

Minutes

27th Steering Group Meeting of Priority Area 9 “People and Skills” (PA9) of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)

Date: 7th November 2024 & 8th November 2024

Venue: Hotel Avala, 2 Mediteranska, 85310 Budva, Montenegro

Chair:

Roland Hanak, Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy, Austria

Olha Dubovyk, Ministry of Social Policy, Ukraine

Aaron Schilhan, OeAD, Austria

Day 1: Thursday, 7 November 2024

Welcome and Introduction

Roland Hanak opened the Steering Group Meeting (SGM) and welcomed the PA9 Steering Group members as well as on-site and online participants of the meeting. He thanked the Montenegrin partners for the opportunity to meet in Budva and for their support in preparing the meeting.

Ivana Šućur welcomed the participants on behalf of the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Dialogue and expressed her gratitude for accepting their invitation to host the SGM in Montenegro. She pointed out that this meeting takes place at a crucial moment for Montenegro, as they are working intensively toward their goal to achieve full membership in the European Union (EU) by 2028. Ivana Šućur reiterated that Montenegro remains fully committed to necessary reforms on the path to EU accession and is ready to actively contribute to the vision of a united, democratic and prosperous Europe through continued cooperation.

Olha Dubovyk welcomed the participants on behalf of the Ukrainian Ministry of Social Policy and thanked the EU partners for their unyielding support for Ukraine. She related that the negotiation process between Ukraine and the European Commission (EC) regarding the EU accession is currently running. She pointed out that participating in the process so far has been a very important experience for Ukraine and hopes that all Candidate Countries have fruitful negotiations.

Aaron Schilhan welcomed the participants on behalf of Jürgen Schick and introduced himself as the new member of the Austrian PAC9 Team, representing the education and training agenda. He wished all participants a good meeting and fruitful discussions.

Adoption of the Agenda

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

State of Play EUSDR: News, Initiatives and Events

Update on the Austrian Presidency (Priority Area Coordinators)

Roland Hanak provided an update on activities carried out within the framework of the Austrian EUSDR Presidency so far and the contributions of PA9 towards these activities. The Austrian Presidency was the first to last 14 months after the system change, stretching from November 2023 to December 2024.

During this time, PA9 organised the 12th PA9 Stakeholder Conference in May 2024 in Vienna, Austria, where the Minister of Labour and Economy of Austria Martin Kocher and the Minister of Labour and Social Protection of the Republic of Moldova Alexei Buzu attended in person. The Deputy Minister of Education and Science of Ukraine Dmytro Zavgorodnii also attended the event online. It was a very successful event and we were very pleased that high-level political representatives could meet there and deal with the topics of green and digital change and the just transition.

PA9 contributed to the 13th EUSDR Annual Forum, which took place in June 2024 in Vienna, Austria, with a session on the topic of skills and education for the green transition. Our session was met with great interest and was attended by a high number of participants. Additionally, the PA9 hosted a world café “Investing in People and Skills – More Crucial Than Ever!” within the framework of the forum.

In June 2024, PA9 organised a Thematic Workshop in Podgorica, Montenegro, on the topic of digitalisation in the public employment service and the labour market administration, mainly focusing on facilitating the exchange of good practices between countries with different levels of digitalisation in the Danube Region. This was a major event as well, with many expert contributions, and was very well received.

The 3rd Meeting of the Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence was hosted within the PA9 in April 2024 in Vienna, Austria. Against the background of the green transition, the event focused on the issue of changing skill demands and the role of Centres of Vocational Excellence in meeting these demands.

PA9 held a Thematic Conference tackling school cooperation in the Danube Region in June 2024 in Krems, Austria. The event aimed to enhance transnational cooperation among teachers and school and initiate new eTwinning projects in the Danube Region.

Another major EUSDR event hosted by the Austrian Presidency where PA9 participated is the NC-PAC Meeting in January 2024 in Vienna, Austria. PA9 will also attend the upcoming NC-PAC Meeting taking place in December 2024 in Vienna, Austria.

News from the Upcoming Bosnian Presidency (Midhat Džemić, Directorate for European Integration of Council of Ministers, Bosnia and Herzegovina)

Midhat Džemić greeted the group from Sarajevo and apologised for not being able to join in person. While the Bosnia and Herzegovina (BA) presidency programme is still in the process of

being finalised, Midhat Džemić was happy to share the current updates. He expressed gratitude to PA9 for their valuable contributions to the presidency programme, which have all been accepted, and announced that the 14th EUSDR Annual Forum will take place in Sarajevo from the 5th to 6th of November 2025. PA9 plans to hold a Steering Group Meeting in Sarajevo back-to-back with the Annual Forum and to host a session during the event.

The BA presidency identified EU enlargement as the top priority, though current planning is complicated by the fact that the new EC has not been established yet.

A second priority is the cross-fertilisation of the EU Macro-Regional Strategies (MRS). The BA presidency is planning to organise joint events of the EUSDR with the Adriatic-Ionian Strategy (EUSAIR), as both strategies share common priorities, such as youth involvement, embedding, and governance improvements, and have overlapping member states. However, there is a need to carefully navigate eligibility issues in such collaborations.

Furthermore, embedding efforts remain a high priority of the BA presidency, with plans to involve experts in EU enlargement and IPA management. To advance this topic, the presidency intends to develop a discussion paper and propose actionable ideas for further dialogue.

