

Minutes

22nd Steering Group Meeting

Priority Area 9 “People and Skills” (PA9)

Date: 10 June 2022

Venue: Flemings Conference Hotel (Neubaugürtel 26-28, 1070 Vienna), Vienna, Austria

Chairs:

Roland Hanak, Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy, Austria

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

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

Nadija Afanasieva, Ukrainian Institute for International Politics, Ukraine

Welcome and Introduction

Roland Hanak, Jürgen Schick, Anna Gherganova and Nadija Afanasieva opened the Steering Group Meeting and welcomed the participants. Nadija Afanasieva announced Oleksandra Husak and Viktoriia Karbysheva as the new Priority Area Coordinators (PACs) from Ukraine. She also informed that Ukraine was resuming the Presidency of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), which had been temporarily put on hold due to the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, and that the Annual Forum would be held in a hybrid format, probably in Košice (Slovakia) – the agenda of PA9 will be among the priorities of the presidency.

Adoption of Agenda

The agenda was adopted unanimously (available [here](#) and attached, see Annex 1).

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

General update from the European Commission

Dorota Korczyńska (DG REGIO) addressed the MRS report 2022 provided by the European Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, European Economic and Social Committee and European Committee of the Regions. The report focuses on three main topics: social change, youth, and the European Green Deal. Current crises such as the war in Ukraine and Covid-19 bear strong implications related to skills and the labour market. She highlighted several documents and events such as

- Survey on integration of people fleeing Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in Vocational Education and Training (VET);
- The Education and Innovation Summit 2022;
- Progress on the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

For a more detailed description, please see the presentation [here](#).

Update from the Danube Strategy Point

Andreea Pena (Danube Strategy Point, DSP) gave an update on DSP activities, including upcoming workshops on EUSDR stakeholder engagement and communication. The DSP is also supporting the implementation and monitoring of the EUSDR embedding process. In addition, a new online tool for reporting on progress and achievements by PACs was developed. The final report of the [EUSDR policy/impact evaluation](#) is now available. Communication efforts include information distributed via the EUSDR website and app, social media platforms and an online media campaign. The DSP will disseminate information and promote the Danube Strategy Flagships identified by the Priority Areas (due to be submitted to the DSP by 15 July 2022).

The presentation is available [here](#).

Update on the financial planning and first call of the Danube Region Programme

Stephen Halligan (DRP) gave an overview of the Danube Region Programme, of which Priority 3 “A more social Danube Region” addresses topics and policies similar to those of PA9, such as

- SO 3.1: Accessible, inclusive and effective labour markets;
- SO 3.2: Accessible and inclusive quality services in education, training and lifelong learning;
- SO3.3: Socio-economic development through heritage, culture and tourism.

The next call of the DRP will comprise a two-step procedure, with the first step being launched in September 2022 and to be submitted in October/November 2022. The applicants’ guide will be made available by late June 2022. The 2nd step will be launched in spring 2023, with the final approvals being granted in autumn 2023 and the projects starting in November 2023.

The presentation is available [here](#).

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

Roland Hanak (Labour, AT) informed about a substantial decrease of the unemployment rate in Austria. Moreover, he informed about the effects of the COVID19 crisis on the Austrian labour market and a very high demand for labour that currently cannot be fulfilled, especially in the tourism industry. He gave a brief outline about the current measures for refugees from Ukraine, such as the “blue card” that allows refugees to apply for work without a high administrative burden. Information about jobs is also published on the employment service’s website both in Ukrainian and Russian: <https://www.ams.at/arbeitsuchende/arbeiten-in-oesterreich-und-der-eu/ukraine> As regards Corona, the short-time work scheme “Kurzarbeit” is still in place and proves to be a suitable tool to overcome short-time shocks of the labour market, as occurred during the pandemic.

