

## Minutes

### 28<sup>th</sup> Steering Group Meeting

#### Priority Area 9 “People and Skills” (PA9)

Date: 25<sup>th</sup> June 2025

Venue: Online

#### Chairs:

Viktoriia Karbysheva, *Ministry of Education and Science, Ukraine*

Roland Hanak, *Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection, Austria*

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

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

## Welcome and Introduction

Viktoriia Karbysheva, Olga Dubovyk, Roland Hanak, Jürgen Schick and Anna Gherganova opened the Steering Group meeting and welcomed members and participants of the PA9 Steering Group. The PAC9 team expressed their solidarity and support for Ukraine during the full-scale war provoked by Russia. Viktoriia Karbysheva, a Ukrainian PAC9 member, expressed gratitude for the support Ukraine receives from every EU country throughout the Russian full-scale invasion. Ukraine remains committed to its European path and to implementing the key sectoral reforms in education, training, and skills.

## Adoption of the Agenda

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

## State of Play EUSDR: news, initiatives, and events

### Update from the Bosnian Presidency (Lea Nuhić, Directorate for European Integration)

Lea Nuhić, representing the Directorate of European Integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina Council of Ministers, summarized key achieved and ongoing milestones during their Presidency of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region. A significant emphasis was placed on the Presidency's proactive engagement in organizing events that fostered stronger regional cooperation and stakeholder involvement. One of the highlighted achievements was the joint event titled “Enhancing Regional Cooperation in the Danube Basin: Stronger Together”, a Cross-PA event on water management, emergency response, and disaster risk management. This event, held in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations of BiH, the Republic of Croatia, Priority Area Coordinators for PA5 and PA10, and the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR) and Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), was highly successful in promoting cross-border dialogue and cooperation. In May, the BA Presidency also supported the First National Participation Day for civil society, which was organized by PA10 in cooperation with the Danube Civil

Society Forum. This event served as a platform for NGOs and grassroots organizations to contribute actively to regional development processes, reinforcing the inclusive spirit of the Danube Region Strategy. In the area of connectivity, the BA team organized a specialized event on rail, road and air mobility (in cooperation with PA1b), which brought together multiple technical experts and policymakers. This initiative addressed vital transport issues in the region, promoting more integrated and sustainable mobility solutions.

Looking ahead, Lea Nuhić announced the organization of the 14<sup>th</sup> Annual Forum of the EUSDR, which will take place in Sarajevo on November 5–6, 2025, with pre-forum events scheduled for November 4. This forum will be the flagship event of the BA Presidency, aiming to gather stakeholders from across the Danube Region and beyond. The theme of the Presidency "Flowing Together, Growing Together" underlines Bosnia and Herzegovina's commitment to unity, cooperation, and joint growth within the macro-regional framework. The Forum will feature an official opening ceremony, a high-level political panel with ministers from the EU Candidate Countries and EU Commissioners, and the symbolic handover of the EUSDR Presidency to Bulgaria. Across the two days, participants will engage in thematic panels and workshops aligned with the Presidency's priorities, including EU enlargement, security and civil protection, disaster preparedness, tourism and culture, green transition, connectivity, and skills and labour market development.

In conclusion, Lea Nuhić expressed sincere thanks to PA9 SG members, wished the participants a productive and inspiring meeting, and extended an open invitation to join the upcoming EUSDR Annual Forum in Sarajevo to continue building a resilient, inclusive, and forward-looking Danube Region.

### **General Update from the EU Commission (Elisa Cocco, DG REGIO)**

Elisa Cocco provided an update on current developments in the EU's regional policy, the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, and upcoming initiatives. Key points included the priorities of the new Commission – greening industry, enlargement and neighbourhood policy, citizen support (especially youth and mental health), security and defence – which reflect current geopolitical challenges that Europe faces. Elisa Cocco highlighted the forthcoming proposal for the new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), expected on July 16, emphasizing goals of simplification, performance-based funding, and greater flexibility. A recent midterm review of Cohesion Policy also points toward future focus areas like AI, resilience, water management, and defence.

