

Minutes

19th Steering Group Meeting

Priority Area 9 “People and Skills” (PA9)

Date: 26th November 2020

Venue: Online

Chair:

Roland Hanak, Federal Ministry of Labour, Family and Youth, Austria

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

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

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

Daria Bovkun, Ministry of Education and Science, Ukraine

Welcome and Introduction

Hanak, Schick, Gherganova, Pavlov and Bovkun (new PAC from Ukraine, replacing Valeriya Izhyk) opened the Steering Group Meeting and welcomed the participants as Priority Area Coordinators of PA 9 to the meeting. The welcome was followed by an introductory statement by Johan Magnusson from the Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy, European Commission. He referred to the current two main challenges, the green and digital transition, that were highlighted by the ongoing Covid crisis. Furthermore, he mentioned the recently published third report of the European Commission on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies, whose results are mainly mirrored by the Council conclusions on this report.

Adoption of Agenda

The Agenda was adopted unanimously.

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

Tour de table

MD – Ludmila Pavlov (Education): Moldova relies on support of international organisation regarding the development of digital technology in teaching and learning. This concerns the improvement of digital skills of teachers and pupils and the development of digital learning resources. Furthermore, the government focuses on the training of young specialists via the dual education system and therefore strengthen the development of Centres of Vocational Excellence. Another focus is to increase the mobility of teachers and pupils in the country and the region and to ensure equitable access to learning material. This is being done by recording lessons of all classes in general and VET education and transmit them through TV channels and other media sources. Moldova constantly improves its digital library that can serve in any crisis situation. Finally, Moldova supports the idea of establishing a Danube network of Centre of Vocational Excellence.

MD – Anna Gherganova (Labour Market): The LM in MD is still affected by the pandemic. The employment rate has decreased by 3% and labour force participation decreased by 5%. 25% percent of the working population were affected by the crisis on the labour market, of which 60 % stopped their activity, of which 25% worked from home. This led to adaptations of labour market legislation. Active labour market measures are being implemented with a particular focus on disadvantaged groups. Work on skills matching is also continued, as well as work on occupational standards. Migration will be another focus to improve the situation of Moldovans working abroad.

CZ – Marie Taltyňová (Education): On 5 October 2020 the government announced the state of emergency that has been prolonged until 12 December leaving all educational institutions closed with certain exceptions and a switch to distance learning. A 5-level anti-pandemic system was implemented including guidelines for a gradual return to school for pupils. Furthermore, the government approved the strategy on education policy for the following ten years on 19 October 2020. It serves two strategic aims: to increase competences needed for an active civic and professional life and the reduction of inequalities and to support the development of pupils' and students' potential.

CZ – Martin Karlík (Labour Market): Unemployment in AT has increased from 2 to 2.8%. A new lockdown may cause a further increase. The sort work scheme was transformed into a permanent scheme effective from January 2021. With regards to the green deal, a project focussing on employees at risk of losing their job was started. A specific focus are women with children and their integration into the labour market. Specific measures for childcare are also being implemented.

HR – Petra Reiner (Education): In terms of Vocational Education and Training (VET) Croatia is implementing a comprehensive curricula reform aiming at the provision of a more meaningful education system aligned to the needs of the labour market and students. A new subject curriculum was introduced in schools and along with this reform goes the e-school project. This project aims to facilitate the digital transformation of schools by providing ICT equipment, e-services, e-content and digital trainings. A strategic framework for distance learning was introduced to continue the learning under the new circumstances. In addition, Croatia introduced an experimental programme for a whole day school. In terms of VET, the ministry continues to establish regional competence centres to increase the quality of VET and provide the students with competences needed on the labour market. In the field of lifelong learning the plan is to adopt a new adult act to ensure the quality of adult education and recognise non-formal and informal learning. Concerning higher education, there is an ongoing reform to align study programmes with labour market needs by preparing occupational and qualification standards.