In terms of event planning, the BA presidency is working with organisations like the Regional Cooperation Council in Sarajevo to organise joint events. Concerning the Annual Forum, the BA presidency is still searching for financing. A finalised presidency programme and a near-complete list of events are expected to be ready by the NC PAC Meeting in December in Vienna. Finally, Midhat Džemić sought input on the planned PA9-event at the Annual Forum and proposed organising an additional event before the forum to address the broad topic of brain drain in detail. In response, Roland Hanak declared PA9 will contemplate an additional event on brain drain leading up to the Annual Forum, however emphasises PA9's desire to bring the topic to the Annual Forum itself and thus reach a wider audience.

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

Elisa Cocco provided an update on the next European Commission for the period 2024-2029 and on the future of the EU Cohesion Policy. Ursula von der Leyen's political guidelines were published in July 2024 and focus on 4 priorities dealing with Europe's sustainable prosperity and competitiveness, an EU strategy for defence, security and preparedness as well as supporting the EU citizens and in particular youth, and strengthening enlargement and neighbourhood relations towards a global Europe. She pointed out a shift from a general green priority towards a focus on cleaning industries and improving the competitiveness of the EU, but a strong emphasis also lies on preparedness in response to crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukraine invasion. Youth support plays a crucial role in the new guidelines, as each commissioner will have to organise youth dialogues. The enlargement agenda is the most important political priority at the moment, which is also reflected by the planned splitting of DG NEAR into separate portfolios dedicated to the enlargement policy and to the Mediterranean Region/Southern Neighbourhood.

President Ursula von der Leyen put forward her proposal for the new commission in September 2024, but the forming process is currently still running. The proposed commissioners will undergo hearings in the European Parliament in the coming months. The hearings of commissioner Roxana Mînzatu responsible for the people, skills and preparedness agenda, and of commissioner Raffaele Fitto responsible for the cohesion and reforms agenda, could be of interest for PA9. The final college of the European Commission is expected to be secured by the start of 2025 at the latest.

Important milestones planned for 2025 are setting the Multi Annual Financial Framework for the next programming period 2028-2034 (by mid-2025) and the proposal of the EC for the new Cohesion Policy. It is expected that the budget allocated for the Cohesion Policy is unlikely to increase compared to the last period, against the background of the following two financial constraints: Firstly, the EU will have to reimburse the 750 billion EUR borrowed under the NextGenerationEU, and secondly, the new priorities enlargement and security are costly and will require considerable funding.

The future of the Interreg programmes is yet to be outlined in detail, however, it is already known that the programmes will remain active. Results so far have confirmed the need for a dedicated financial pocket for Interreg at EU and programme level, as well as the need for partnerships, joint programming and implementation.

Elisa Cocco announced that the next Macro-regional and Sea Basin Strategies Days will take place between the 24th to the 26th of September 2025.

Elisa Cocco's presentation is available via this [link](#).

Update from the Danube Strategy Point (Cristina Cuc, DSP)

Christina Cuc provided an update from the Danube Strategy Point (DSP), highlighting progress and plans across several key areas. On the embedding process, she noted the recent publication of the Austrian Presidency's guidelines paper, which reflects on successful practices and areas needing improvement, such as the absence of a coordination platform.

Regarding events, she outlined several key activities this year, including the PAC Meeting and Seminar hosted in September in Neusiedl am See, an upcoming NC-PAC Meeting in Vienna in December where embedding will be discussed, a Managing Authorities (MA) Network meeting in November to facilitate exchanges between PACs, NCs, and MAs, and a meeting of the cross-MRS working group on embedding in October.

2024 has seen significant efforts in terms of evaluation, monitoring, and reporting. An interim report of the EUSDR process and implementation evaluation is expected in 2025, and the final report is planned for 2028. Consolidated information from stakeholders will be published in December 2024 to reflect progress and identify areas for improvement. Findings of the evaluation process will also be shared with the EC.

The Danube Strategy Flagships remain central to promoting successes, including projects, networks, and processes that demonstrate the achievements of the strategy. These examples are used in external stakeholder discussions and DSP campaigns, such as videos, while also

informing future work plans and project developments. Priority Areas also play a role in their promotion, with notable contributions from PA10 (media) and PA8 (ceremony).

On communication, a new website is under development and expected to be available for testing by the end of 2024, with access for PACs planned for spring 2025. For capacity building, the first training session is scheduled for next year, with further details to be presented at the NC-PAC Meeting in December.

Regarding the Danube Youth Council (DYC), a new generation of youth members has joined the strategy this year. Half of the current members extended their mandates to aid the transition by transferring knowledge to new members. Applications for the next cohort are being assessed to finalise the selection process. The Danube Youth Organisations Network (DYON) is working to enhance its collaboration with the DYC, with 48 organisations currently registered. Lastly, Christina Cuc mentioned that the EUSDR event list for the coming year will be completed by the end of 2024.

Jörg Mirtl expressed gratitude for the support provided by the DSP on social media, emphasising its positive impact. However, he referred to the EUSDR process and implementation evaluation, particularly concerning the distribution of the interviews. While PA9 was granted only one interview before time constraints intervened, the DSP, as the contracting authority, had six interviews. In contrast, the PAs where the core content of the Strategy is developed and discussed, had merely five interviews collectively. He also highlighted the challenges of conducting joint interviews with PACs, given the varying backgrounds, including differences between newly established PACs, those active since the strategy's inception, and regional disparities.

Cristina Cuc's presentation is available via this [link](#).