The Fifth Report on the Implementation of Macro-Regional Strategies was released in May, showcasing progress in action plan revisions, youth engagement, and alignment with the Commission priorities. Elisa Cocco underscored growing youth involvement in shaping future territorial cooperation, referencing the November 2024 youth declaration with 77 recommendations for post-2027 EU policy, including simpler application procedures, 100% co-financing, and larger infrastructure projects.

Finally, Elisa Cocco announced that the Macro-Regional and Sea Basin Strategies Days 2025 will be held in Brussels on 24–25 September, with interactive sessions, workshops, and “speed dating” with Commission officials. The Commission encourages additional parallel events and ideas from stakeholders to foster deeper collaboration across regions and strategies.

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

### **Danube Region Programme: Update on 3<sup>rd</sup> Call (Stephen Halligan, DRP)**

Stephen Halligan provided an update on calls for proposals under the Danube Region Programme, specifically focusing on labour market, education, and vocational training (Objectives 3.1 and 3.2). Eight new projects were recently contracted under the second call, with strong alignment to PA9. A lead partner seminar in Bucharest allowed for knowledge exchange and synergy building. The third call for proposals was pre-announced on June 24<sup>th</sup>, with the call opening in mid-September and closing on December 15. It will include:

- Capacity building for employment support bodies, including training on social economy.
- Strategic initiatives for Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs), including potential support for the Danube Region Platform on CoVEs.
- A second focus on international cooperation among CoVEs and enhancing their local ecosystems.

The total budget for this call is € 6 million, which is expected to fund a limited number of highly competitive projects.

A fourth call is in early planning stages, and it is expected to focus on supporting the Republic of Moldova's and Ukraine's EU integration paths, likely opening mid-2025.

Seed money projects will start by August, and the annual event is planned for October/November 2025, aiming to support and promote the third call.

Stephen Halligan concluded by highlighting growing momentum, increased cooperation, and active development of strategic cross-border initiatives in the Danube Region.

Stephen Halligan's presentation is available via this [link](#).

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

The Danube Strategy Point (DSP) representative provided a comprehensive update on recent and upcoming activities supporting the implementation and coordination of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR). DSP continues to assist stakeholders with governance, communication, capacity-building, funding alignment, and youth engagement.

Key highlights included governance Improvements regarding the ongoing efforts to simplify governance structures, clarify stakeholder roles, and develop improved rules of procedure via a cluster-based consultation process. A progress report is expected by September, with follow-up discussions in August. In the area of Embedding and Funding, efforts have focused on strengthening links between EUSDR stakeholders and managing authorities, facilitating annual meetings of Managing Authority Networks, and providing targeted support to PACs during EUSDR Embedding Weeks as well as on providing overviews of EU calls relevant to EUSDR objectives to ensure better alignment and increased uptake of funding opportunities.

The 2022–2023 EUSDR Implementation Report and the 2020 - 2024 EUSDR Process / Implementation Evaluation have been published on EUSDR website. The PA 9 key initiatives included promotion

activities, organisation of thematic events, data monitoring, and youth involvement. A key recommendation is to increase political engagement and improve impact-focused policy coordination. 26 Danube Strategy Flagships were selected by EUSDR Priority Areas in 2024 (15 new, 11 updated), with ongoing promotion and certification activities. For 2025 the Flagships selection process is ongoing. Additionally, a new EUSDR website is being developed, currently in testing phase, with feedback under review. Trainings on capacity building are planned for September (in Brussels) and November (in Sarajevo), along with onboarding sessions for new staff or members.

Updates on DYC and DYON developments were shared, indicating that 18 experienced members had extended their mandate, while 10 new members had been selected. Increased engagement in PAs activities was mentioned, including work on publications, project planning, flagship selection, and events organisation. The 4<sup>th</sup> Danube Youth Camp, scheduled for June 2025 in Vienna, was highlighted along with the upcoming DYON Boot Camp in July 2025 and involvement in a youth panel during the 14<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum / Danube Participation Day, organised by PA 10.