Jürgen Schick (Education, AT) informed about efforts to support the integration of children and teachers fleeing the war in UA in the AT school system. Support measures include information in UA language, video and phone translation services, a buddy programme for UA children and psycho-social and emotional support. At the beginning of the year, the AT Government introduced a comprehensive education remedial support package to combat possible learning losses and to promote students' well-being in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Measures include the expansion of remedial support hours at schools, of the platform "weiterlernen.at" for individual learning support, of psychosocial support and of school social work. Furthermore, summer schools will be organized for the third time. As part of the implementation of the 8-point plan of digital education, digital devices are distributed to pupils at lower secondary level and digital basic education is introduced as a new compulsory subject from the school year 2022/23 onwards. In early childhood education and care, additional resources will be provided to increase offers and improve quality (1 billion EUR from 2022/23-2026/27).

Filip Milicevic (Labour, HR) stated that the unemployment in HR is currently at 7.6% and the situation seems to be worsening. With 68 %, the employment rate still lags behind the target rate of 75%. The main policies are funded by the ESF. The Recovery and Resilience Facility helps in overcoming the negative effects of the pandemic. Some of the priorities in the labour market policy are currently digitalisation, green skills, and adult education. On the labour market, there is also an ongoing supply shortage.

Petra Reiner (Education, HR) commented on the construction and extension of kindergartens in HR to enable higher participation rates in early and pre-school education (a call was published in April 2022). A whole-day school model is being prepared to increase the minimum instruction time in compulsory education. Both reforms are implemented through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan. Through the e-School project, school digital infrastructure and teachers' digital competences are enhanced. Through the ESF project „Modernisation of VET“, VET curricula are developed based on occupational and qualification standards. The National Recovery and Resilience Plan allocation for higher education will be used to increase the digital maturity of higher education institutions due to the fact that the level of digital maturity of HEIs at national level is not uniform. A new Act on Adult Education was adopted in December 2021 to introduce quality assurance, to encourage greater participation and to enable the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning.

Ondřej Krýsl (Labour, CZ) stated that with 3.2%, the unemployment in CZ is very low. There are currently 235.000 job seekers. For the refugees, 5000 CZK are currently provided per month/person.

Marie Taltynová (Education, CZ) reported on the implementation of the Strategy for the Education Policy of the Czech Republic 2030+, which includes a reform of teacher training and strengthening of digital education within the implementation of the National Recovery Plan. Regarding the war in UA, CZ is among the states that have been receiving the highest number of refugees. Approximately 128,000 children have been granted temporary protection. The government approved an amendment of the legal norm „Lex Ukraine” to prepare schools for the new school year and to facilitate the integration of UA children into the CZ education system. The ministry launched calls for the organization of intensive holiday language courses for children aged 6 to 18. The CZ and UA authorities agreed that the UA schools will recognize the fulfilment of compulsory school attendance in the CZ on the basis of a study certificate issued by the CZ schools. CZ is currently preparing for the CZ Presidency in the Council of the EU, during which digital education and inclusive education will be priorities. The ministry is currently finalizing the Draft Council Conclusions on supporting well-being in digital education and the programme of the events that will be held in Brussels and Prague.

Gabriella Tölgyes (Labour, HU) highlighted that unemployment was brought down to close to 3% (3.2%) in the months preceding the epidemic, and the domestic unemployment rate is now 3.7%, one of the lowest in Europe. (In terms of unemployment, Hungary has moved up to 5th place in the EU ranking, according to the latest Eurostat data. It is 6.4 percent in the EU-27 and 7 percent in the euro area.) Regarding Jobseeker's allowance the Government believes that "work should be given instead of benefits" and therefore promotes so-called active labour market instruments. This philosophy is also reflected in the job protection measures taken since the spring (e.g. sectoral wage subsidy scheme, job protection wage subsidy scheme, job creation wage subsidy scheme, self-employment compensation subsidy scheme, business labour subsidy scheme, wage subsidy scheme for employees in the KFI sector).

