the Mid-December 2022. Subsequently the Report will be submitted to the Council and discussed in the first half of 2023 during the Swedish Presidency. Among the main features of 2022 MRS Report will be the delivery of key European political priorities, cohesion policy aspects, how MRS should accelerate their delivery on Green, Digital and Social transitions, and examples of projects from these MRS. The topics of addressing the war in Ukraine and the recovery from the pandemic by MRS and their role in facilitating the enlargement and added value of the MRS in Europe are also expected to be assessed.

Elisa Cocco announced an upcoming event - Macro Regional Strategy Week 2023. The event will provide an opportunity to network, exchange and learn from each other's experiences for all 4 Macro Regional Strategies and is to be held on 24-28 April 2023 in Brussels in hybrid format. She also highlighted that 2023 was announced as The European Year of Skills with a view to strengthening EU competitiveness, cooperating with companies, and matching these

needs with people's aspirations to attract talents to the EU continent. At the end, Elisa Cocco mentioned last month Interreg Annual Event/Youth4Coop Summit 2022, which took place last month with the participation of the Danube Youth Council.

The presentation is available under this [link](#).

Update from the Danube Strategy Point (Nicole Hauder)

At the beginning of this year the Danube Strategy Point published Needs Assessment for closer cooperation between PACs and other relevant stakeholders. Based on that DSP conducted a workshop for PACs and teams on EUSDR stakeholders' management and engagement in Romania. The follow-up of this workshop is expected to be published in December. A quick recap on embedding process was provided with special regard to EUSDR Task Force, Embedding Tools and Shortlist of Strategic topics, MA Networks, general updates and EUSDR Embedding Week, held in July. Regarding Monitoring, the EUSDR Monitoring Concept that was endorsed by NCs in February 2022. Ms. Nicole also elaborated on the Reporting on the Progress and Achievements of the EUSDR Priority Areas implemented in 04/2022 via the new online tool. It is to be used for EC Reports on the Implementation of EU MRS, EUSDR implementations Reports, decision making by NCs, future evaluations etc. Regarding communication, 2nd online media campaign was developed for 10 weeks (May 15th - July 24th). 116 web portals from 24 EUSDR countries were used to display EUSDR videos and electronic banners in the national languages of the Danube Region and in English. EUSDR website is updated constantly for latest news, events, lists of NCs and SG members. Nicole Hauder elaborated on EUSDR social media platforms. New communication tool – Danube Strategy Flagships was introduced. Overall, 27 Danube Strategy Flagships were provided by PACs, including 3 from PA9. Currently, a social media campaign on Danube Strategy Flagships is underway on EUSDR social media platforms (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram). The speaker kindly asked participants to actively promote the Flagships and disseminate the them via newsletter or internally within particular units, stakeholder groups etc. Toolkit for EUSDR implementation which will be useful for new stakeholders, especially non-EU ones was developed. For the next year it is planned to develop a plan for capacity building based on special needs, EUSDR workshops for stakeholders are also planned to be continued.

At the end, Nicole Hauder elaborated on Danube Youth Council, established in October 2022 and funded via Technical Assistance from EC co-funded by the city of Vienna for the period of one-year to October 2023. The mission of DYC is to contribute to the implementation of the Strategy, which offers an opportunity for real impact, and bring new perspectives on the EUSDR by providing input on thematic level. Currently, 28 young people from all 14 participating states are part of DYC. Next step will be capacity building for the Danube Youth Council members on 12-16 December 2022 in Vienna. PA9 have already confirmed the participation in this event.

The presentation is available under this [link](#).

Update on the financial planning and first call of the Danube Region Programme (Stephen Halligan)

Stephen Halligan commented on state of play of the Danube Region Programme. 290 applications were submitted within the First Call for Proposals. Mr. Stephen elaborated on the number of applications for different SOs. 15 applications were submitted for SO 3.1 and 23 – for SO 3.2. DRP is considering in detail how to increase this number. As for PAC Call, Approval letter with conditions is expected to be published on 7th-8th December 2022. Regarding SEED Money Facility, the frame for this is to be finalised on 5th-6th December 2022 at the Monitoring Committee Meeting of the Programme. After that, the content is to be developed by Priority Areas.