Cristina Cuc closed by reminding PA9 SG members to coordinate event scheduling via the shared calendar to avoid overlaps and thanked everyone for their ongoing contributions.

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

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

### Tour de table

**AT – Barbara Willsberger & Jörg Mirtl (Labour Market):** Barbara Willsberger noted that Austria's Ministry of Labour has undergone restructuring and is now part of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection. The labour market remains challenging, with rising unemployment, particularly among youth and elderly workers, prompting a policy focus on these groups. A significant change is the discontinuation of educational leave for employed people starting on July 1. Instead, a new initiative will prioritize on-the-job training and upskilling, aiming to ensure beneficiaries remain employed within the same enterprise for a longer period. Jörg Mirtl added that Austria is currently facing a high unemployment rate – 6.9% nationally or 5.6% according to Eurostat – affecting over 300,000 people, with youth and elderly workers being the most impacted. However, there are signs of improvement, with employment figures beginning to rise again due to shifting economic conditions. Public Employment Services are prioritizing support for these vulnerable groups, and funding for employment policy has increased to around € 11 billion annually. Regions reliant on heavy industry, particularly the car sector, are struggling the most, while tourism regions are performing better. Innovation and structural support are seen as critical to revitalizing affected areas and stabilizing the labour market.

**AT – Jürgen Schick (Education):** Since March 2025, Austria has a new federal government and Minister of Education, resulting in a reorganization of responsibilities – higher education and research are now handled by a separate ministry. Despite budget constraints, education remains a top priority, with over 80 targeted projects planned during the current legislative period. Key areas include expanding German language support and early childhood education. Education is also key to promote equal

opportunities. Evidence-based school and skills development will guide reforms, with additional support for schools facing socioeconomic challenges. School autonomy will be strengthened, and more psychosocial support staff will be provided. Pupils will receive targeted assistance to acquire basic skills by the end of compulsory education. The government also plans to continue investments in digital teaching and learning resources to modernize education. Overall, these reforms aim to make Austria's education system more inclusive, adaptable, and future-ready.

**HR – Mateja Maljuga (Education):** Croatia has made significant progress in education reform through its National Recovery and Resilience Plan. Two major grant calls led to 347 projects for preschool infrastructure, creating over 20,000 new enrolment places. Additional state funds were allocated to lower kindergarten costs for parents. In schools, over 70% of a World Bank loan was used for infrastructure improvements, while digital transformation was advanced through the E-Schools programme and the AI-focused BRAIN project. Vocational education reform introduced 146 modular curricula set to begin in September 2025. Adult education saw the adoption of rules for recognizing prior learning and validation programmes. In higher education, efforts to align studies with labour market needs continue, with Croatia reaching a 40.7% tertiary attainment rate among 30–34-year-olds. Programme agreements are underway with all public universities and scientific institutes, to be finalized by the end of September.

**CZ – Ondřej Krýsl (Labour Market):** The Czech Republic is implementing a major reform of its social benefits system, effective from October 1, aiming to better target support for living and housing costs while incentivizing labour market participation and responsible childcare. The new system simplifies administration by consolidating four benefits into a single, digitalized application process, incorporating property assessments and school attendance checks. The National Recovery Plan includes the establishment of almost 400 children's groups with a capacity of over 7,000 new places to support parental employment, alongside the introduction of "neighbourhood children's groups" for home-based care. This is currently underway, and the Czech Republic wants to exceed this goal. Projects focusing on gender equality, including the Equal Pay initiative, and the reconciliation of work and family life are also progressing. Additional measures include reduced insurance premiums for part-time workers over 55 and carers, and an amendment to support employment of people with disabilities. Labour market flexibility is being enhanced through changes to the Labour Code. Despite having one of the EU's lowest unemployment rates, the tight labour market poses challenges for Czech economic growth.