Member States' and Candidate Countries' Perspectives on Skills Policies in the European Semester / Economic Reform Programmes

Facilities for Recovery, Reforms and Growth – Key Elements, Reporting Obligations and Implementation Plans

Roland Hanak explained that the following session aims to support Candidate Countries to prepare for EU accession by sharing experiences and good practices from EU Member Countries. The thematic focus of the session is on the implementation of the European Semester.

Katia Berti (Head of Unit, European Semester, DG EMPL)

Katia Berti started her presentation by providing an overview of the main labour market developments in the EU in 2023, as described in the 2024 Spring Package of the European Semester: Developments were largely positive within the EU, with employment rates remaining high and thus relatively low unemployment rates. At the same time, it must be recognised that a general labour and skills shortage in the union represents a common

challenge that is observed across countries and economy sectors. Consequently, the main priorities of EU in the areas of education and employment are to promote up- and reskilling, to facilitate the implementation of effective labour market policies and the application of additional instruments to support labour market integration, such as creating appropriate childcare services. Furthermore, attracting talent from abroad could also contribute to alleviating labour shortages. In response to these issues, the EC released an Action Plan on Labour and Skills Shortages in March 2024, aiming to address common challenges and achieve common priorities.

The 2024 Spring Package of the European Semester underlined the importance of skills in all its four pillars, reaching from competitiveness and macroeconomic stability, over productivity and environmental sustainability to fairness. In this regard, Katia Berti highlighted that creating inclusive education systems and widely imparting skills to all population groups can reinforce the competitiveness of the EU, while also preserving the European Social Model.

A new feature of the policy coordination that was introduced with the 2024 cycle of the European Semester is the Social Convergence Framework (SCF). The framework reinforces the social dimension of the European Semester and supports the implementation of the EU Pillar of Social Rights. The SCF entails a two-stage analysis of risks and challenges to upward social convergence in Member States. In the first stage, a Joint Employment Report (JER) consisting of potential risks based on a first screening of labour market, skills and social policies in all Member States was produced by the EC and adopted by the ESPCO Council. Based on the findings of the 2024 JER, seven Member States were identified as presenting risks to upward social convergence and subjected to a deeper analysis in the second stage. The results of both stages of the risks analysis were discussed in the Social Protection Committee and Employment Committee and reflected in the Country Reports belonging to the Spring Package of the 2024 semester cycle.

Depending on the concrete challenges identified, Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) are being passed on to each Member State with the Spring Package of the European Semester. In the policy domain of education and employment, the CSRs cover thematic areas such as vocational education and training, adult learning as well as labour and skills shortages/mismatches. Specifically, the CSRs refer to reforms in the areas of early childhood education and care as well as to policies to improve the availability, inclusiveness and quality of education and training, and to ensure smooth transition between education and employment. The CSRs also address labour and skills shortages and reinforce the need for up- and re-skilling of the workforce.

Luis Dessewffy (Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy, Austria)

Luis Dessewffy provided an overview of the structure of the European Semester as well as of main outcomes of the last semester cycle in Austria. The European Semester was established in 2010 and is part of the EU's economic governance framework. It aims to better coordinate

the economic, fiscal, labour and social policy within the EU. The semester follows a specific one-year cycle. During the first phase, EU Member States discuss their fiscal and budgetary plans and agree on key priorities. In the second part of the cycle, the Member States are expected to align national policies and budgets for the subsequent year.

The semester cycle starts in November with the Autumn Package, which includes documents such as the Alert Mechanism Report, the Annual Sustainable Growth Survey, the Joint Employment Report as well as the draft recommendations on economic policy and the opinions on the budget plans. By March, the documents contained in the Autumn Package are approved, analysed and the general objectives of the EU are determined. In April, the Member States submit their medium-term fiscal structural plans and National Reform Programmes (NRPs) to the EC for evaluation. Based on the NRPs, the EC issues CSRs among other documents with the Spring Package in May. After the CSRs are discussed in the Council, they are usually approved in June and formally adopted in July. In the timeframe between August and October, the Member States are invited to implement the CSRs and incorporate them into the reform, public investment and national budgetary plans for the following year. The CSRs are based on guidelines and classify as soft policy however, the Member States are strongly encouraged to implement them consistently.

The Employment Committee (EMCO) operates within the policy framework of the European Semester since 2011 and plays a key role in the labour policy domain. The EMCO fulfils the function of an advisory committee to the EPSCO Council to promote the coordination of employment and labour market policies both at the European and national levels. The EMCO consists of two subgroups: The Indicators Group carries out technical work on the indicators which are used in monitoring the EU Employment Strategy, and the Policy Analysis Group monitors the implementation of the Council recommendations. Where topics and priorities overlap, the EMCO also cooperates with other preparatory bodies of the Council to discuss issues of joint interest, most notably with the Social Protection Committee and the Economic Policy Committee.

The SCF was piloted in the last semester cycle and aims to identify social imbalances occurring in the EU and its Member States, highlighting the importance of social and economic policies. The SCF's main objective is to strengthen and monitor employment and social developments in the Member States based on a systematic two-step analysis. First, risks to social convergence are analysed via the Social Scoreboard. Based on a Member State's performance in relation to the last years as well as other Member States, it can qualify for a deeper analysis in the second stage. If risks for social convergence have been confirmed, these will be reviewed by means of the procedures for monitoring Member States' progress in implementing reforms within the semester and addressed in the CSRs.