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

Tour de table

AT – Roland Hanak (Labour Market): The labour market is recovering and the unemployment rate (October 2022) is at ~ 6 % (a slight increase from last month). As of 15 November 2022, about 320.000 people were registered as unemployed, of which about 70.000 were in training. Despite the current situation with COVID19 and the economic impacts of the Russian invasion in Ukraine, this is the lowest rate for November in 11 years, which demonstrates a high degree of resilience of the Austrian labour market, as these numbers are even better than before the COVID19 crisis. 3000 persons are still in the Short-Time Work – “Kurzarbeit – scheme (last year ~70.000). In the Austrian budget, 220 Mio € have been reserved for Kurzarbeit for the next year. Compared to the same time period in 2021, the GDP is increased by 2.5%, which is mainly due to the impact of COVID last year. Against this background, with about 120.000 open positions in October 2022, there is currently a very high demand for labour that cannot be fulfilled. This is particularly true for the tourism and hospitality industry. Roland Hanak elaborated on support measures for the refugees from Ukraine. Currently, there are about 90.000 refugees from Ukraine in Austria, of whom 26.000 are in Vienna. About 56.000 receive the basic social services (‘Grundversorgung’) for refugees. 7000 have so far found a job, but often far below their qualification. The Ministry of Labour and Economy of Austria is closely coordinated with the Public Employment Service (AMS) in this regard. Austria has introduced a so-called “blue card”, that allows the respective refugee to apply for an employment permit and a simplified procedure applies. Moreover, the Austrian Public Employment Service actively supports enterprises that would like to hire displaced persons from Ukraine. The Austrian Public Employment Service estimates that out of 90.000 refugees, 25.000 could potentially be integrated into the Austrian Labour Market.

MD – Ludmila Pavlov (Education): The Republic of Moldova has recently introduced several reforms in the educational sector. Notably, European Moldova 2030 National Development Strategy was approved. The Educational strategies 2030 were also adjusted to this this national document. Moldova is currently in the process of developing Youth strategy until 2030. The priority is also to support reforms and normative documents related to the Dual VET. To this end, the Ministry of Education and Research is strengthening partnership with business environment and public society. 12 sectoral committees were established to adjust education to the needs of labour markets and help the Ministry with the curriculum development and occupational standards for VET education. Currently, Moldova is in the process of digitalization of VET, updating of curriculum, programmes of VET systems, improvement of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs). Regarding the higher education, an important reform was initiated this summer with the aim of reviewing the network of higher education institutions in the country, as Moldova had 24 higher education institutions and 19 research institutes. The main task of this reform is to merge research institutions with higher education institutions. As a result of these reforms more human and finance resources will be directed to the higher education institutions and higher education system will become stronger and more resilient. Moldova Education Reform Project was started with the support of the World Bank. Moldova has realized all procedures for joining UNESCO Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education and will officially become part of this Convention in the upcoming months. At the end, Ludmila Pavlov Activities elaborated on the management of the refugee crisis. Currently, in Moldova there are 80000 refugees, half of them are children and young people. About 2400 of them are enrolled in Moldova's educational system.

MD - Anna Gherganova (Labour Market): (*Contribution was received in writing*) new National Employment Program for 2022-2026 has been approved, focusing on 4 objectives: Improving access to the labour market of women with family responsibilities, people with disabilities; reducing informal employment and capacity building for labour market institutions, as PES, Labour Inspectorate. Labour market indicators did not change significantly, in 3thd quarter 2022 labour force was 901.8 thousand people, labour force participation – 42.3% and employment rate was 41.3%. Number of unemployed was 22.3 thousand people, unemployment rate 2.5%. With regard to refugees from Ukraine – they are receiving employment support provided by PES and different NGO, providing career guidance support, training courses funded from foreign sources. Right now government has to decide on the status of refugees for the next future, including approach (support measures) for labour market integration.