HR - Loredana Maravić (Education): The 4 goals related to higher education are: 1. Increasing the relevance of higher education that includes the promotion of lifelong learning in terms of programmes that end up in micro-qualifications; 2. Further internationalisation of higher education and the increasing of the attractiveness of higher education programmes, including support to the establishment of European Universities; 3. Social dimension of higher education and decreasing the drop-out; 4. Full roll-out of programme-based funding of higher education.

HR – Filip Miličević (Labour Market): For the last two months the Ministry of Labour provided support to the employees and employers, with a focus on job preservation and short work schemes. This is done with a loan

from the EC. Job preservation provides support of 500 €/employee for 500.000 employees. 40 to 45% are funded via the ESF, the rest via the loan.

DE – Tilmann Späh (Education and labour market): The main objective of all actions taken was to keep schools open. This is accompanied by measures of remote schooling for pupils who have to stay at home. The ministry provides additional digital equipment to all pupils, teachers and lecturers. In addition, it developed new learning materials and restructured the measures of learning outcomes in the light of the pandemic. In the field of labour market policies, short time schemes were extended. The unemployment rate has not grown substantially. Measures were taken to strengthen the attractiveness of vocational training, especially for the nursing profession. The tax burden for companies was lowered and safety nets were established for small companies in sectors particularly hit by the crisis, such as culture or tourism/leisure industry.

RO – Carmen Clapan (Education): In September schools started normally, following three scenarios (green, yellow, red) depending on the number of Covid cases. However, since 9 November the government decided to close all schools for 30 days. All teaching activities at all learning levels are organised online. In regions, where activities cannot be carried out online county school inspectorates and schools in general have the obligation to provide educational resources to children without internet access. The main goals of the national reform programme for 200 are: increasing the quality of school education and skills level of students and teachers; the strengthening of VET; consolidating an inclusive approach in education; increasing the quality of higher education and matching with labour market needs; support students from rural areas, disadvantages groups and non-traditional students to participate in tertiary education; developing institutional capacities and increasing the internationalisation of higher education. For the next period 2021-2027 our ministry of education started a process to establish main priorities to be funded by the future structural funds framework that is now being finalised.

RS – Danijela Stojanović (Labour Market): A new employment strategy for the period 2021-2026 is in the preparation phase. The labour market situation is currently stable. The unemployment rate in Serbia is at 7.3%, which is a decrease of 3% compared to last year. However, also the employment rate decreased as well as the activity rate. **Boško Latković** commented on an initiative called “my first salary”, which aims at improving the labour market situation of young people and fighting against skill shortages. 10.000 young people with secondary and higher education will be trained for independent work and to acquire knowledge and skills. A new employment strategy was drafted in cooperation with ILO and other partners, such as the chamber of commerce and Labour Unions.

SK – Drahuša Kalmanová (Labour Market): The current situation of the labour market is also under the impression of the pandemic’s effect. Unemployment rate is at 7.35 % in October 2020. In the light of the crisis, the Employment Services Act was amended and includes a project for the preservation of jobs. Schemes for employers affected by the exceptional situation are implemented.

UA – Daria Bovkun (Education): The ministry has received the first results of the study “EU-Ukrainian schools” that shows that pupils of the new Ukrainian pilot school have higher skills than those from basic schools. Therefore, we created documents that will allow us to introduce the new Ukrainian schools also in basic schools from 2021. Another priority is to develop the capacity of teachers through the implementation of new

standards. The ministry is currently working to establish the professional development of centres to support teachers. An EU project's goal was to bring new content in schools and reskill teachers. In terms of VET, the ministry prepared a draft strategy for the development of VET until 2023. The purpose is to update the policy of VET to continue its modernisation mainly on a regional level. The EU funded programme "EU for skills, better skills for modern Ukraine" is being successfully implemented in 7 pilot regions. In higher education Ukraine updated the national qualification framework in accordance with the EU lifelong learning framework and European higher education. The Covid pandemic affected especially secondary schools. The government is trying to reshape the learning and teaching process by strengthening the digital component in education. Ukraine is now in the process of digitalisation of education by continuing the all Ukrainian online school, reskilling teachers and conduct a comprehensive study on the current situation of digitalisation in education.