**HU – Tímea Farkas (Labour Market):** Hungary is facing growing labour shortages, driven by both demographic trends and post-COVID impacts, leading to significant upward pressure on wages. Real income rose by 3.1% from 2020 to 2023 and surged another 9.8% in early 2024, outpacing labour productivity and raising concerns about long-term sustainability. Despite minimal economic growth, labour demand jumped from 79,000 to 99,000, mostly from the competitive sector. Policies incentivizing employment among older workers, such as tax exemptions for pensioners, have notably increased employment in the 65–74 age group – more than in other Visegrad 4 countries. With GDP growth forecasted at 3–4% in 2025, job creation is expected to continue, supported by potential government subsidies. A tripartite agreement aims to gradually raise the minimum wage to 400,000 HUF by 2027 and the average gross salary to 1 million HUF by 2028.

**MD – Anna Gherganova (Labour Market):** The Republic of Moldova's top focus in the sphere of labour market and social policy has been the Public Employment Service (PES) reform, aimed at improving services delivery for both job seekers and employers. The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy is currently changing procedures, improving vacancy – jobseeker matching, and launching full digitalization, including a new IT system. Performance-based management is also being implemented. Labour market indicators remain stable, with a notable improvement in women's employment due to new childcare services and flexible maternity/paternity leave options. However, challenges persist as employment rates remain low (around 42–43%), and the labour market continues to face high inactivity and migration pressures. In parallel, the Republic of Moldova is heavily engaged in EU integration, especially aligning with the EU acquis on free movement of workers, which is a complex and time-intensive process.

**ME – Ivana Sucur & Belma Redzovic (Labour Market):** Montenegro is actively pursuing EU membership, aiming to complete accession negotiations by 2026 and formally join by 2028. The Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Dialogue is leading efforts under Chapter 2 on the free movement of workers, which is a complex, horizontal area requiring legislative alignment with EU standards. This includes adopting the Directive 2014/54 and modernizing the Employment Agency's IT systems to integrate with EU platforms. Montenegro is also working on ESCO standard implementation and coordinating social security systems. Youth Guarantee initiatives are underway to combat high youth unemployment by encouraging greater participation in policy development. Additionally, labour-related legislation, including the Labour Code and laws on trade unions and strikes, are being amended with a strong emphasis on functioning social dialogue. A Directorate for Social Entrepreneurship has been established to support inclusive economic growth. Montenegro is also engaging with EU IPA funds (2024–2026) and addressing legal migration challenges by considering bilateral agreements with third countries, pending EU Commission guidance.

**RO – Carmen Clapan (Education):** Romania has a newly formed government as of this week, which presents a modern and realistic vision for education. The government's programme emphasizes a student-centred, equitable, and inclusive education system, supported by well-trained and motivated teachers. Priorities include reducing school dropout rates, addressing functional illiteracy, and aligning education with future labour market needs. In higher education, the focus is on developing highly qualified human capital, fostering innovation, and strengthening ties with the labour market. Key strategies also involve digitalization, curriculum reform, and infrastructure investment – particularly in dual and rural education – aiming to position education as a core driver of sustainable development by 2030. More concrete reforms are expected in the near future.

**RS – Vanja Nedeljkovic (Education):** To better align education with labour market needs, Serbia is intensifying efforts to strengthen institutional capacities, improve legal frameworks, and align qualification standards with curricula through the implementation of its National Qualifications Framework. By December 2024, Serbia had 183 accredited public adult education providers, including secondary schools, enterprises, and universities. In 2024, Serbia hosted the ETF Forum on Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training, emphasizing career guidance and practitioner training. A national reference point for vocational education quality was established, and Serbia conducted its first peer review on school principal training in April 2025. Dual education continues to expand with new financial incentives, covering 13 higher education institutions and 54



study programs. Serbia also joined WorldSkills Europe and launched its first national skills competition, “Serbian Skills,” with winners set to represent the country at EuroSkills 2025 in Denmark. Additionally, the Ministry of Education contributes to the Youth Guarantee Program, in collaboration with employment and economic stakeholders.