The job protection measures put in place have been successful in preserving jobs and stabilising the labour market, contributing to the preservation of 400,000 jobs, the creation of 58,000 jobs and the support of 68,000 self-employed.

Most new jobs were created in the service sector, where employment grew by more than half a million (503,000), while employment in industry increased by 303,000 and in agriculture by 42,000.

Summer student work plays an important role in supporting youth employment. Since 2013 more than 210,000 students of secondary schools and higher education took part in a programme.

After the election in April, the structure of the Government has been changed. Labour market and adult training now belong to the Ministry of Technology and Industry. Vocational training belongs to the new Ministry of Innovation and Culture.

Anna Gherganova (Labour, MD) stated that the Labour Market is recovering, however, the main labour market indicators could still improve. Although there is low unemployment, the activity and employment rate are rather low, which is due to emigration. Especially the high inactivity is considered to be problematic, as well as the high NEETs rate. The Ministry of Labour works on a new employment programme where a new labour legislation, expanding of ALMM, increase in funds allocated for ALMM and improvement of ALM policy targeting is proposed, that should also increase the labour market participation of women, NEETs and other vulnerable groups. Moreover, the short-term measures taken during the pandemic have been improved, such as support for businesses or parents having children learning online. There is also a pilot for a new draft procedure for NEETs. UA refugees can be hired immediately by companies.

She also mentioned that around 2,000 UA children were enrolled in educational institutions in MD and that about 300 Ukrainians will complete their final examinations in MD. With the New Education Strategy 2030, high schools will be reorganised.

Vesna Pejović (Education, ME) reported on the draft of a new law for higher education and amendments to the law on secondary education. The Ministry of Education is actively participating in EU and international programmes and it is planned to establish a new department for project development and mobility. For the integration of UA refugees in the ME integration system, no evidence of previous experience is required. Pre-school education and childcare are offered free of charge. Pedagogical and psychological support are provided. There has not yet been any enrolment of UA students in higher education, but four UA professors have joined higher education institutions in ME. In the area of adult education, free Montenegrin language courses are offered.

Ivana Šucur (Labour, ME) emphasized that the challenges on the labour market in ME are similar to the other countries. In the field of tourism, a significant part of the work force is going to HR or to other countries. The unemployment rate among younger people is very high. She expressed that ME is ready to support refugees from UA.

Clapan Carmen (Education, RO) highlighted the “Romanian Secondary Education Project (ROSE)”, which aims to reduce early school leaving and to increase the transition to college and retention rate. The project also supported the digitalization of schools in response to COVID-19. Through the National Recovery and Resilience Programme, 3.6 billion euros (12% of the

total budget) will be allocated to education and training. UA minors can be enrolled in RO schools in an audience format, with access to introductory RO language courses and psycho-pedagogical assistance and counselling. The transition from lower secondary education to upper secondary education is ensured without participation in national examinations. The legislative framework has been changed to recruit teachers for UA children. Other support measures include scholarships, free school accommodation, transportation and medical care. "Educational hubs" have been set up to ensure the continuity of the educational process in accordance with the UA education system, by Ukrainian teachers, using the platforms provided by the UA Ministry of Education. Students enrolled in recognized higher education institutions in UA can continue their studies in public higher education institutions in RO, without tuition fees and with a monthly scholarship and other support measures. National testing required to enter higher education institutions in UA is being prepared in response to a request from UA.

Boško Latković (Labour, RS) gave an update about the labour market situation in RS. He stressed that there is a new law on social entrepreneurship to create an environment favourable for business. The RS government allowed refugees from UA to easily enter the labour market without work permit. The programme "My First Salary" introduced in 2020 has proven to be a success with about 17,000 young people having gone through the programme in 2020/2021. As regards NEETs, a workshop was conducted in cooperation with ILO concerning the Youth Guarantee. Concerning the social protection system, a Strategy on deinstitutionalisation was adopted in order to provide additional social assistance services to those who are in need.