HR - Petra Reiner (Education): Within pre-school education the first call published in April 2022 for constructing and extending kindergartens has finished, resulting in additional 17000 enrolment places. The second call will be published by the end of this year and will cover those

municipalities and cities that have not successfully passed the evaluation within the 1st call. Another huge project is the introduction of the whole-day school with the aim of increasing the number of teaching hours in key literacies. A whole-day school model has been recently prepared, which is a framework document outlining the main features of the whole-day school. This will be followed by a public call for implementing the needed infrastructural projects at the level of primary education, whose publication is planned for December 2022 or January 2023. Another ongoing project is the e-school project which aims at establishing a system of digitally mature schools. The Vocational Education and Training Act was recently updated with the aim of strengthening the dual education model and developing VET Curricula in accordance with occupational and qualifications standards. Furthermore, a new Act on Higher Education and Scientific Activity was adopted this year. Another ongoing project in higher education is the enhancement of digital maturity of higher educational institutions. A survey was carried out at all public higher education institutions to determine the conditions related to digital infrastructure. This survey will be a basis for preparing the *Technical report on investing in digital infrastructure* which will be provided by the OECD. The document will contain recommendations for necessary investments in digital infrastructure.

CZ - Marie Taltynová (Education) provided a short information about the ongoing Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union (CZ PRES, July 1–December 31): The main priorities in the field of education and training have been digital education, initiative “Pathways to school success” and support of Ukraine. The Czech Presidency has recently finalized two texts: Council Conclusions on Supporting Wellbeing in Digital Education and Recommendation on Pathways to school success. Various meetings that took place under the CZ PRES mainly in Prague (HLG, DG Schools etc.) counted with direct participation of representatives from Ukraine. The discussions within these meetings were focused on support of refugee pupils and students from Ukraine as well as on the current needs of the Ukrainian education system. The main aim of the CZ PRES was to ensure the continuation of discussion in the above-mentioned areas and provision of up-to-date information from the Ukrainian side. Regarding the national policies in the sphere of education and training, the Czech Republic is currently at the end of the first implementation phase of the Strategy for the Education Policy 2030+. The ministry is evaluating the first phase and at the same time preparing for the second phase that will take place in the years 2023–2027.

CZ - Nikola Strašek (Social Policy): The share of unemployed people increased to 3.5 % in October. Despite the influx of Ukrainian refugees Czech labour market remains tight. According to the Czech Republic Labour Office over 124000 Ukrainian refugees have been employed in Czech Republic since the beginning of the war. On the other hand, companies and customers are already starting to face disproportionately high prices which will hamper recruitment of

new employees. Czech Republic is taking all necessary measures to speed up the process of recruitment. Among the main issues a country is focused on are managing the refugee crisis caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and tackling energy poverty. To this end, Czech Republic continues to cooperate with energy suppliers to ensure sufficient gas reserves and introduced a Special Energy Tariff to aid households. Czech Republic is also increasing its regular support for low-income families by providing them with housing allowance

DE – Christopher Sanchez (Education): Unemployment rate in Baden-Württemberg has fallen to 3.6%. One of the issues the region is facing is lack the vocational training force. Currently, there are over 600000 Ukrainian refugees in the whole Germany, 200000 of which are children. Up to the spring, Germany is looking into integrating about 30000 Ukrainian school kids into the German education system. To this end a task force was created. Among the priorities are adoption to Ukrainian curriculum and providing refugee children and youth with educational infrastructure.

DE – Dessislava Traykova (Labour Market): The unemployment rate in Bavaria is still low – 3.1% with slight increase comparing to the last year. There is a need to address some issues following from energy crises, to transform the labour market in terms of digitalisation and climate change. Challenges caused by the Russian military invasion of Ukraine are being addressed. Almost 25000 Ukrainian refugees are now registered in Bavaria as unemployed. Apart from national measures in this regard, “FIBA 2” project is funded by the European Social Fund providing employment support to refugees to restart their careers and rebuild their lives. A new call from European Social Fund is expected to be launched, providing qualifications and training for refugees, especially for women and young people under 25. Some events are also planned within European Year of Skills for next year.