In Austria, the NRP is coordinated by the Federal Chancellery together with several ministries and the social partners. Most notably, the Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy, the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research and the Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Health,

Care and Consumer Protection are involved in the European Semester. Regarding fiscal and budgetary policy, there is also coordination with the Federal Ministry of Finance. In the area of employment, the 2024 CSRs for Austria focused on 1. Reducing the tax burden on labour, 2. boosting the labour market participation of women, including by improving quality childcare services, and on 3. improving the labour market outcomes for disadvantaged groups, such as older people, low-skilled job seekers and people with a migrant background, and on raising the level of their basic skills, starting at school level. The last report monitoring the implementation of the CSRs in Austria showed limited progress in all policy areas.

Luis Dessewffy's presentation is available via this [link](#).

Eva Masárová (Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, Slovakia)

Eva Masárová described how the European Semester was transposed into Slovak realities by focusing on practical experiences on the implementation of the semester and on how the CSRs were used to bring innovation into practice. In the programming period 2021-2027, the Slovak activities conducted within the framework of the European Semester were based on three main documents that represent the foundation of the dialogue between Slovakia and the EC's departments on the programming of funds within the Cohesion Policy (ERDF, ESF+, Cohesion Fund): The Country Reports and the CSRs for the years 2019-2020 as well as the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan for 2030. In the area of skills, emphasis was put on coping with new economic developments emerging from the green and digital transformation and at the same time aligning them with the needs of the labour market and supporting the assessment and anticipation of skills needed. Recommendations referred to increasing the level of skills, validating non-formal education, enabling retraining and investing in vocational training.

As a result of consultations with the EC, these recommendations were finally translated into a joint priority of the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Education titled "Skills for a better adaptability and inclusion". The recommendations also influenced the legislative environment in the field of skills and led to the adoption of the Strategy for Lifelong Learning and Counselling for the Years 2021-2030.

In the fall of 2022, an Alliance of Sectoral Councils (ASC) was established with the goal to bring optimal institutional and systemic solutions to the areas of occupations, qualifications and lifelong learning (formal and informal) in such a way that they correspond to the current requirements of the labour market as well as development tendencies and anticipated innovation trends. The members of the ASC reflect the composition of the Economic and Social Council of the Slovak Republic consisting of employers and trade unions, and further include state representatives from the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Education. Gradually, some competences of both ministries have been transferred to the ASC: This concerns the forecasting of trends and needs of the labour market, which was initially conducted by the Ministry of Labour. Furthermore, the accreditation of educational programmes for adult

education is expected to be moved from the the Ministry of Education into the area of responsibility of the alliance starting with 2025.

According to the CSRs from 2023 and 2024, digital and green skills shortages still constitute emerging challenges for Slovakia. These are being addressed through national projects financed by the ESF+ and ERDF funds.

Fadil Zejnelagić (Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Dialogue, Montenegro)

Fadil Zejnelagić provided an update on the goals pursued by Montenegro on the way to EU accession. The most important document setting objectives to meet the required economic criteria is the Programme of Economic Reforms (PER). During its drafting, broad consultations were conducted. To meet the Copenhagen criteria for EU membership and withstand the market forces within the EU, it is necessary to establish full stability of institutions and the rule of law and improve its economic performance. Economic policy measures in the medium term will be aimed at diversifying the economic activity and increasing the competitiveness of the economy as well as strengthening the resistance of the Montenegrin economy to external shocks. Ensuring macroeconomic and fiscal stability, improving the business environment and starting a strong investment cycle are further economic policy measures planned. The perspectives of economic growth in the medium term are supported by the new EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans.

Strong economic performance in recent years has accelerated Montenegro's progress towards meeting the required criteria however, further measures are still needed. To this end, the EU issued Recommendations to Montenegro for the PER 2024-2026, which are already in the process of being implemented.

One recommendation referred to the need to strengthen the operational capacities of the Employment Office for the implementation of services and measures through digitisation. A comprehensive reform aiming to digitise services and procedures within the Montenegrin Public Employment Service is currently underway. The new digitised system is expected to be fully operational starting with November 2024, eight months ahead of schedule.

Moreover, the EU recommended to commence the implementation of the Youth Guarantee pilot programme and at the same time start the necessary preparations for structural, operational and organisational changes within the Montenegrin Employment Office the enable the delivery of the full Youth Guarantee services after the pilot period. Starting with January 2025, the Youth Guarantee will be piloted for two years in selected municipalities and the full-scale implementation of the programme on the entire territory of Montenegro will begin in 2027.

Another recommendation concerns the revision of the National Employment Strategy, which is the key document in the field of employment policy. The strategy covers the period 2021-2025 and is currently being evaluated by external experts with the support of the Federal

Ministry of Labour and Economy of Austria. The results of this evaluation constitute the groundwork for the new National Employment Strategy after 2026 that is under development. Building on the priorities set in the new EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, the Montenegrin government drafted in close cooperation with the EC the Reform Agenda of Montenegro for 2024-2027. The agenda represents a comprehensive plan of economic and social development measures aimed at accelerating the integration of Montenegro into the EU through the implementation of key reforms. The agenda was adopted in September 2024 and includes reforms in four priority sectors, namely: business environment and private sector development, digital and energy/green transition, human capital development, and rule of law consolidation and fundamental rights protection.

Tour de Table

Based on the guiding questions included in the Draft Agenda of the meeting, the Steering Group members were invited to provide short inputs on the current situation in their respective countries.

UA – Olha Dubovyk (Labour Market): While meeting all requirements and fulfilling the indicators set for EU accession is challenging, Ukraine is working on improving its capacities in this respect. Olha Dubovyk appreciated the support offered by Austria and Montenegro by being open to share their learnings and experiences with facing challenges during the accession process.