**RS - Boško Latković (Labour Market):** Serbia finalized its initial Youth Guarantee Implementation Report, covering 2023 and 2024, with 8,700 young people registered, 90% of whom were new to the program. The report has been submitted to the European Commission for feedback and is awaiting final approval before being sent to the government for adoption. Serbia also hosted a fruitful workshop with Austria’s Ministry of Labour, gaining insights into best practices in implementing active labour market measures. Additionally, progress continues with regard to developing Serbia’s National Standard Classification of Occupations. A draft methodology has been prepared, with 33 occupation standards already developed, aiming to better align education and labour market needs by enabling improved monitoring of labour market trends.

**SK – Drahuša Kalmanová (Labour Market):** The unemployment rate in Slovakia in May was 5.79%, with over 161,000 job seekers registered, including more than 62,000 long-term unemployed. Recently, the number of job seekers exceeded those finding employment, indicating a cooling labour market. The inflow of employed foreigners has slowed since January. Around 70% of employers face difficulties filling positions due to talent shortages caused by an aging population, technological changes, and a mismatch between education and labour market needs. Additionally, many young Slovaks study abroad and do not return. To address these challenges, the Ministry of Labour launched the "Ready for Work in Industry" project to retrain 25,000 people over four years, especially for the automotive sector. Another pilot, "Work Instead of Benefits," penalizes those who refuse suitable job offers by cutting material need benefits. Slovakia also supports young workers through a mentoring initiative, easing their entry into the labour market, building on the successful "Right to First Employment" project, which recently employed over 1,800 people.

**UA – Viktoriia Karbysheva (Education):** Since Russia’s full-scale invasion, Ukraine’s education system has faced severe disruptions, with nearly 1,700 schools damaged or destroyed by early 2025, including over 200 completely destroyed and about 900 in occupied territories. Despite these challenges, restoration efforts are ongoing, with a third of damaged schools under repair and many receiving major renovations. The 2024/2025 academic year was adapted to martial law and regional security, using in-person, distance, and blended learning depending on protective shelter availability. The government allocated substantial funding—over €172 million in 2024 and €142 million in 2025 – for civil defence facilities in schools, prioritizing regions heavily affected by conflict. Ukraine is actively implementing the EU Enlargement Package recommendations, including optimizing educational institution networks with university mergers and financial incentives for consolidated schools. The draft Law on Vocational Education was approved in its first reading and is expected to be adopted by July 2025. A new Law on Preschool Education came into force in January 2025, with regulatory bylaws progressing to increase enrolment and adapt kindergartens for civil protection. Reintegration efforts for Ukrainians abroad include promoting in-person learning in local schools and developing online platforms for students wishing to continue Ukrainian education abroad. The New Ukrainian School reform is ongoing, focusing on teacher training, curriculum updates, and reform monitoring, with a new State Standard for Specialized Secondary Education set to take effect in September 2027.

Overall, ensuring safe, accessible, and adaptable education remains a top priority amid ongoing challenges.

**UA – Olga Dubovyk (Labour Market & Social Policy):** The Ministry of Social Policy in Ukraine is actively working to implement reforms aligned with the European Council’s recommendation on adequate minimum income for active inclusion. A key initiative is transforming state social assistance for low-income families into a unified basic social assistance scheme. This aims to increase the effectiveness and targeting of financial support, reducing fragmented payments, simplifying applications through electronic data exchange, and better motivating recipients toward social and economic participation. In the labour market, Ukraine adopted an important law in January 2025 to enhance employment opportunities for persons with disabilities. The law prohibits discrimination based on disability, mandates reasonable accommodations, and promotes inclusive workplaces. It also supports the creation of social enterprises and integration programs, providing financial incentives to employers who actively promote the inclusion of persons with disabilities. Ukraine is making continuous efforts to align its legislation with EU norms through official screening and negotiations, appreciating the EU’s constructive feedback in this complex process toward closer integration and more inclusive social and labour policies.