HU – Gabriella Tölgyes (Labour Market): (*Contribution was received in writing*) Regarding the last year changes, Hungarian labour market could get through the coronavirus pandemic and the challenges of the Russian-Ukrainian war successfully. Despite the deteriorating external environment, employment reached a record level in the summer months, exceeding 4.7 million. The employment rate for the 15-64 age group rose to 74.6%, well above the EU average of around 70%. Internationally, the unemployment rate remains one of the lowest in the EU. The structure of employment has shifted into a more sustainable direction following the pandemic, as a result of the fact, that around 120,000 more people are currently employed in the competitive sector than before the pandemic. In addition, the relatively rapid consolidation of the labour market has also been supported by government measures to preserve jobs and encourage job creation. The re-emergence of labour shortage also appeared. The available data refer to the second quarter of this year, when the number of vacancies was close to 100,000, according to the Hungarian Central Statistical Office. And

companies reported 27,000 more vacancies to the Public Employment Service in the first nine months of the year than a year earlier. Increasing labour shortages are affecting both prosperous and high employment sectors, such as manufacturing, but low unemployment has made it a problem that now affects the entire national economy. Currently, the domestic labour shortage in Hungary has decreased to 40% and the EU average is close to 30%. This is still a high rate, but the trend is towards a reduction in labour market tightness. The number of jobseekers has stabilised at around 230-240 thousand, which is an improvement of 150 thousand compared to the lowest point in employment, but already 20-30 thousand below the pre-pandemic level. As regards the outlook for employment in the future, rising external risks and increased company costs due to the energy crisis could lead to job cuts, lay-offs and a slowdown in employment growth, especially in demand-sensitive services and energy-intensive manufacturing companies integrated in international value chains.

RO - Carmen Clapan (Education): At national level Romania launched in July 2022 two draft laws on pre-university education and higher education respectively, and the implementation of the strategic project entitled “Romania Educated”. The draft on pre-university education includes amendments proposed by public institutions and NGOs, representatives of trade unions and student associations, as well as other stakeholders who were involved in drafting of this law. The draft takes into account the objectives of the new European strategic framework for education and training and transposes a number of recommendations adopted by the Council of the EU, in particular those on early childhood education and care and upper secondary education. The Ministry of Education aims to improve access and quality in education and to create an education system that responds to two major challenges: on the one hand, to create a dynamic and flexible skills ecosystem in line with rapid labour market, demographic and social changes; and, on the other hand, to create a system based on equity and inclusion and investment efficiency. The draft law on higher education includes a number of provisions proposed by higher education consortia, the Romanian Agency for Quality in Higher Education, trade unions and student associations, other ministries, etc. The draft takes into account the recommendations recently adopted by the Council of EU and aims to: increase the flexibility and attractiveness of higher education study programmes; support the excellence and international dimension in Romanian universities; strengthen dual system programmes at university level; make study pathways more flexible and recognise micro-certificates; increase the relevance of studies for the labour market; involve the business environment more in students` lives; introduce short- term programmes in higher education; strengthen international partnerships through common degree regulations; support higher education institutions to participate in European university Networks. The two draft laws passed through a public debate and will enter in the Romanian Government for adoption. In regard to “Romania Educated” project, the investments are funded by the National Recovery and Resilience Programme (NRRP). In the field of VET, the main measures aim to reform the

system leading to the creation of a complete vocational pathway for higher technical education and the development of dual education, both transversally, by increasing the number of fields, qualifications and the number of graduates, and longitudinally, by adapting the legislative framework for level 4 and 5 qualifications, as well as at university technological level. Also, NPRR will cover the development of 10 regional consortia, development and equipping of 10 integrated vocational campuses, equipping of computer laboratories and practical workshops in VET institutions, in order to increase the quality of the educational networks, rapid integrate into the labour market and graduation of young people with qualifications and skills needed on the labour market.