RS - Boško Latković (Labour Market): On June and December 2021, the first and second intergovernmental conference between Republic of Serbia and EU were held since the transition to the new methodology of conducting pre-accession negotiations whereby 35 negotiation chapters were grouped into 6 clusters. On these conferences, Republic of Serbia officially opened cluster 1 – Basics and cluster 4 - Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity. Serbia has adopted a new Law on the employment of foreigners, which is in accordance with the EU directives, but the adoption of new laws in the field of employment and employment of persons with disabilities are also being considered due to the need to harmonize them with EU law.

ME – Ivana Šućur and Fadil Zejnelagić (Labour Market): EU accession will bring important benefits for Montenegro in the area of labour market and skills. In relation to recent migration waves, a benefit of EU membership will be to create frameworks for migration cycles that could bring these developments into balance. At the moment, Montenegro faces many labour gaps that are difficult to fill due to high emigration, such as the need for seasonal workers in the area of tourism. Having access to the EU workforce will open up opportunities for EU workers

to come to work in Montenegro. At the same time, Montenegrin workers can gain new experiences and knowledge abroad however, the goal is to encourage them to eventually return to Montenegro and implement their learnings there. Moreover, EU membership will ensure freedom of movement, which is essential on the one hand for attracting more tourists to Montenegro, and on the other for attracting big companies to settle and invest in Montenegro.

Day 2: Friday, 8 November 2024

State of Play EUSDR: News, Initiatives and Events

Update from the Austrian Presidency (Roland Arbter, Federal Ministry for Agriculture, Forestry, Regions and Water Management, Austria)

Roland Arbter presented updates of the Austrian Presidency, led by the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Federal Ministry for Agriculture, Forestry, Regions, and Water Management of Austria, which will conclude its term at the end of 2024, passing the mantle to Bosnia and Herzegovina. The presidency has emphasised that the primary responsibility for implementing the strategy rests with the Priority Areas, which serve as its substantive core. The Danube Strategy Point has provided crucial support in this effort, aligning closely with the European Commission's initiatives. While fulfilling its organisational duties, the Austrian Presidency has also leveraged its position to advance the strategy through targeted efforts. One of the presidency's primary objectives has been to enhance the visibility, political ownership, and recognition of the strategy within the Danube Region. Efforts have focused on leveraging key events to build bridges and embed the strategy into a broader framework of regional cooperation. This approach has included not only events directly organised under the strategy, such as the Participation Day, the Annual Forum, and the Business Forum, but also external stakeholder conferences and the collaboration with the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR), which will feature prominently in the NC-PAC Meeting in December. These efforts aim to broaden partnerships and raise the profile of the strategy across various sectors.

EU Accession and enlargement have been central themes during the Austrian Presidency. Activities, including a high-level meeting of foreign ministers, have explored how the strategy can contribute to these priorities. Although linking these issues directly to the strategy's objectives remains a challenge, there is confidence that the incoming Bosnian Presidency will continue to prioritise gradual integration and enlargement in its agenda.

Looking to the future, the Austrian Presidency has encouraged discussions on emerging frameworks and transformation agendas introduced by the incoming European Commission. To facilitate this, it has supported the development of a think piece and engaged experts to draft proposals for consideration. Stakeholders have been invited to provide feedback on critical topics, which will inform the agenda of the next NC-PAC Meeting, ensuring a forward-looking approach to policy and programmatic priorities.

Cooperation with other EU programmes such as Interreg has been another area of focus. The presidency has worked to strengthen ties with cross-border initiatives, emphasising that these instruments are complementary rather than competitive. Embedding efforts have underscored the importance of aligning these programmes with the strategy's objectives. Stakeholders have been invited to participate in the upcoming MA Network Meeting, and initiatives like the ESF network in the Danube Region have been highlighted as valuable contributors to these efforts.

The Austrian Presidency has also paid close attention to governance issues, focusing on assessing and refining the strategy's operational framework. This work has included the production of a governance paper and the development of tools to evaluate and enhance governance mechanisms. The DSP has played a vital role in these activities. Governance will be a central topic of discussion at the NC-PAC Meeting, where additional strategies for strengthening the model will be explored.

Reflecting on these efforts, Roland Hanak highlighted the need to extend engagement beyond the core group of stakeholders, questioning the definition of the "family" of actors involved. He argued for greater involvement of Priority Area Coordinators (PACs) in meetings with regional representatives to foster meaningful collaborations. While large events like the Business Forum have been impactful, they have sometimes lacked direct connections to key players. Future efforts should aim to strengthen these linkages.

State of Play PA9: News, Initiatives and Events

Update Flagship "School Cooperation in the Danube Region" (eTwinning Initiative)

Aaron Schilhan provided an update on the Flagship "School Cooperation in the Danube Region" (eTwinning Initiative). This year, the eTwinning Danube Region Seminar was held from 12th to 14th of June 2024, in Krems, Austria. Organised by OeAD, the Austrian National Agency for Erasmus+ and National eTwinning Support Organisation, in cooperation with the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research of Austria which coordinates PA 9, with Moldova also represented through its eTwinning National Support Organisation, the seminar gathered 42 teachers from 12 countries within the Danube Region. The participants taught students aged 6 to 19.

The seminar began with welcome remarks from Ursula Panuschka, Head of Erasmus+ School Education and eTwinning Austria, followed by a thematic input by Jürgen Schick. Teachers then participated in two eTwinning training workshops, where they developed 10 new group projects. Each participant joined at least one project team, ensuring active engagement in the collaborative process. Overall, the seminar was conducted in a friendly and productive atmosphere, and it was considered a great success, further enhancing cooperation and project development within the Danube Region.