UA – Olha Dubovyk (Labour Market): A resolution was adopted to support socially vulnerable groups. Additional social warranties are provided for the unemployed during the crisis. About 300.000 families will receive assistance for those with children below 10 years old. The social protection was strengthened and extended. Unemployment benefits are granted after the first day of application and an online platform was introduced.

AT Jürgen Schick (Education): Due to a sharp increase of infections additional containment measures came into force in Austria. As of 17 November, all regular schools shifted to distance learning until 4 December. However, schools remain open for certain pedagogical support or to take care of children if parents have to work or there is not enough space at home to study. There is also the possibility of practical training in VET schools under strict hygiene measures. Furthermore, higher education institutions are in distance learning mode. In relation to the Covid-19 crisis improving the digital skills at all levels has been a top priority. Austria is increasingly integrating digitalisation in education on a strategic level. The ministry has developed an 8-point plan for digital education. This plan aims at introducing as of 2020-21 a single portal for communication between teachers, pupils and parents, preparing all teachers for blended and distance learning through intensified professional development, providing access to harmonised teaching materials and upgrading IT infrastructure as well as equipping pupils and teachers with digital devices. For instance, a massive open online course (MOOC) has been introduced to prepare teachers for distance and blended learning. In the first round, 11 000 teachers took part. The second round started in November 2020. Reform measures apart from Covid-19 include further developing the apprenticeship system in VET in terms of stronger competence orientation and digitalisation, a new mobility and internationalisation strategy in higher education and continuous work to build a comprehensive education monitoring system.

AT – Roland Hanak (Labour Market): Unemployment has been falling since the first lockdown. However, the new lockdown since 17 November will have its impact. The unemployment rate is currently at 8.7, which is a 1,1% increase compared to the October 2019. Tourism, the construction industry and goods production were particularly affected. Among the measures are 1) a Corona job initiative; 2) short term work schemes, where the employer is reimbursed to maintain jobs; 3) subsidies for part-time work; 4) sales compensation; 5) special care time if schools/kindergartens are closed.

State of Play EUSDR and PA9

Update on Slovak EUSDR Presidency priorities (Michal Blaško, NC Slovakia)

Michal Blaško (SK) commented on the SK presidency of the EUSDR, as well as current developments. He highlighted the need for deepening the cooperation among all participating countries on all levels of government and to involve a maximum of different stakeholders. The SK presidency would like to focus on embedding the EUSDR into the EU funds, innovation, digitization and climate change. With regards to embedding, the EUSDR shall be integrated into centrally managed programmes and operational programmes of the ESIF. DTP is going to continue its support for the governance of the EUSDR. There is an embedding task force and networks of MAs were established. He stated that there is considerable political and legislative support for the EUSDR.

Roland Hanak highlighted the importance for PA9 to have good relations with the EUSDR Presidency and offered cooperation, e.g. regarding the next EUSDR Annual Forum.

In relation to embedding, Barbara Willsberger commented on the ESF MA network, which was established in 2015. A joint text module was developed for the ESF OPs referring to the EUSDR and thematic clusters are being developed to intensify transnational cooperation in this regard. The network is implemented in cooperation with PA10.

Update on new DTP2 priorities (Johannes Gabriel, project officer, DTP)

Find more information in the presentation: https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/DTPII_Programming_November2020.pdf

The new Danube Transnational Programme II (DTP II) will officially start at the beginning of 2021 until 2027. DTP has had 5 Task Force Meetings, where findings of territorial analysis were taken on board and we aligned the DTP II to the revision of the EUSDR Action Plan.