RS - Boško Latković (Labour Market): Situation with Serbian labour market is so far stable, and all indicators have positive trend. According to the data from the Labour Force Survey, for the second quarter of 2022, the employment rate is 50.9% and the unemployment rate is 8.9% (lower by the 2.2% comparing to the same period last year). Employment of youth is one of the main focuses for Serbia. In the Economic Reform Programme 2022-2024 the priority will be establishing the framework for introduction of the Youth Guarantee Program. The preparations of Implementation Plan are underway. Currently, Serbia is in the third circle of «My First Salary» program related to youth employment. More than 10000 employers and the same number of employees have shown interest in participating in this programme. There is an increasing demand for the employment of youth in the processing industry, healthcare, social care, trade, retail sectors etc.

RS - Vanja Nedeljkovic (Education): The Reform of Education in Serbia is underway with many activities planned in the following period and defined in the Education Development Strategy in the Republic of Serbia until 2030. Currently, Serbia is focused on preparation of the new Action Plan which will be accompanying the Strategy until 2026. The introduction of the State Matura at the end of secondary education is in its final phase, the Ministry of Education is revising the concept of the State Matura. There are 36 dual study programmes at 10 higher education institutions in Serbia. In November 2022 the Government Office for dual education was created. In this regard the main priorities are to facilitate faster development of dual education and increase employability of youth.

SK – Lucia Auxtová (Education): The Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic in cooperation with National Institute for Education and Youth prepared a draft of flexible and unified curriculum for primary schools organized into 3 education circles, which will bring the possibility to redirect attention to the assessment of the pupils at the end of each cycle. With the aim to improve the educational results of Slovak students the Ministry launched several programmes aimed primary at the students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and students at risks of school failure. These programmes are financed from state budget and

from Recovery and Resilience Facility. One of the projects is "Smarted Together", with the aim to support schools through high quality and affordable tutoring students who are at risk of school failure or students who need help with their studies. It also helps in creating conditions for improving student's knowledge and skills in extra curriculum hours to a specified extent. At the same time tutors are supposed to help to balance differences in student's knowledge and skills and abilities as well as to eliminate the risk of repeating grades and early termination of student's education. The aim of the Ministry of Education is to ensure accessible and quality education, education for all children and to this end a Strategy for Inclusive Approach in Education and Training was adopted by the Government. This Strategy has been developed based on the Programme of the Government of the Slovak Republic 2021 – 2024: Area of Equal Opportunities in Education and is considered as a commitment of Government to improve the current state of education for all children without distinction.

SK – Drahuša Kalmanová (Labour Market): At the end of October, the unemployment rate in Slovakia reached 5.9%, it fell below 6% for the first time in 2.5 years. For the first time since March 2020 the rate of registered unemployment fell in all regions of Slovak Republic. In September the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic launched 2 new projects with the aim of maintaining the trend of reducing unemployment. The aim of the first one is to support young people up to the age of 29 in applying to the labour market. High school, university graduates as well as other young job seekers can benefit from this project. These measures increase the chances for young people to be employed in labour market within 2 years after finishing school. Another national project under the title Activation of Disadvantaged Job Seekers supports the increase of employment of disadvantaged job seekers. It is assumed that the project will have a significant positive impact on unemployment. Regarding the legislation, in October the Labour Code amendment was submitted to the parliament, containing measures for unemployment, and creating new jobs as well as adjusting condition of employment of citizens with disabilities. The Amendment is due to enter into force in January 2023

UA - Oleksandra Husak (Education): Ukrainian education system is severely affected by the war. However, the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine continues ensuring sustainability of all its operations and moves forward with implementing of key sectoral reforms. The Ministry keeps tracking damaging of educational infrastructure via the interactive [map](#), which is being constantly updated. As of today, 2767 educational institutions have been damaged from bombing and shelling, 337 of them are destroyed. Regardless damages and destruction, Ukraine tries to ensure sustainable access to education. New academic year has started in most of Ukrainian educational institutions, the model of learning depends on security situation in each region and is defined by the local military administrations. As of Mid-November, educational process is ongoing in almost 13000 of Ukrainian schools, covering 4 million school

children. Starting from September 2022 about 85% of VET institutions provide learning. About 70% of schools are equipped with civil protection shelters so that there is a possibility to provide face-to-face learning.

