

Minutes

21st Steering Group Meeting

Priority Area 9 “People and Skills” (PA9)

Date: 4-5 November 2021

Venue: Online

Chairs:

Roland Hanak, Federal Ministry of Labour, Austria

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

Daria Bovkun, Ministry of Education and Science, Ukraine

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

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

DAY 1

Welcome and Introduction

The Priority Area 9 Coordinators Roland Hanak, Jürgen Schick, Ludmila Pavlov, Daria Bovkun and Anna Gherganova opened the Steering Group Meeting and welcomed members and participants of the PA9 Steering Group. The importance of cooperation of all the member states within PA9 in terms of recovery and resilience of the Danube Region was highlighted. PAC9 also mentioned the upcoming Ukrainian Presidency of the EUSDR in 2022 and the identification of PA9 as one of the thematic priorities of the future Presidency.

Adoption of Agenda

The [agenda](#) was adopted unanimously.

General update from the European Commission

Dorota Korczyńska (DG REGIO) provided an overview and a general update, including on the upcoming [Social Economy Action Plan](#). A related event was held on 16 December 2021. Its goal is to enhance social investment, support social economy actors and social enterprises, and to create jobs. Moreover, she drew attention to the Competence Centres for Social Innovation (see Day 2), as well as the Digital Education Action Plan, and also referred to the EUSDR’s Youth Manifesto and the European Year of Youth in 2022.

The presentation is available [here](#).

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

In the framework of a tour de table, each Danube Region representatives gave an overview on the respective current situation on the labour market and within the education systems, especially with regards to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Filip Milicevic (Labour, HR) stated that there was no significant decline in the employment rates in HR since the beginning of the pandemic. The Hr labour market is not affected too heavily by the pandemic. He informed the SG about the current ESF programming and the Resilience and Recovery programme, including green skills and green jobs.

Petra Reiner (Education, HR) commented on the ongoing curricular reform to modernize teaching and learning in schools in Croatia and the e-Schools project to support a complete digital transformation of schools. There is an experimental programme for introducing a whole-day school system with single-shift classes and the aim of increasing the minimum instruction time in compulsory education, which is one of the lowest in Europe. **Currently, a whole-day school model is being prepared.** The ongoing VET reform aims to contribute to the development of a quality education system, promote excellence and development of lifelong learning, and increase the employability of young people. A new Act on Adult Education, introducing a quality assurance system and the recognition of prior learning, is to be adopted by the end of the year. In the area of higher education, the implementation of the Croatian Qualifications Framework aims at aligning study programmes with labour market needs and improving their quality and relevance. It was amended at the start of 2021 to clarify the distinction between qualifications acquired at the professional studies' level and the university level. Other priorities include the internationalisation of higher education, primarily through the alliances of European Universities and by increasing the number of study programmes in foreign languages.

Ondřej Krýsl (Labour, CZ) provided a brief summary on the labour market situation in CZ, which has currently the lowest unemployment rate in the EU (3%). Labour market has recovered recently. There are two current challenges for the Czech labour market: 1) lack of supply, e.g., for the automotive industry, 2) the ongoing inflation, especially in the field of energy. There are instruments to help those households that are the most affected by the energy prices and CZ would like to cooperate in this regard with other EU Member States.

Christiane Spies (Labour and Education, DE/BW) reported that Baden-Württemberg had an unemployment rate of 3.7% and a youth unemployment rate of 2.9% in September 2021, which are the lowest rates in Germany (also due to vocational jobs and job offers in the new school year).

Two key objectives for 2021-2026 in the area of education are to create a holistic understanding of performance and education and to get “back to the top” with a consistent quality development. Concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, the school year 2021/2022 started with face-to-face lessons and protective measures in place, including hygienic regulations, procurement of air filter systems, daily testing for non-vaccinated and non-recovered personnel, testing of students and pupils every three days, the cohort principle (if there are infections trying to still keep small groups in the school), and vaccination offers and multilingual information materials at schools. Measures to support the digitalization and digital transformation of schools include improving technical infrastructure and equipment of schools, procuring mobile digital devices, and strengthening technical skills of teachers and school children. To improve equity in education, keeping face-to-face lessons are a top priority and several programmes were implemented to reduce learning gaps as a result of lockdowns (summer schools, learning bridges, programme “Lernen mit Rückenwind”, federal programme “Catching up after corona”). In addition, measures in the fields of intercultural education, language and reading promotion, school psychology, learning assessments, and the promotion of talent are being implemented.