Policy Objectives of the DTP II most relevant for Priority Area 9 are:

PO1 – SO2 (iv) developing skills for smart specialisation, industrial transition and entrepreneurship: There might be a certain overlap with PA9 priorities given the focus on skills development.

POIV - SO1(i)- Enhancing the effectiveness and inclusiveness of labour markets and access to high quality employment through developing social infrastructure and promoting social economy: This policy objective IV will become a priority axis in the new programme dedicated to educational and social issues with 3 specific objectives (2 dealing with educational and social issues, one with tourism).

POIV - SO2(ii) - Improving access to inclusive and quality services in education, training and lifelong learning through developing infrastructure, including by fostering resilience for distance and on-line education and training

The presentation done is an input done to the last Task Force Meeting, it is still a work in progress. Some adjustment might still occur – e.g. there was a discussion around early school leavers, and whether this is really a transnational topic to be integrated in the new programme. There is a direct relevance what might

become the new programme in terms of PO4, which will become the third priority axes, for Priority 9. It is not yet clear how much money will be allocated to the new DTP II. This also depends on how much priority member states give to the Danube Region Strategy.

Schick asked in which way it is possible to give feedback to the current stage of the programming and whether it is possible for PA9 to comment on it. Schick also referred to one slide of the presentation mentioning “Coordinated and harmonised education policy and governance”. EU treaties put education and training into the hands of the member states. Therefore, harmonisation should not be a thematic focus or action of the programme.

EUSDR Participation Day 2020

Schick informed the participants that PA 9 was involved in this year’s EUSDR Participation Day “Youth in the EU Danube Strategy: Towards a common vision” that was held back to back with the EUSDR Annual Forum 2020. This was an excellent opportunity to highlight the activities of PA9 related to youth and young people like equipping young people with the right skills, support NEETs and tackle youth unemployment. During the event participants learned e.g. about the [European Youth Manifesto](#) by DG Regio, where core elements relate to the PA9 work like improving young people’s skills & increase access to training opportunities and boosting employment for young people in Europe.

Sieber summarized the main discussion point of the workshop “Youth, Education & Skills” he held in the framework of the Participation Day. Participants discussed how to use education and skills as vehicle to youth participation in the labour market and civil society. Main results of the discussion were:

- Digital skills are crucial and should be paired with media literacy and critical thinking
- Young people must be equipped with trust and confidence in education and training
- Digital democracy: young people can use digitalisation to participate online
- Young people are highly affected by COVID crisis: it is hard to stay motivated, to find jobs or participate in exchange programmes

Johan Magnusson added that it was a key priority for the Commission to raise the profile in youth issues. For example, there was the Interreg annual event in October 2020 that initiated a youth dialogue and invited young people on their input on cooperation. During the macro-regional week – tentatively scheduled in March – there will be, amongst other topics, a focus on youth participation.

EUSDR Annual Forum 2020

Roland Hanak (PAC, AT) reported on the Annual Forum of the EUSDR, which was held online and focussed on the harmonious and sustainable development of the Danube Region. PA9 hosted session 3 dealing with the social perspective of sustainable regional development; it dealt with the question of how to improve social and education policies as well as civil protection within a sustainable regional development in the Danube Region and emphasized the important role of Social and Labour Market Policies, Education, Vocational Education and Training for Social Fairness, Sustainable Development and Resilience. It also touched upon Learning and Competences to support the Green and Digital Transition and show innovative and interdisciplinary aspects of Knowledge Sharing about Flood Resilience in the Danube Region. The panel was

facilitated by Roland Hanak/PAC9 and assembled participants from the Croatian Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, the European Training Foundation, the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research and the Croatian Ministry of Interior.