Ukraine continues the implementation of the New Ukrainian School Reform. Starting from September it was launched in basic secondary school education level all over Ukraine. Since the beginning of the full-scale war the Ministry is making enormous effort to ensure continued education in Ukraine. Special attention is paid to developing existing learning opportunities like developing the national e-learning platform for Ukrainian schools online and providing children and teachers with digital devices. With the aim to create the safest possible conditions and transparent examination during university admission campaign, the special procedures were introduced this year - National multidisciplinary test which took place in Ukraine and 20+ countries. Some initiatives were introduced in IT sector, for example the Regulation on internal academic mobility for the IT students was adopted, providing them with opportunity to continue learning in any VET institution all over Ukraine. The Ministry has launched free short-term courses for adults including for IDPs, providing partial qualifications. For now, 500+ people have finished them, 50% of which are already employed. In VET sector the Ministry continues implementing the EU-funded programmes EU4Skills, Better skills for modern Ukraine which have been reformatted in term of the war, providing not only training and psychological support for teaches but as well procurement of household appliances, heating devices and computers for displaced learning participants.

UA - Olha Dubovyk (Social Policy): Despite active hostilities, Ukrainian government is taking measures to ensure the social protection of people in Ukraine. From the first days of the war, the Ministry of Social Policy simplified the rules to ensure the evacuation of people abroad, including people with disabilities and children. The number of people in need of support from the state has fundamentally expended. At the moment more than 4 million of IDPs have been registered. The Ministry automatically continuing to finance all previously assigned social benefits during martial law. More than 6 million people are covered by one or other type of social assistance in Ukraine. The plan for the recovery of Ukraine is currently being developed. Ukraine will need social investment programmes to stimulate entrepreneurship, helping to start their own business can the important part of the intensive package for the return of Ukrainians that were displaced abroad. The Ministry of Social Policy has prepared comprehensive legislative initiatives aimed at reforming the employment system of persons with disabilities which are reflected in a Draft law on employment of persons with disabilities, which has been registered recently.

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

Feedback on the 11th EUSDR Annual Forum on human resources and labour market and PCY Thematic Conference on September 15-16, 2022

Nadija Afanasieva (PAC9 team, Ukraine) provided a short overview of the events within Ukrainian EUSDR Presidency. On September 15-16 Ukraine succeeded to have a **thematic conference «Education, training and inclusion: transformation during crises»** in Ivano-Frankivsk (one of Ukrainian regions that are part of the Danube Region Strategy) and online. Recordings of the event are available via the link: [part 1](#), [part 2](#).

The second event was **XI EUSDR Annual Forum**, held on 20-21 October. The parallel session on human capital and labour markets was held within the event. The topics of human capital and labour markets were one of the central thematic priorities of Ukrainian Presidency for 2022. During the parallel session participants were discussing also with representatives from European Training Foundation, the Head of the Directorate for VET of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine and the Rector of University of Maribor current developments in the fields of education, training and employment in the Danube Region. Although Ukrainian EUSDR Presidency has come to an end, Ukraine would further cooperate for the implementation for its plans in 2022. The link to the recording is [here](#).

Update on PA9 Danube Strategy Flagships

Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence

Sarah Fellner (OeAD, PAC9 team, Austria) provided a brief overview on Danube Strategy Flagships, initiated to raise awareness and highlight key initiatives across the whole region. At the last Steering Group meeting in Vienna PA9 selected 3 Flagships. One of them is the Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence, an initiative that PA9 has set up together with European Training Foundation (ETF). Currently, 12 countries of the Danube Region are participating in this platform with the focus on 2 main elements:

- 1) To promote policy exchange. To this end, a core group of policy platform members from the Danube region countries and from PA9, ETF and the EU Commission was created.
- 2) To facilitate cooperation between centres of vocational excellence, VET schools and other institutions.

Regarding VET excellence, which the central focus of the platform, special attention is paid to green transition in VET and social inclusion. In November, the 2nd meeting of the Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence was held online, engaging almost 50 participants from 11 Danube Region countries, the European Training Foundation, European Commission, Danube Region Programme, OeAD and involved experts.