Gabriella Tölgyes (Labour, HU) submitted in writing an overview of employment trends and measures in HU during 2020-2021:

The coronavirus epidemic also hit Hungary in the spring months of 2020, breaking an unprecedented employment growth trend, while the global crisis has also significantly reshaped the domestic labour market.

Hungary has achieved some of the most dynamic employment growth in the European Union over the past decade, while unemployment has also fallen to a record low of around 3%. This positive trend was only temporarily interrupted by the shock of the pandemic and in the summer of 2021, KSH recorded the highest employment rate since the regime change, when the number of people in work rose to over 4.7 million.

The unemployment rate for the 15-74 age group fell from 11.2% in 2010 to 3.4% in 2019, before the epidemic brought it down to 4.3% in 2020. The combination of economic recovery and public support for job creation has led to a slow but steady decline in unemployment.

Anna Gherganova (Labour, MD) stated that the labour market is recovering after the pandemic, both employment and activity rates are improving, however, the NEETs rate remains high with 19%. The Ministry of Labour in MD is developing a new employment programme that contains several elements, e.g. a new NEETs outreach methodology in MD, assisted employment for people with disabilities etc. One other element is the digitalisation of employment services in MD.

Ludmila Pavlov (Education, MD) informed about the priorities of the new government in place since August 2021, including the allocation of funds for recovery, remediation, and support of the learning progress of all students to overcome the pandemic situation. Another priority is the development of a national centre for education and leadership in education to ensure the modernization of initial and continuous training of teachers and principals and to ensure the availability of sufficient and competent staff by increasing salaries. Funds to support inclusive education in general education are to be doubled and the financing mechanism for all levels of studies is to be improved. Other priorities include digitalization, simplifying documentation and reporting procedures, creating a fund for innovation in education, improving the normative framework regarding the provision of textbooks and other teaching aides, as well as the modernization and efficiency of technical and vocational education and training (with a focus on dual VET). In the area of higher education, the training of specialists in priority areas and study programmes that meet business needs are a priority. Due to the pandemic situation, vacations for general education students were extended by another week. The education sector and teachers are vaccinated actively. Online formats are set up for most higher education institutions. The National Strategy for Education 2030 is in the last stages of preparation for approval.

Daniela Placinta (Education, RO) reported that the school year 2021/2022 started in September in physical format at all levels. If a COVID-19 case is confirmed in a class, courses continue online for 13 days, with the possibility to come back earlier if tested negatively on the 8th day. Due to the increased number of COVID-19 cases, schools are on vacation for two weeks and it will be decided depending on the rate of infections if classes would be resumed physically or online. At higher education level, universities are advised to conduct all teaching online (or in a blended format in the case of faculties for medicine). In the area of VET, the project “ReCONNECT – adaptation to change – an integrated anticipation, monitoring and evaluation mechanism for the labour market and education” is being implemented with the objective of linking demand with labour supply by introducing new tools and mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating public policies in the field of education and market skill requirements. An information system to provide real-time data on graduates from VET will be elaborated.

Boško Latković (Labour, RS) gave an update about the labour market situation in Serbia. He stressed that the programme “my first salary” was introduced in 2020 for young employees and was a big success. This programme is intended for young people without experience under 30. He also mentioned that the Western Balkan countries introduced a Youth Guarantee programme similar to the EU Member States. The Draft of the Youth Guarantee scheme is to be submitted by mid-March and to be finalised in June 2022.

Lucia Auxtova (Education, SK) informed about the long-term efforts of Slovakia to set the rules during the pandemic to maintain full-time education in schools as long as possible, with the safest possible environment for students. The EU Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) is one of the most important funding sources to secure the restoration and resilience of Slovakia and kick off reforms to modernize education. Recent initiatives include a curricula reform for a shift from a content- towards a competence-oriented system as well as investments in digitalization and school infrastructure. With the amendment of the Education Act, mandatory pre-primary education for 5-year-olds from the school year 2021/2022 was introduced. Funds of the RRF will also be allocated to reinforce the capacity of kindergartens. Another goal is to have digital coordinators in all primary and secondary schools within 3 years. In the area of higher education, around € 200 million will be dedicated to increasing the performance of higher education institutions, and a new strategy for internationalization is currently being finalized. The new draft amending the Higher Education Act includes changes in the governing bodies of higher education institutions and in funding methodologies with a stronger weight on research outputs. It shall also initiate a broader reform in higher education, which will relate to merging higher education institutions to create larger institutions that are able to attract funding for high-quality research. By the end of 2021, the Lifelong Learning and Career Guidance Strategy for 2021-2030 is expected to be approved.