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

### **12th Meeting of the ESF Network in the Danube Region, 28 April 2025, online**

**Barbara Willsberger (L&R Social Research, PAC9 team, Austria)**

In cooperation with PA10, the 12<sup>th</sup> meeting of the ESF Network in the Danube Region took place on April 28 with 26 participants, including representatives from the EU Candidate Countries. The meeting focused on operationalizing green skills within EU funding frameworks, featuring examples from Croatia, Austria, and Montenegro. The meeting also addressed simplified cost options for projects, generating strong interest and follow-up requests for bilateral exchanges.

### **13th PA9 Stakeholder Conference, 12-13 May 2025, online**

**Mykhailo Omelchenko (UIIP, PAC9 team, Ukraine)**

The 13<sup>th</sup> International Stakeholder Conference, titled "Towards an Innovative and Inclusive Danube Region through Unity and Cooperation," took place on May 12-13 and featured engaging speakers and panel discussions. The event focused on transforming education and labour markets in candidate countries such as Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and the Western Balkans. Introductory input, presented by Patrick Paquet from DG EMPL, concerned the Union of Skills, and discussions examined how this European Commission initiative can be integrated into PA9 work. Key topics included enhancing the attractiveness and visibility of VET education, upskilling and reskilling, lifelong learning, and social inclusion. The conference also showcased impactful projects from the Danube Region and explored cooperation and financing opportunities, including input from the Baltic macro-regional strategy.

### **Thematic Conference “School Cooperation in the Danube Region”, 4-6 June 2025, Linz, AT**



**Sarah Fellner (OeAD, PAC9 team, Austria)**

The Thematic Conference on School Cooperation in the Danube Region took place in Linz, Austria, on June 4–6, organized by OeAD in cooperation with the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education. Its goal was to foster cross-border school collaboration via the eTwinning platform. The event gathered 37 teachers from 11 Danube Region countries and resulted in the development of 12 joint school cooperation projects on topics such as cooking culture, history, democracy, and media literacy. As the 14th edition of this annual conference, it has engaged over 500 teachers to date and produced 140 collaborative projects, becoming a key component of PA9 activities.

## **Outlook 2nd half of 2025**

### **13th Meeting of the ESF Network in the Danube Region, 25-26 September 2025, Bratislava, SK**

**Barbara Willsberger (L&R Social Research, PAC9 team, Austria)**

The next ESF Network meeting is scheduled for September 25–26 in Bratislava, co-hosted with Slovakian ESF+ Managing Authority. It will highlight a Youth Guarantee one-stop-shop project and discussions on upcoming funding periods under the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). The agenda for the event is currently being prepared.

### **Thematic Conference “Roma Empowerment”, 16-17 October 2025, Vienna, AT**

**Jörg Mirtl (Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection, PAC9, Austria)**

A key upcoming event to mark in the calendar is the Conference on Roma Empowerment on the Labour Market, scheduled for October 16–17 in Vienna. Organized within the framework of the Danube Strategy, the event will be hosted at the Austrian Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection. The conference aims to address Roma integration in the labour market– a vital issue in the Danube Region, which is home to a significant Roma population. Formal invitations will be circulated in July, and all interested participants are encouraged to reach out to the organizers (Barbara Willsberger and Flavia-Elvira Enengl) for more information. Additionally, it was highlighted that the Danube Strategy continues to facilitate meaningful bilateral cooperation, with upcoming meetings and exchanges – including a multilateral meeting in Vilnius focused on innovative approaches to implementing social and educational initiatives through macro-regional strategies.

### **29th Steering Group Meeting, 6-7 November 2025, Sarajevo, BA**

**Dragana Ilić-Đotunović (OeAD, PAC9 team, Austria)**

The next key event for the second half of 2025 is the 29<sup>th</sup> Steering Group Meeting, which will take place back-to-back with the 14<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is scheduled for November 6–7, with sessions held over two half-days – afternoon on November 6, and morning until noon on November 7. Additional details and formal invitations will be shared in due course.