Jelena Perućica (Education, RS) informed about reforms in VET on the basis of the Law on Dual Education. Dual education is being implemented in 150 secondary vocational schools and 700 companies are included in the dual education system. So far, a total of 64 dual educational profiles with qualification standards have been developed. The establishment of regional training centres within secondary vocational schools aims to support formal dual and non-formal education and address the mismatch of knowledge and skills with the needs of the labour market. In 2019, the Law on the Dual Model of Studies in Higher Education was passed. So far, 32 study programs at 9 higher education institutions have been accredited according to the dual model. In 2018, the Law on the National Qualifications Framework was adopted and the NQF Council, the Qualifications Agency and 12 sector skills councils were established. The electronic platform NQF Register provides an overview of existing qualification standards. In 2021, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development adopted the Education Development Strategy 2030.

Drahuša Kalmanova (Labour, SK) stated that currently, unemployment is at 6.67 %. Job vacancies are rising. 76,000 refugees from UA are currently in SK. Most Ukrainians work in production, specific solutions are being sought to integrate Ukrainian refugees on the labour market and in the society.

Nadija Afanasieva (UA) reported on behalf of the UA Priority Area Coordinators and Steering Group members. She expressed UA's gratitude to the countries receiving refugees. She reported on casualties from the war. Damages to educational infrastructure are being tracked in an interactive map. So far, 185 educational institutions have been completely destroyed and over 1,000 damaged. Lessons on the digital platform All-Ukrainian Online School (grades 5-11) have been translated into other languages. Grade 11 is exempted from the final state examination. A software is being developed to enable online enrolment to universities and online exams. VET was resumed in 18 from 24 UA regions. Nine VET institutions have been completely destroyed and 98 damaged.

Jobs in UA have decreased by 40% and new laws for unemployment were introduced, while a programme was established to reallocate production to the territories that are not occupied. In terms of social policy, she highlighted the dire situation of people with disabilities and children without parents. Special bank accounts were created through which people in need can receive social payments.

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

PA9 Stakeholder Conference

The 10th Stakeholder Conference took place in a hybrid format in Vienna and online on 9 June 2022. During the European Year of Youth 2022, Priority Area 9 dedicated this year's conference to how education, training and labour market systems in the Danube Region can support young people in times of crisis. Documentation is available [here](#).

Danube Region Platform on Centers of Vocational Excellence

Sarah Fellner (OeAD, AT) informed about the Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence that PA9 has launched together with the European Training Foundation. It aims to provide a forum for national, regional and international exchange on centres of vocational excellence (CoVEs). Nominations to the Policy Platform established under the initiative have been received by 10 Danube Region countries (AT, BG, HR, CZ, MD, ME, RO, RS, SK, UA). A kick-off meeting took place in November 2021. Documentation on the meeting is available [here](#). A second meeting is planned to take place in the second half of 2022.

Network of ESF Managing Authorities in the Danube Region

Barbara Willsberger (L&R Social Research, AT) commented on the recent activities. She emphasized that topics of PA9 are going to be embedded in the upcoming ESF+ programmes. The main issue of interest is the introduction of a text module for transnational cooperation into the programmes. The next ESF Managing Authorities Network meeting will take place on 4 and 5 July 2022.

eTwinning Conference on School Cooperation in the Danube Region

Sarah Fellner (OeAD, AT) recapped the 10th eTwinning Danube Region Seminar, which took place in Vienna from 2 to 3 June 2022. It was organized by the AT National Agency for Erasmus+ in collaboration with the AT Ministry of Education, Science and Research. The aim of the meeting was to enhance transnational cooperation among teachers and schools in the region. Forty participants from 11 countries joined and developed 9 new cooperation projects. Documentation on the seminar is available [here](#).

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

Barbara Willsberger (L&R Social Research, AT) informed about the release of the update of the PA9 “Danube Region Monitor – People & Skills”, which was prepared by the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (wiiw) (available [here](#)). Key findings, conclusions and possible recommendations of the report were discussed in an online expert workshop on 2 March 2022. Documentation on the workshop is available [here](#). Another update with the most recent data available is planned to be released towards the end of the year. An online database is being developed and will be available for testing soon.