Drahuša Kalmanová (Labour, SK) reported that unemployment has fallen on its lowest levels since 2020. There is a new national project for young people under the age of 30, which is about motivating employers to hire young job seekers, e.g. by receiving a contribution to the young employee's salary. The unemployment rate is currently at 7.8 %.

Daria Bovkun (Education, UA) reported on recent activities in the area of digital transformation and reformation of VET. The Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine in cooperation with civil society launched "All-Ukrainian School Online", a web platform with lessons and teaching materials for blended and remote learning for pupils from grades 5-11. Regarding the reformation of VET, the ministry is continuing to update the content and improve the quality of VET in accordance with the needs of employers and the labour market. Key priorities are the provision of recommendations for the establishment of career centres in VET institutions, the improvement of digital skills of VET personnel, the launch of a platform for remote and blended learning, and the development of a concept of standards for the further creation of senior field-oriented schools. The Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine conducted a survey of employers and graduates in 10 regions to analyse labour market needs. Two competitions were organized, one supporting the promotion of education and occupation in the field of energy efficiency and the other one aiming to increase the attractiveness of VET.

Olha Dubovyk (Social Policies, UA) informed that the Government of Ukraine had approved a Human Development Strategy, which aims at improving human development indicators, including life expectancy, living standards, access to quality lifelong learning and fair distribution of economic resources. In 2021, an incentive mechanism for the return to the labour market of unemployed from low-income families was introduced. A bill was adopted aiming to create preferable conditions for the employment of persons with disabilities.

Igor Tereshchenko (Economy, UA) stated that the pandemic led to an increase in unemployment. The government has drafted a law in cooperation with ILO experts to improve the state policy on employment. The UA government has started a new initiative to improve the customer-orientation of employment services.

Roland Hanak (Labour, AT) provided some figures about the labour market situation, with a decreasing unemployment rate below the rates before the pandemic. Also, long-term unemployment is decreasing. Short-time work remains the main instrument to counter the crisis. He commented on several aspects of short-time work.

Jürgen Schick (Education, AT) informed about the objective to respond to the COVID-19 situation with more flexible measures that can be taken by schools and on a regional level (“4-Point Plan”), in order to avoid large-scale school closures and complete shifts to distance learning. Safety measures implemented include regular PCR and antigen testing, vaccination offers, and equipping schools with air filter systems where needed. To counteract learning deficits, summer schools were organised for the second time. The implementation of the “8-Point Plan for Digital Learning” was continued with an overall investment of approximately € 250 million (including funding from the Recovery and Resilience Facility). Measures include updating curricula, improving IT infrastructure, upskilling teaching staff and making digital devices available to pupils. Austria is about to start the implementation of a project supported by the EU Technical Support Instrument, which focuses on improving digital competences of teacher educators and the provision of digital education material. Austria has also submitted a proposal to improve the framework conditions for staff working in early childhood education and care to enhance the quality of education for children and support the implementation of the European Child Guarantee in Austria. There is also a continued emphasis on further developing quality management in the education system.

State of Play EUSDR Presidency

Vice-Minister for Communities and Territories Development of Ukraine Ihor Korkhovyi (NC, UA) presented a [video](#) about the UA presidency of the EUSDR 2021-2022. This was complemented by a presentation, which highlighted the UA presidency’s main thematic priorities, including

sustainable development, the development of human capital and education. He expressed his gratitude to the Coordinators of PA9.

The presentation is available [here](#).

Update from the Danube Strategy Point

Mihaela Florea from the Danube Strategy Point (DSP) provided an overview of DSP activities. In an upcoming DSP report, PA9 stakeholder conferences are identified as a best practice example for cooperation of PACs with stakeholders. Mihaela Florea also commented on the Embedding process and a related Discussion Paper. With regards to Monitoring and Evaluation of the EUSDR, she mentioned a new Monitoring Tool that is still to be discussed. A Policy/Impact Evaluation will be conducted until April 2022. In the field of communication, an interactive [digital brochure](#) was created by the DSP, which also features an article from PA9, and an EUSDR application was developed. The presentation is available [here](#).