In addition, the AT-UA eTwinning Partner-Finding Event took place on October 2nd 2024, hosted by OeAD. This online event brought together 20 teachers from Austria and Ukraine, teaching

students at all levels, to find project partners for future collaborations. During the event, four new eTwinning project ideas were developed in a highly enthusiastic environment.

Update from the ESF Network

The ESF Network met most recently in September in Split, Croatia. The meeting was organised in cooperation with the Croatian PA9 Steering Group member Filip Miličević and PA 10.

For the first time, representatives of the Candidate Countries Montenegro, the Republic of Moldova and Serbia joined the meeting.

The main topics discussed within the frame of the meeting concerned new issues that arise from the enlargement of the ESF network to also include EU Accession Countries. The event was a success and marked a good start for the future cooperation within the network.

Preparations for the next meeting planned for 2025 are already underway. The Slovak colleagues proposed to host the next meeting jointly in Vienna and Slovakia and connect it with a study visit.

More information on the ESF Network is available here: <https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/esf/>

Jörg Mirtl announced that the ESF+ Committee Technical Working Group will take place at the end of November in Budapest, where the four EU Macroregional Strategies will be presented. On this occasion, key representatives of the ESF+ will be informed about the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, which constitutes another dimension of embedding.

Short Updates from the Danube Region Countries

This agenda item was covered during the tour de table on the first meeting day.

Outlook 2025

The Danube Region Monitor – People and Skills

For 2025, preparations are underway for the continuation of the Danube Region Monitor. The tender and public procurement process, managed by BMAW and OeAD, involved sending out invitations to select research institutes, resulting in a contract for the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (wiiw). As the original creators of the monitor, wiiw is considered well-suited for this continuation. The contract is currently being prepared, with work expected to begin soon.

13th PA9 Stakeholder Conference

The 13th PA9 International Stakeholder Conference will prospectively take place in 2025 in an online format and will be organised by the Ukrainian PAC9 colleagues.

The PAC9 Team will inform the Steering Group about any news as soon as possible.

Further Events PA9

The 28th Steering Group Meeting of the EUSDR PA9 will take place in spring 2025 prospectively in an online format. The 29th Steering Group Meeting is planned in autumn in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, back-to-back with the 14th EUSDR Annual Forum that will take place on the 5th and 6th of November 2025.

The PA9 intends to host a session focusing on the topic of “Avoiding Brain-Drain and Closing the Skills Gap: Green and Digital Skills for European Competitiveness” (working title) within the framework of the 14th EUSDR Annual Forum.

The PA9 plans to organise a Thematic Workshop on the topic of Roma Empowerment in 2025 and will get back to you with further information as soon as possible.

In 2025, a continuation of the eTwinning and the Centres of Vocational Excellence flagships is planned. Further details will be communicated in the coming weeks.

SG Decisions

Adoption of the Rolling PA9 Work Programme

For the adoption of the Rolling PA9 Work Programme a written procedure will be launched.

Updates from Partners

European Training Foundation (Gordon Purvis, ETF)

Gordon Purvis expressed gratitude to the PA9 team for excellent cooperation and provided updates from the European Training Foundation (ETF), which is celebrating its 30th year in 2024. Reflecting on the past, ETF highlighted its involvement in previous EU enlargement processes and its ongoing collaboration with partners in Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Ukraine. While much has changed, there is continuity in its close work with the EC and member states, with plans to further strengthen this cooperation in the coming years.

ETF’s focus on human capital development emphasises skills, education, and labour market growth, aligning with the Danube Region Strategy. The organisation is heavily involved in IPA programmes, growth plans, and reform agendas, particularly in skills development, presenting significant opportunities. The accession process remains pivotal, with ETF providing strong support. The green and digital transitions, especially in equipping young people with the necessary skills, are also key priorities. An important milestone was the rollout of the Youth Guarantee in Serbia, where ETF played a role.

ETF’s efforts include on-the-ground engagement, jobs and skills surveys (conducted in Western Balkans and expanding to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine), and identifying future skills needs for policy-makers. The Centres of Vocational Excellence initiative saw a platform meeting in Vienna in April, which engaged Austrian authorities, practitioners and stakeholders to build platforms for collaboration and technical support. The Torino Process remains central

to ETF's mission, aiming to improve policy-making and planning while supporting education and labour market advancements. ETF also assists Erasmus+ offices with policy advice, as the EC's approach evolves to focus more on investment and performance. The ETF looks forward to deepening cooperation, with an open invitation to Torino.

Gordon Purvis' presentation is available via this [link](#).

ERI SEE – Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (Tina Šarić, ERI SEE)

Tina Šarić provided an update on ERI SEE, an international organisation mandated by the ministries of education in seven Southeast European countries, five of which are in the Danube Region. ERI SEE works closely with education ministries, labour ministries, national VET agencies, and stakeholders across pre-tertiary and higher education. Its areas of focus include modernising and ensuring quality in pre-tertiary education (e.g. through VET, quality assurance, teacher training) and improving higher education qualifications.

ERI SEE's activities are primarily project-based, supplemented by regular initiatives. The EQET SEE project, funded by ADA and running until March 2025, focuses on two main areas: 1. improving quality assurance (e.g. by developing competence standards, conducting training needs analyses, creating training programs, and building capacity through study visits); and 2. modernising VET and fostering cooperation with the business sector by developing occupational standards, qualification standards, and curricula, as well as training programs for trainers, teachers, and company instructors. These efforts culminate in dissemination and project evaluations.