### **4th Meeting of the Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence, date tbc, online**

**Sarah Fellner (OeAD, PAC9 team, Austria)**

The 4th Meeting of the Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) is scheduled to take place online on September 30 (date was confirmed after the Steering Group meeting). This platform, launched in 2021 together with the European Training Foundation (ETF), aims to foster policy exchange and institutional cooperation in the field of VET excellence. The upcoming meeting will provide updates on EU-level and national/regional developments and policy priorities related to vocational excellence and CoVEs, and share good practice examples from the Danube Region. It will also highlight funding opportunities under the 3rd call of the Danube Region Programmeme (to be launched mid-September), including support for CoVEs. Further details will be shared soon and will be made available [here](#) on the PA9 website.

#### **Further events PA9, including a PA9 session during the 14th EUSDR Annual Forum**

**Dragana Ilić-Đotunović (OeAD, PAC9 team, Austria)**

The PA9 session at the 14th EUSDR Annual Forum, tentatively scheduled for 6 November in Sarajevo, will be held under the title “Closing the Skills Gap: Green and Digital Skills for a Competitive Europe”. Organized by the Austrian PAC9 team, it will feature expert inputs, including from the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (wiiw), and presentations of good practice examples, e.g. from projects such as TransAC and WIN.

#### **The Danube Region Monitor “People and Skills”, 2025 update**

**Barbara Willsberger (L&R Social Research, PAC9 team, Austria)**

The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (wiiw) has been contracted again to update the Danube Region Monitor, with Maryna Tverdostup leading the work. This year’s edition will include a thematic focus on basic skills. Some countries have already received data requests, and further contributions may be needed – participants were thanked for their ongoing support. The first draft of the report is expected by early September, and a validation workshop will take place on September 22. The final version of the report is scheduled for publication by the end of October so that its results can be presented at the EUSDR Annual Forum. Alongside the report, the underlying monitoring database will also be updated. This process aims to strengthen evidence-based policymaking across the Danube Region.

## **SG Decisions**

### **Identification of PA9 Danube Strategy Flagships 2025**

Mykhailo Omelchenko reported that SG members have nominated three initiatives as Danube Strategy Flagships: “Supporting the socio-economic integration of youth leaving child protection systems by developing their skills and capacities through more inclusive leaving care policies in the Danube region” (Skills4Life), “Establishing a Danube training academy as a measure against brain drain from rural and crisis regions” (TransAC), “Improving the position of Women in the labour markets of peripheral Industrial regions” (WIN).

#### **Skills4Life**

**Dragana Ilić-Đotunović (OeAD, PAC9 team, Austria)**

The Skills4life project aims to support the socioeconomic integration of youth leaving child protection systems by developing their skills and capacities for more inclusive care policies across the Danube Region. The project involves nine countries and 12 partners, including educational institutions, child protection authorities, policymakers, industry representatives, SMEs, as well as mentors, counsellors, and psychologists. The official project launch took place in June 2025, and it will run until March 2028.

## TransAC

**Sarah Fellner (OeAD, PAC9 team, Austria)**

The TransAC project was launched in May 2025. It addresses the negative impacts of brain drain and social stress in rural and crisis areas by focusing on two groups: young learners prone to emigration and vulnerable learners affected by social stress. Both groups will receive training in additive manufacturing (3D printing) to enhance their career prospects. Seven regions from Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Germany, Romania, Serbia, and Ukraine are collaborating on this initiative.

## WIN

**Flavia-Elvira Enengl (L&R Social Research, PAC9 team, Austria)**

The WIN project is an integral Danube Region initiative aimed at improving the position of women in labour markets, especially in peripheral industrial regions, where labour markets are traditionally male dominated. It involves 7 pilot regions and 10 partners from 7 countries. The project focuses on identifying needs and skills gaps of women in these regions and implementing targeted measures to empower them, improve their socioeconomic standing, and enhance their opportunities in the labour market. The project started in 2024 and has been running for over a year, with initial results available. Interested parties can subscribe to the project newsletter for updates.