Guidance Paper for identifying and listing EUSDR Strategic Projects/Processes

Michaela Florea also shared the DSP vision on the process of identifying EUSDR Strategic Projects/Processes. The main goal is to provide a practical tool for all the member states to foster projects and processes of a strategic character, as well as to highlight the progress achieved in order to strengthen the internal and external cooperation. Sarah Fellner (PAC9 staff, AT) drew attention to some of the open points of the DSP Guidance Paper on EUSDR Strategic Projects/Processes that would be discussed in a meeting between PACs and the DSP the following week, including terminology, scope, criteria, the labelling of projects/processes in a preparatory phase, cross-sectoral projects/processes, as well as endorsement by the NCs.

DAY 2

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

International Stakeholders Conference 17-18 June 2021

Daria Bovkun (PAC9, UA) reported on the 9th International Stakeholder Conference of EUSDR PA9 "A Resilient Danube Region through Digitalization, Inclusion and Education", which had been hosted by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine in partnership with Austria and the Republic Moldova. The key objective of the conference was to discuss the development of strategic areas of PA9, notably digitalization, social inclusion and VET. P10 and the EUSBSR had also been invited to contribute.

Contributions to the EUSDR Annual Forum 2021

Sarah Fellner, Jörg Mirtl and Barbara Willsberger (PAC9 staff, AT) commented on their contributions to the Annual Forum on behalf of PA9 through participation in a round table on

“The role of youth and youth policies in the EUSDR” and a presentation of the ESF Managing Authorities Network during a panel discussion on embedding.

ESF Managing Authorities Network

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

eTwinning Online Seminar on School Cooperation in the Danube Region (10-11 June 2021)

Frederic Bayersburg (OeAD – Austria’s Agency for Education and Internationalisation) gave an overview of the 9th eTwinning Danube Region Seminar, which had been organized by the Austrian National Agency for Erasmus+ in collaboration with the Austrian Ministry of Education, Science and Research. The online event brought together 49 teachers from all 13 Danube Region countries that are part of the eTwinning community and led to the development of 7 school cooperation projects. More details can be found in the [event report](#) and on the [public eTwinning page](#). 2022 will mark the 10-year anniversary of the Danube Region eTwinning Conferences and a new era in eTwinning, with eTwinning being combined with another European school education platform.

Danube Region Platform on Centers of Vocational Excellence

Jürgen Schick referred to the updated concept note on the Danube Region Platform on Centers of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs), which had been developed further by PA9 and the European Training Foundation (ETF), incorporating feedback from the PA9 SG, and which had been approved by the PA9 SG during summer. The Danube Region Platform on CoVEs will consist of two elements: (1) a Policy Platform with nominated delegates from the responsible ministries and VET agencies; (2) strengthened cooperation between CoVEs within the ETF Network for Excellence. Jointly organized by PA9 and ETF, a kick-off event will take place on Monday, 29 November 2021. The event will establish the Policy Platform, with the aim of facilitating regular exchange between a core group of experts and facilitating cooperation between CoVEs. Countries that have not yet done so were invited to nominate members for the Policy Platform. Georgios Zisimos (ETF) gave an update on the ETF Network for Excellence and highlighted the benefits of creating platforms at a regional level, which could eventually lead to CoVEs partnerships and projects funded by Erasmus+. The agenda of the kick-off event was introduced. Documentation on the event is available [here](#).

Update of the “Danube Region Monitor – People and Skills”

Robert Stehrer from the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (wiiw), which was commissioned with the update of the Danube Region Monitor “People and Skills”, reported that the new edition of the Danube Region Monitor would focus on economic and social effects of the COVID-19 crisis and would analyse key labour market and education indicators.

The presentation is available [here](#).

Publication “Ten Years of Investing in People and Skills”

Jörg Mirtl (L&R Social Research, AT) and Sarah Fellner (OeAD, AT) gave an update on the status of the publication, which is aimed at commemorating and providing an overview of the last ten years of collaboration in labour market and educational policies, as well as the inclusion of marginalized groups. It will encompass and highlight particular measures and actions taken in these spheres since the start of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region in 2011, as well as reflect upon what could be further achieved in the future. The publication is going to be issued at the beginning of 2022. Appreciation was expressed to all contributors.

HU Publication “Public Social Responsibility and Public Customer Service”

Gabriella Tölgyes (HU) commented on a Hungarian [publication](#) dealing with the role of the public sector with regard to social responsibility. She distinguished corporate social responsibility, individual social responsibility, the community’s social responsibility, and public social responsibility.

The presentation is available [here](#).