PA9 Stakeholder Conference 2020: results and survey

Sieber summed up the highlights of the 8th PA9 International Stakeholder Conference that took place on 18 June under the title “Smart and Social Responses to the Crisis: How Education, Training and Labour Market Policies can Contribute towards a Resilient Danube Region”. Key note inputs from the OECD and Action Group 3 of the EUSALP were made available to participants prior to the conference. During the meeting, high-level panellists from the European Commission, ERI SEE, the Vienna Institute of International Economic Studies and the Austrian Ministry of Education, Science and Research discussed on effects of the crisis on the labour market and education systems in the region. Regarding the labour market, countries depending on foreign trade and tourism are particularly hit by the crisis. The Commission responded to the economic challenges via the Corona Response Investment Initiative, the skills agenda and the new employment initiative. As positive aspect of the crisis, digitalisation can facilitate the participation at reskilling and upskilling measures. Concerning education, the main challenge was to shift schools to online learning. The crisis showed the importance of access to digital education, especially for vulnerable groups and to also adequately equip teachers with digital skills. In all these matters, a further collaboration of Danube Region countries to exchange ideas and practices is highly desirable. Finally, Sieber presented some [survey results of the conference](#).

Cooperation with ETF on Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs)

Zisimos summarised the recent activities regarding the ETF Network of Excellence. ETF started with a mapping exercise of CoVEs in the member countries. ETF sent a letter to 17 ministers in charge of VET to nominate CoVEs. Today there are already 93 ENE members. ETF already launched few small partnerships, where clustered CoVEs with a common interest collaborate in one area. For example, 20 CoVEs from 8 countries joined forces on work based learning in CoVEs. Within the Danube Region, there is the idea to create a subgroup of ENE and potentially a partnership focussing on one topic, namely social inclusion or green skills. The final aim would be to apply for an Erasmus+ call on CoVEs.

Schick added that it was important to have a strong focus on process orientation and on improvement aspects regarding the ENE Danube subgroup. On the one hand, cooperation between countries in the region is key, on the other hand, this should lead to a transmission effect among CoVEs participating in the network. The final goal could be to launch an Erasmus+ project, but this depends on the interest and commitment of all countries. Schick then opened the floor to further comments.

Clapan (RO) mentioned that the Romanian national agency for VET was interested in participation. However, it would need more information on the concrete form of the network. One question is whether involved VET schools will receive financial support to participate in activities. Clapan added that Romania’s main interest was on a cooperation in the field of green skills.

Afanasieva (UA) reported that Ukraine was supporting the initiative and was willing to be part of preparation effort.

Gherganova (MD) supported the idea, especially to cooperate in the field of green skills. However, she also remarked that there might be an overlap of the Danube subgroup with the already existing ETF network of CoVEs.

Zisimos specified that there were already 21 CoVEs from Ukraine, 6 from Serbia and 4 from Moldova part of the ETF network. The network for the Danube Region would be in line with the regional strategy that some regions work in a specific context, on a specific thematical focus.

Auxtová (input via the chat) expressed support for CoVEs initiative in the upcoming programming period on behalf of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport. Slovakia plans to connect all aspects of VET coordination like cooperation with employers, professional development of pedagogical staff and instructors, material and technical equipment, cooperation with universities and primary schools. She also highlighted the importance of links to lifelong learning, quality assurance systems for VET and LLL and the deepening of qualifications and supporting second chance education.

Loredana Maravić (HR) added that it would be useful to know, which states were already part of the ETF network. Croatia has 19 Centres of Excellence in Croatia (VET schools) that would be interested to participate in activities. She asked whether the working group to prepare the Danube network would consist of representatives of ministries / VET agencies or only of CoVEs representatives. Regarding a potential Erasmus+ call she emphasised the importance to encourage CoVEs in the Danube Region to apply. Furthermore, funding was always an issue for VET schools to participate in activities. While she supports the planned activity within the work of the SG, she would need more information on details.

Zisimos explained that the main benefit of creating a network of CoVEs was not financial support but creating a partnership to work on a specific topic. The development of Centres of Excellence was high on the agenda of the EU. The goal is not to give labels to institutions, but to grow together within a network.