The agenda and details about the event can be found via this [link](#).

The next step will be the preparation of a report on the meeting to be shared with PA9 Steering Group members.

ESF Managing Authorities Network

Barbara Willsberger (L&R Social Research, Austria) provided an overview on another Danube Strategy Flagships – The Network of European Social Fund Managing Authorities in the Danube Region, established in 2015. The idea of the Network is not only to embed the topics of the Danube Region Strategy, especially PA9 into the programmes of ESF+, but also to bring together different financing instruments to work on a bigger range of topics, especially within PA9. During the last meeting of the Network in July, it was decided to focus on 4 topics:

- 1) VET and youth employment
- 2) women in the labour market
- 3) social inclusion and integration of vulnerable groups of Roma people into the labour market
- 4) the context of ageing population: labour market and training issues

The next step for the Network will be a workshop in 2023 to focus on good practices and youth employment and VET.

European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training National Reference Points

Carmen Musat (Romania, NCTVETD) elaborated on the Romanian Danube Region Flagship – European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training National Reference Points (EQAVET). Concerning national dimension, reorganizing of the partner networks to implement the EQAVET Recommendations was initiated. Support was offered to VET schools from partner networks in the implementation of activity plans and peer review activities. Electronic platform for network communication (retelel.montivagant.ro) was created. The application combines functionalities specific to a tool for community management. Regarding the activities, in 2019-2021 through the "EQAVET-NRP-RO" project the partner networks of VET schools were reorganized. In 2022-2023 organization of 20 peer reviews in the VET school network took place. Collecting data on students' satisfaction with the way learning outcomes are achieved and assessed in the VET schools included in the networks. Regarding international dimension, study visits were organized in Romania, Netherlands, Sweden, Croatia and Slovenia. Presentation can be found via this [link](#).

Update of the Danube Region Monitor – People and Skills (Maryna Tverdostup and David Zenz, WIIW)

Maryna Tverdostup: WIIW – the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies is working on the update of the previous Danube Region Monitor. The major task for now is to update all the indicators. Currently, complete data set is available and the work is being done on graphs, adjusting the text and doing all the necessary changes. The major focus of the report is on the effects of the COVID-19 crisis and exit from it. The report is planned to include some information on the catastrophic economic, social and humanitarian effects of the war in Ukraine. New results will be discussed in more detail during the workshop on December 15th,

we will provide the information on all the recent findings, updated indicators and on the consequences of the war in Ukraine.

David Zenz elaborated on the state of the online database that is being developed. A detailed and comprehensive look at the usage of the tool was provided.

Overview of other coordination activities

Nadija Afanasieva noted that in September PA9 Proposal to the DRP 2023-2028 was submitted together with partners from Ukraine, Austria and Moldova. PAC team is looking forward to the new activities, SG meetings, working group meetings, some thematic activities to be discussed further.

Sarah Fellner gave an update on PA9 communication activities. Currently, 2 videos are being produced to introduce PA9 and its activities in understandable way. These videos will be shared among Steering Group and with stakeholders. An update on the reach of the PA9 newsletter was provided. Over 80 new subscribers of the newsletter were gained through PA9 activities in 2022, so the current total number of them is more than 1090. The subscription box for the Newsletter can be found via the [link](#).

Updates from partner institutions

PA8 possibilities for cooperation (Nadija Afanasieva)

During the last NC-PAC meeting in Vienna there was a discussion within the PAC on the possibilities of cooperation with other Priority Areas. The idea was to install the cooperation with PA8 and PA7. Nadija Afanasieva was invited to the Steering Group of PA8 in Stuttgart. PA8 working groups include: innovation and technology transfer, artificial intelligence, cluster and regional development, digital Danube and female entrepreneurship. The topics of labour market, migration and inclusive entrepreneurship are often discussed within PA8. That's why PA8 is really interested in cooperation with PA9 and this topic is subject to further discussions. Participants of the meeting were asked to send proposals with ideas on the work of their countries on PA8.