Report from the bilateral meeting on short-time work

Roland Hanak and Jörg Mirtl reported on a bilateral meeting between the Republic of Moldova and Austria held on 3 November 2021 dealing with short-term work, which provided a fruitful exchange on this topic that matters a lot in times of the pandemic. Anna Gherganova commented on the meeting and pointed out how the Republic of Moldova is going to establish short-time work and how to avoid abuse of the payments by companies. More employees in the Moldovan Public Employment Services are going to be needed.

Social Innovation Project

Barbara Willsberger announced a new project “SIPLUS” – funded by the EaSI programme – which was launched in a partnership with Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany (Baden-Württemberg) and Slovenia aiming to foster social innovation in the Danube Region and beyond. This includes the establishment of National Competence Centres for Social innovation in the participating countries. The project is going to last from May 2021-April 2023. This umbrella project brings together a diversity of actors, be it from the ESF+, the ERDF,

or other funding schemes such as Leader. The activities are going to include mapping, peer-learning, and thematic networks.

The presentation is available [here](#).

Exchange on potential project ideas and partner search for crossborder/transnational projects

Daria Bovkun highlighted the need for more communication and interaction among project promoters and other actors, e.g. by creating a platform for project ideas or project proposals that could be shared in the framework of a matchmaking exercise under the umbrella of PA9. The idea was supported by the other PACs from Austria and the Republic of Moldova.

Adoption of the rolling Work Programme PA9

The rolling Work Programme PA9 was adopted.

Clarification regarding SG membership list and voting rights

Sarah Fellner proposed to add an additional column in the PA9 SG membership list to define the specific roles in the SG, clarifying whether a person is an observer or a member with voting rights. Voting rights can of course be delegated. The director of the ERI SEE secretariat, Tina Saric, was included in the list of PA9 SG members.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Roland Hanak and Jürgen Schick concluded the meeting and expressed their hope to meet in a face-to-face meeting soon. Daria Bovkun invited everyone to take part in the UA Presidency's activities. Ludmila Pavlov expressed her gratitude to the Steering Group and for the active participation.

Participants of the 21st SG meeting of EUSDR PA9:

First Name	Last Name	Institution	Country
Sarah	Fellner	OeAD - Austria's Agency for Education and Internationalisation	Austria
Roland	Hanak	Ministry of Labour	Austria
Jörg	Mirtl	L&R Social Research	Austria
Jürgen	Schick	Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research	Austria
Barbara	Willsberger	L&R Social Research	Austria
Frederic	Bayersburg	OeAD - National Agency Erasmus+	Austria (OeAD)
Robert	Stehrer	Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (wiiw)	Austria (wiiw)
Dorota	Korczyńska	European Commission	Belgium (EC)
Maya	Slavova	Ministry of Education and Science	Bulgaria
Tamara	Drljanovčan Ruk	Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy	Croatia
Loredana	Maravić	Ministry of Science and Education	Croatia
Filip	Miličević	Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy	Croatia
Petra	Reiner	Ministry of Science and Education	Croatia
Ondřej	Krýsl	Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs	Czechia
Christiane	Spies	ZSL Baden-Württemberg	Germany
Gabriella	Tölgyes	Ministry of Innovation and Technology	Hungary
Georgios	Zisimos	European Training Foundation	Italy (ETF)
Gherganova	Anna	Ministry of Labour and Social Protection	Republic of Moldova
Ludmila	Pavlov	Ministry of Education and Research	Republic of Moldova
Carmen	Clapan	Ministry of Education	Romania
Daniela	Placinta	Ministry of Education	Romania
Mihaela	Florea	Danube Strategy Point	Romania (DSP)
Boško	Latković	Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs	Serbia
Danijela	Stojanovic	Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs	Serbia
Lucia	Auxtová	Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport	Slovakia
Drahuša	Kalmanová	Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family	Slovakia
Nadija	Afanasieva	Ukrainian Institute for International Politics	Ukraine
Daria	Bovkun	Ministry of Education and Science	Ukraine
Olha	Dubovyk	Ministry of Social Policy	Ukraine
Alla	Kinshchak	Ministry for Communities and Territories Development	Ukraine
Ihor	Korkhovyi	Ministry for Communities and Territories Development	Ukraine
Liudmyla	Makarenko	Ministry for Communities and Territories Development	Ukraine
Ivan	Petryk	Ministry for Communities and Territories Development	Ukraine
Oleksandr	Slyvchuk	Ukrainian Institute for International Politics	Ukraine
Igor	Tereshchenko	Ministry of Economy	Ukraine