## Adoption of the rolling PA9 Work Programme

The updated rolling PA9 Work Programme was adopted by the PA9 Steering Group. It is available on the PA9 website via this [link](#).

## Updates from partners

### Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (Tina Šarić)

The Education Reform Initiative of Southeastern Europe (ERI SEE) has been actively implementing three key projects recently:

1. Enhancements in the Quality of Education and Training (EQET SEE) – funded by the Austrian Development Agency, this 3.5-year project was concluded on March 31 with a major international conference in Belgrade. Achievements include the development of regionally based occupational and qualification standards in the agriculture and metal processing sectors, teaching and learning materials covering professional, environmental, social, and gender topics, as well as training Programmes for teachers, instructors, and evaluators. All outputs are integrated into national systems and available online.

2. Renewable Energy Services in Education and Training (RESET) – funded by Germany, ending on September 31. This project supports education and training for the renewable energy sector, focusing on solar photovoltaic and wind turbine technologies, with the development of teaching handbooks and the promotion of the green agenda. A regional working group meeting is scheduled for early July in Skopje, North Macedonia, to discuss the education and training action plan for renewables.
3. RECONOMY Programme – implemented by HELVETAS in collaboration with the Volvo Group and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), this project developed occupational and qualification standards and training Programmememes for mechatronics specialists. National integration of these standards is ongoing.

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

### **European Training Foundation (Gordon Purvis)**

The European Training Foundation recently celebrated 30 years of work and is now in its 31st year, it continues to focus on human capital development for both youth and adults, with particular attention to digital and green transitions, as well as innovation. ETF provides active support across the Danube Region and partner countries such as those in the Western Balkans, Moldova, and Ukraine, collaborating closely with the European Commission. To illustrate ETF has recently carried out studies work-based learning with dissemination events in Montenegro and in North Macedonia. In parallel to that and a range of other activities in country and regionally, ETF is advancing networks of excellence with meetings planned for September. Another example is the rollout of the "GLAD" governance network is underway in partner countries.

Currently in June 2025, ETF has organised an 'ESCO' in a skills and qualifications meeting in Turin which has brought together representatives from EU Member States and partner countries, including many from the Danube Region. Additionally, a study focused on people with disabilities in education and skills has already been implemented in several countries. ETF is also intensifying its efforts focused on the Youth Guarantee initiative, emphasizing the integration of education and labour market initiatives. ETF is also committed, in cooperation with the Commission, to extending EU policy frameworks such as the Union of Skills and the Clean Industrial Deal to partner countries. Qualifications frameworks and quality assurance also remain priorities, with active involvement in Serbia and other partner countries ongoing. In parallel, ETF is working with partner countries and the Commission so to better ensure lessons learned from the Erasmus+ programme are being integrated into policymaking at national, regional, and EU levels. Looking ahead, ETF plans to maintain a high level of activity during the second half of 2025 within the Danube Region Strategy and other initiatives. This includes a major Alliance for Apprenticeships meeting scheduled in Podgorica in October. Experts from ETF will also continue their visits to partner countries, with upcoming trips planned to many of the countries over the next months.

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

### **Danube Youth Council (Gabriela Radkova & Viktorija Ćosić)**

Two representatives of Danube Youth Council shared information about DYU activities in the field of PA9. At the DYU meeting, the group focused on improving the transition from education to

employment to reduce youth unemployment and social exclusion. They proposed creating a PA 9 paper analysing challenges, youth perspectives, and best practices from the Danube Region and Europe, emphasizing youth involvement and cross-border cooperation. The results is planned to be presented at the 14<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum in November. DYC also contributed to the brain drain topic last year with a youth survey and a thorough analysis. This year, they aim to support the PA9 by exploring employment opportunities for youth after studies, especially marginalized groups, focusing on related areas seeking support for survey dissemination.

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

## Conclusion and Next Steps

Mykhailo Omelchenko and Roland Hanak delivered concluding remarks and closed the Steering Group Meeting.

Participants of the 28<sup>th</sup> SG meeting of the PA9 EUSDR:

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