Publication “Ten Years of Investing in People and Skills”

Jörg Mirtl (L&R Social Research, AT) informed about the publication, which was published just before the stakeholder conference. It 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 can be accessed [here](#).

Overview of other coordination activities

Jürgen Schick (Education, AT) mentioned the contribution of PA9 to the MRS report on the implementation of EU macro-regional Strategies by the European Commission.

Steering Group Decisions

Identification of PA9 Danube Strategy Flagships

On 2 May 2022, the Steering Group had been invited by the PACs to submit proposals in line with the Guidance Paper for identifying and listing Danube Strategy Flagships (available [here](#)).

Based on the proposals received, the Steering Group decided on three initiatives to be labelled as Danube Strategy Flagships: the [Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence](#), the [ESF Managing Authorities Network](#) and the European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training National Reference Points project ([EQAVET-NRP-RO 2019](#), [EQAVET-NRP-RO 2021](#)) (see Annex 2).

Adoption of the rolling Work Programme PA9

The rolling Work Programme PA9 was adopted with the addition of the HU publication “[Public Social Responsibility and Public Customer Service](#)” and the RO project “European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training National Reference Points” (see Annex 3).

Updates from partner institutions

European Training Foundation (ETF)

Ulrike Damyanovic (ETF) provided an update on current ETF activities: ETF assists Western Balkan countries with Youth Guarantee preparations in cooperation with ILO and together with DG EMPL and DG NEAR. UA is supported through online courses and regarding the recognition of qualifications. Other areas of focus include green and digital skills, CoVEs, monitoring reform progress in education and training (Torino Process, Osnabrück Declaration), and employment.

Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE)

Tina Šarić (ERI SEE Secretariat) introduced the work of the Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe. She highlighted activities in the areas of VET, quality assurance, teacher education and training, and the recognition of higher education qualifications. More details are contained in the presentation available [here](#).

A.o.b.

Ivana Šucur (ME) invited the Steering Group to hold their next meeting in Montenegro.

Participants of the 22nd SG meeting of EUSDR PA9:

Last Name	First Name	Institution	Country
Fellner	Sarah	OeAD - Austria's Agency for Education and Internationalisation	Austria
Hanak	Roland	Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy	Austria
Mirtl	Jörg	L&R Social Research	Austria
Schick	Jürgen	Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research	Austria
Willsberger	Barbara	L&R Social Research	Austria
Miličević	Filip	Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy	Croatia
Reiner	Petra	Ministry of Science and Education	Croatia
Krýsl	Ondřej	Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs	Czechia
Taltnová	Marie	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports	Czechia
Dunca	Anamaria	Danube Strategy Point (DSP)	DSP
Pena	Andreea	Danube Strategy Point (DSP)	DSP
Halligan	Stephen	Danube Transnational Programme (DTP)	DTP
Korczyńska	Dorota	European Commission (EC)	EC
Šarić	Tina	Secretariat of the Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE)	ERI SEE
Damyanovic	Ulrike	European Training Foundation (ETF)	ETF
Tölgyes	Gabriella	Ministry of Technology and Industry	Hungary
Pejović	Vesna	Ministry of Education	Montenegro
Simicevic	Granica	Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare	Montenegro
Šucur	Ivana	Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare	Montenegro
Anna	Gherganova	Ministry of Labour and Social Protection	Republic of Moldova
Clapan	Carmen	Ministry of Education	Romania
Latković	Boško	Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs	Serbia
Peručica	Jelena	Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development	Serbia
Vasic	Jelena	Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs	Serbia
Auxtová	Lucia	Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport	Slovakia
Kalmanova	Drahuša	Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family	Slovakia
Afanasieva	Nadija	Ukrainian Institute for International Politics	Ukraine