Schick replied to the question of Maravić stating that in his view the working group would consist of ministries and VET agencies in order to operationalise the idea, elaborate a thematic focus and identify potential CoVEs. CoVEs could then be invited to a possible event in 2021.

Finally, Schick summed up that the PA9 team would consider the inputs by the SG and circulate the questions regarding the potential establishment of a Danube network of CoVEs. This way, it was possible to see which countries were interested in joining such a network and which topic to focus on.

Danube Region Monitor: update and next activities

Willsberger (AT) reported that the Danube Region Monitor was published in 2019. An update should be contracted in January 2021, including a digital database to be accessed on the PA9 website.

Danube Strategy Point: Recent activities

Mihaela Florea (DSP) reported on the most recent activities of the Danube Strategy Point. She introduced the new evaluation officer, Nicole Hauder. Furthermore, she commented on the embedding process for the upcoming ESIF period.

Best practice examples concerning remote schooling / digital education

Sieber informed the participants that PA9 had collected examples concerning remote schooling from Danube Region countries. This initiative was led by PA7 together with PA9 and a template was sent out to the PA9 SG. Sieber thanked the SG for sending back 14 examples from 8 Danube Region countries. All examples will be compiled in a comprehensive document and shared with the PA9 SG and all relevant stakeholders.

DTP-PAC assistance project update

Hanak (AT) informed that the contract for the new PAC assistance was received and signed.

Adoption of the revised Work Programme

Willsberger (AT) reported on the revision procedure of the Work Programme, which was adapted to the newly adopted Action Plan and has integrated new projects. She asked the SG members to nominate new projects that are relevant for PA9.

Hanak asked if there are any comments to the draft work programme. As no comments were raised and the required quorum was reached, the new Work Programme was adopted.

Any other Business

There was a short discussion on the new SG contact list that was recently updated by PA9. However, DSP asked also NCs to update the SG lists, which led to sum discrepancies. Florea from DSP explained that potential issues can be discussed bilaterally with the DSP.

Participants of the SG meeting:

First Name	Last Name	Institution	Country
Roland	Hanak	Federal Ministry of Labour, Family and Youth	Austria
Nicole	Hauder	Danube Strategy Point	Austria
Jörg	Mirtl	L&R Social Research	Austria
Jürgen	Schick	Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research	Austria
Jakob	Sieber	OeAD	Austria
Barbara	Willsberger	L&R Social Research	Austria
Johan	Magnusson	European Commission	Belgium
Loredana	Maravić	Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Croatia	Croatia
Ivana	Matosin	Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy	Croatia
Filip	Milicevic	Ministry of labour, pension system, family and social policy	Croatia
Petra	Reiner	Ministry of Science and Education	Croatia
Martin	Karlík	Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs	Czech Republic
Marie	Taltnová	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports	Czech Republic
Tobias	Kazich	Ministerium für Kultus, Jugend und Sport Baden-Württemberg	Germany
Tilmann	Späh	Ministerium für Kultus, Jugend und Sport Baden-Württemberg	Germany
Johannes	Gabriel	Danube Transnational Programme	Hungary
Georgios	Zisimos	European Training Foundation	Italy
Anna	Gherganova	Ministry of Health, Labour and Social Protection	Moldova
Ludmila	Pavlov	Ministry of Education, culture and Research	Moldova
Carmen	Clapan	Ministry of Education and Research	Romania
Mihaela	Florea	Danube Strategy Point	Romania
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
Michal	Blaško	Ministry of Investments, Regional Development and Informatization	Slovakia
Drahuša	Kalmanová	Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family	Slovakia
Nadija	Afanasieva	Ukrainian Institute for International Politics	Ukraine
Daria	Bovkun	The Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine	Ukraine
Olha	Dubovyk	the Ministry of Social Policy	Ukraine
Viktoria	Karbysheva	Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine	Ukraine