European Training Foundation (Ulrike Damyanovic)

The context for the work of ETF in 2023 is the digital and green transition. The European Year of Skills will be the golden opportunity for PA9 and ETF will work closely to further promote this agenda. Another round of Torino Process Review (an analytical tool for looking into progress of VET for the labour market in the current context) is planned to be done in 2023 in most of countries. So-called Copenhagen process for Vocational Education and Training reforms is created for the candidate countries. The first monitoring round is expected to take place in 2023. Youth is also important topic for ETF. Western Balkans are being supported with

the implementation of the Youth Guarantee. ETF supports measures in career guidance, work-based learning practical experience for Youth Guarantee, flexible form of work for young people etc. A meeting with European Youth organizations is planned for December and representatives from DYC could also be invited. Another important topic, linked to the cooperation with Ukraine, is further work on qualification development and recognition. In 2023 further support will be addressed to countries involved in Erasmus+ activities for VET and linking the project with policy making. A study on skills for green economy and green transition is underway. Representatives from Ukraine and Moldova will be invited to participate in director's general meeting for vocational education and training as EU candidate states.

Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (Tina Šarić)

Recent governing board meeting was supported by the consultative body made of representatives of ETF and PA9. Education Reform Initiative supports the economies of South-eastern Europe and Moldova in their national reform processes and in monitoring European developments and trends in education and training sectors. Active support is done in the field of quality assurance in pre-tertiary education. Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe partners with the quality assurance agencies from the Danube region. A joint policy vision on the improvements and under goals of the external evaluation was made. Regional standard of competencies for external evaluators and, subsequently, the questionnaire for the training needs and analysis were developed. Currently, work on formulating the recommendations for the methodologies which are used in the external evaluation is underway. So far, the regional standard of occupations and qualifications for the agricultural technician was developed and the curriculum is being drawn up at the national level. Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe is working on continuing support on easier recognition of qualifications in the region and the quality assurance agencies in the advancements to the European standards and guidelines in the quality assurance in the European higher education area. Last pillar of intervention was the teacher education and training, with the focus on digitalisation of education. To this end, study visits for teachers are organized.

Adoption of the rolling Work Programme PA9 (Nadija Afanasieva)

The rolling Work Programme PA9 was adopted.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Nadija Afanasieva delivered concluding remarks and closed the Steering Group Meeting.

Participants of the 23rd SG meeting of the PA9 EUSDR:

First Name	Last Name	Institution	Country
Sarah	Fellner	OeAD – Austria’s Agency for Education and Internationalisation	Austria
Roland	Hanak	Federal Ministry of Labour	Austria
David	Zenz	Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies	wiiw
Maryna	Tverdostup	Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies	wiiw
Barbara	Willsberger	L&R Social Research	Austria
Jörg	Mirtl	L&R Social Research	Austria
Elisa	Cocco	DG REGIO, European Commission	EC
Nicole	Hauder	Danube Strategy Point	DSP
Petra	Reiner	Ministry of Science and Education	Croatia
Nikola	Strašek	Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs	Czech Republic
Marie	Taltnynová	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports	Czech Republic
Christopher	Sanchez	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of Baden-Württemberg	Germany
Dessislava	Traykova	Bavarian State Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Affairs	Germany
Stephen	Halligan	Danube Transnational Program	DTP/DRP
Ulrike	Damyhanovic	European Training Foundation	ETF
Ludmila	Pavlov	Ministry of Education, Culture and Research	Republic of Moldova
Carmen	Clapan	Ministry of Education	Romania
Carmen	Musat	NCTVETD	Romania
Boško	Latković	Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs	Serbia
Vanja	Nedeljković	Ministry of Education, Science and Technology Development	Serbia
Tina	Šarić	Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe/ERI SEE	ERI SEE
Lucia	Auxtová	Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family	Slovakia
Drahuša	Kalmanová	Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family	Slovakia
Petra	Česen Čatar	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia	Slovenian EUSDR Presidency
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Oleksandra	Husak	Ministry of Education and Science	Ukraine
Viktoriia	Karbysheva	Ministry of Education and Science	Ukraine
Olha	Dubovyk	Ministry of Social Policy	Ukraine