Additionally, ERI SEE has become increasingly engaged in the green agenda through its contribution to the RESET project, focusing on renewable energy education and training. Key activities include policy recommendations for TVET decision-makers to align with labour market needs in renewable energy and raise awareness about TVET opportunities in this field. Upcoming events include a regional conference on lifelong learning and recognition of prior learning (RPL) in Albania, an event in Vienna on the intersection of green initiatives and VET, and the final EQET SEE project conference, to which all PA9 Steering Group members are invited. ERI SEE is also developing learning materials on renewable energy and planning new activities in the region, such as re-skilling, upskilling, and further advancing VET initiatives.

Tina Šarić presentation is available via this [link](#).

Danube Youth Council (Gabriela Radkova & Dejana Petranović, DYC)

Gabriela Radkova and Dejana Petranović shared recent updates from the Danube Youth Council (DYC), including the successful organisation of the 3rd Danube Youth Camp in Vienna, held under the Austrian Presidency by the DSP and the City of Vienna. A key development from this event was the creation of a Google Drive channel, which provides all DYC members with access to current and future council activities. This document serves as a database for participation, contributions to past events, and future opportunities. It is designed to help new

members catch up and stay informed, while also allowing outgoing members to stay connected and aware of ongoing activities.

They also reflected on the involvement of youth in the priority areas, lessons learned from past group activities, and potential improvements in cooperation. A central theme was knowledge transfer to bridge the gap between the old and new generations of DYC members, ensuring smooth transitions and effective engagement. Two notable activities included an in-person meeting with Roland Arbter, the National Coordinator of Austria, to discuss youth involvement in the strategy, and a meeting with colleagues from the DYC of the EU Alpine Strategy (EUSALP) to explore mutual learning, coordination, and possible combined efforts in the future.

The EUSDR post-2027: New European Commission Priorities and the Future of PA9

Input on the New European Commission 2024-2029 and the EU Cohesion Policy post-2027 (Flavia Enengl)

Building on the general update provided by DG Region on the first meeting day, Flavia Enengl touched upon how the skills topic is being handled by the next European Commission. The Political Guidelines for the next EC 2024-2029 identify a need for a new European Prosperity Plan to tackle the skills and labour gap. To this end, a Union of Skills focusing on investment, adult and lifelong learning, skill retention and recognition of different types of trainings should be established, and lifelong learning should be embedded into education and careers. These goals require a boost and refocus of skills funding in the EU budget. Concrete initiatives planned by the new EC include a STEM Education Strategic Plan, a European Strategy for Vocational Education and Training as well as a Skills Portability Initiative and work towards a European Degree.

In her Mission Letter to commissioner Roxana Mînzatu, president Ursula von der Leyen set specific goals for the portfolio of people, skills and preparedness. The portfolio foresees strengthening Europe's human capital, societies and the social model as well as tackling skills and labour gaps through training and education, as main priorities in this area. But also facilitating labour mobility within the EU and ensuring a just transition through a Quality Jobs Roadmap should contribute to achieving the portfolio's goals. Developing a new Action Plan on the Implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights as well as a new Pact for European Social Dialogue, and contributing social, education and employment strategies to the European Semester constitute key objectives of the portfolio. The European Social Fund Plus will remain an important financial instrument for realising this vision.

Flavia Enengl's presentation is available via this [link](#).

Any other Business

None.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Roland Hanak closed the meeting, thanking the Montenegrin colleagues for hosting the meeting, the experts for their inputs and all participants for joining. The partners ensured once again their continued solidarity and support for Ukraine in these challenging times.

Participants of the 27th SG meeting of the PA9 EUSDR:

On-site Participants

First Name	Last Name	Institution	Country
Lucia	Auxtová	Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth	Slovakia
Cristina	Cuc	Danube Strategy Point	DSP
Luis	Dessewffy	Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy	Austria
Olha	Dubovyk	Ministry of Social Policy	Ukraine
Flavia	Enengl	L&R Social Research	Austria
Tímea	Farkas	Ministry of National Economy	Hungary
Roland	Hanak	Federal Ministry for Labour and Economy	Austria
Boško	Latković	Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs	Serbia
Eva	Masárová	Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family	Slovakia
Jörg	Mirtl	Federal Ministry for Labour and Economy	Austria
Dejana	Petranovic	Danube Youth Council	DYC
Gabriela	Radkova	Danube Youth Council	DYC
Aaron	Schilhan	OeAD	Austria
Ivana	Šučur	Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Dialogue	Montenegro
Dragana	Vojvodic	Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Dialogue	Montenegro
Barbara	Willsberger	L&R Social Research	Austria
Fadil	Zejnlagić	Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Dialogue	Montenegro

Online Participants

First Name	Last Name	Institution	Country
Roland	Arbter	Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Regions and Water Management	Austria
Katia	Berti	DG EMPL, European Commission	EC
Elisa	Cocco	DG REGIO, European Commission	EC
Midhat	Džemić	Directorate for European Integration of Council of Ministers	Bosnia and Herzegovina
Mykhailo	Omelchenko	Ukrainian Institute for International Politics	Ukraine
Gordon	Purvis	European Training Foundation	ETF
Tina	Šarić	Education Reform Initiative of Southeastern Europe	ERI SEE

Annex

Steering Group members provided the following written contributions answering the guiding questions for the Tour de Table after the meeting:

UA – Olha Dubovyk (Labour Market): Since June 2022, Ukraine has the status of a candidate for membership in the EU. In November 2023, the EC published a Report on the progress of Ukraine within the framework of the 2023 European Union Enlargement Package. Based on recommendations presented in this report, the Action Plan for the implementation of the recommendations of the EC was approved by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine in February 2024. The plan defines measures for skills and competences. These include measures aimed at improving the quality of education and vocational training, in particular for Ukrainians returning from abroad, to ensure that the results correspond to the needs of the labour market, especially in terms of skills necessary for reconstruction. Measures also aim to ensure the adaptation of the education system to accommodate the reintegration of Ukrainians returning from abroad. Furthermore, efforts are underway to continue to bring the legislation of Ukraine in line with the acts of the EU Law on mutual recognition of professional qualifications and adopt a national law on professional education. The implementation of the Action Plan is accompanied by a monitoring procedure within which all ministries must report once every three months to the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine on the implementation of the respective actions for which they are responsible.

The Roadmap for the European Integration of Ukraine in the Fields of Education and Science until 2027 was approved by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine in December 2023. One of the objectives of the roadmap is related to skills and competencies. In particular, the training of specialists in professions that require additional regulation need to be aligned with EU requirements and recommendations, and the EU recommendation on the recognition of qualifications must be taken into account in the legislation and educational process. To this end, a comparison of the National Qualifications Framework with the European Qualifications Framework is required.

The Strategic Plan of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine until 2027 was approved in March 2024 and foresees the transformation of professional education as one of its priorities. It follows the purpose to provide the citizens of Ukraine with access to quality professional education in order for them to have a wide choice of educational opportunities. In return, the labour market receives competitive workers for the recovery and reconstruction of the country as a result of these efforts.

RS - Boško Latković (Labour Market): Active labour market policy measures, especially those concerned with the acquisition of skills and competences as well as with further education and training, must be foreseen within the national legal framework. This means that they are

implemented in accordance with the Law on Employment and Unemployment Insurance and the Law on Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities. They are further elaborated in strategic documents such as the Serbian Employment Strategy and the Action Plan for the Implementation of the Strategy. In this context, it is important to also mention the Reform and Growth Agenda of the Republic of Serbia. This document is part of the EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and incorporates all of Serbia's obligations regarding skills and trainings for the Youth Guarantee Programme.

Two primary challenges have been identified in connection with these activities. The first challenge relates to the overall coverage of unemployed with active labour market measures. Due to limited funding, only 12,9% of the total number of unemployed persons registered in the National Employment Service have access to active labour market policy measures. The second challenge refers to strengthening the effectiveness of Serbian policies in order to reach EU standards.

The Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs is obliged to report on the results and performance of the implementation of active labour market policy measures. To this end, Annual Reports on the Implementation of the Action Plan are being prepared. These reports are being made public through the unified information system for all public policies in Serbia.

SK – Lucia Auxtová (Education): Education for the future includes green skills. Slovakia needs green skills for the development of key sectors for economic growth, such as electromobility and renewable energy sources. Investments from the green chapter of the Recovery and Resilience Plan REPowerEU will bring innovations to secondary vocational schools. Developing educational programmes for teachers by means of REPowerEU is also considered, which would help with their professional training. Thanks to these investments, the schools can also acquire the necessary equipment for both practical and theoretical education. The reform will contribute to the gradual adaptation into practice of study programmes at the level of secondary vocational schools. These investments are intended to create material-technical, organisational and other conditions for education and practical teaching in the targeted schools as well as to develop necessary educational materials.

Skills for Green Transition is a national project under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth of the Slovak Republic and aims to reform and update the current education and training programmes to reflect the current labour market needs for green skills. The reform consists of three parts: The first part envisions the adaptation of the curriculum for secondary vocational schools with a stronger focus on developing green skills needed in the sectors with high growth potential – at first especially those related to renewable energy sources and electromobility. The updated curriculum shall be in line with the classification of green skills as defined in the European Classification of Occupations, Skills and Competences (ESCO). The second part of the reform shall change qualification standards for

the preparatory education and trainings for teachers in secondary and vocational schools, and shall update the teachers' training programmes. The newly created training for teachers and trainers in secondary vocational schools shall focus on developing teaching skills in the same areas related to renewable energy sources and electromobility. The updated teachers' programme shall too reflect the ESCO classification of green skills. In the third part of the reform, adult training programmes for the acquisition and extension of skills and/or qualifications for occupations for which there is a shortage of skilled workers or for sectors that are undergoing major transitions (e.g. heavy industry, automotive sector) shall be developed in close cooperation with relevant experts. The adult training programmes shall focus on skills in the areas of renewable energy sources and electromobility as well.

Expected outcomes of this reform include adjusted curricula and the provision of equipment for specialised programmes focusing on renewable energy sources and electromobility in 13 selected secondary vocational schools in Slovakia within the third quarter of 2025. The same timeframe applies for providing 180 professional training courses for teachers and practical trainers of secondary vocational schools in the field of renewable energy sources and electromobility. By the end of the second quarter of 2026, 565 students are expected to successfully complete the new modules in the field of renewable energy sources and electromobility.

The implementation of REPowerEU in accordance with the set goals of the EU, especially in the field of combating climate crisis, including the transition to a green economy, requires the training of highly qualified experts that have appropriate skills in the field of renewable energy sources. Accordingly, the State Institute of Vocational Education plans to gradually conclude a Memorandum of Understanding with schools and self-governing regions.