

Minutes

26th Steering Group Meeting of Priority Area 9 “People and Skills” (PA9) of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)

Date: 24th May 2024

Venue: Lighthouse 10, Haus des Meeres, Fritz-Grünbaum-Platz 1, 1060 Vienna, Austria

Chair:

Roland Hanak, Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy, Austria

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

Viktoriiia Karbysheva, Ministry of Education and Science, Ukraine

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

Welcome and Introduction

Roland Hanak, Jürgen Schick, Viktoriiia Karbysheva and Anna Gherganova opened the Steering Group Meeting (SGM) and welcomed the PA9 Steering Group members and participants of the meeting. Team PAC9 expressed their solidarity and support for Ukraine as well as their gratitude for the work done under these challenging circumstances during the illegal Russian aggression. On behalf of the Ukrainian PAC9 team, Viktoriiia Karbysheva welcomed the opportunity to meet in person, thanked all partner countries for their day-to-day support and underlined the importance on putting the focus on education, training and youth in times of recovery as well as in view of Ukraine commencing the EU accession process. In light of yesterday’s 12th PA9 Stakeholder Conference, Roland Hanak thanked for the active contribution, and highlighted the high-level political participation, enhancing political ownership and involvement for the PA9 and EUSDR.

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 Austrian EUSDR Presidency and the Annual Forum (Jutta Moll-Marwan, Federal Ministry for Agriculture, Forestry, Regions and Water Management of Austria)

Jutta Moll-Marwan gave an update on the Austrian Presidency's initiatives, emphasizing the importance of ensuring stable structures as preconditions for thematic cooperation. She pointed out the close collaboration with the Danube Strategy Point (DSP) to generate inputs for discussions on horizontal topics and to initiate processes regarding the future of the EUSDR and cohesion policy. Furthermore, a strong focus lies on reaching out to other Danube Region

organisations to explore potential links and cooperations, by promoting cross-sectoral exchange, and integrating youth into these processes. The Danube Youth Council (DYC) is already well-established and ensures that young people have a voice in implementing the EUSDR, and efforts are currently underway to found the Danube Youth Organization Network (DYON), with 47 youth organizations from the region showing interest in getting involved. The aim is to assist these organisations in establishing the network and identifying potential collaboration opportunities.

The Austrian Presidency also aims to extend its cooperation efforts beyond the stakeholders already involved, by reaching out to additional stakeholder groups to demonstrate what the EUSDR can offer. Establishing interlinks with various topics and players is deemed crucial, and a series of key events are being organized to present the strategy. Several events will take place addressing different topics and thematic priorities such as stability and security for the Danube Region, innovation, skills and business opportunities in the region, as well as the enhancement of the Danube Region ecosystem, and water and green transition management.

Upcoming events hosted by the Austrian Presidency were presented, including 13th EUSDR Annual Forum, where PA9 will host a session on the topics of skills and education for the green transition, the National Network Meeting, bringing together the EUSDR and Interreg stakeholders, the Danube Region Business Forum, as well as the PAC Seminar, the National Coordinators (NC) Meeting and the NC-PAC Meeting.

Jutta Moll-Marwan's presentation is available via this [link](#).

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

Elisa Cocco provided an update on the future of the EU Cohesion Policy. Representatives of academia, socio-economic partners, civil society, and policy makers from the EU, national, regional and local level are already involved in discussions on the strategic orientation and policy goals for the next programming period 2028-2035. The results of these discussions flow into papers issued by the European Commission (EC) and most notably the EC report "Forging a Sustainable Future Together. Cohesion for a competitive and inclusive Europe: Report of the High-Level Group on the Future of Cohesion Policy" that was published in February 2024. Key recommendations from this report highlight the need for a more performance-based instead of cost-based cohesion policy that helps institutional capacity building, improves governance, builds synergies and focuses on minimising disparities by supporting underdeveloped regions. Looking back on the previous and current programming periods, she relays some main findings of the "Ninth Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion" published by the EC in March 2024. Due to the cumulated impact of cohesion policy fundings in 2014-2020 and 2021-2027 programmes, the overall EU GDP is estimated to grow by 0.9% by 2030, with an above average, higher impact in cohesion countries. However, challenges still persist, such as the threat of regional disparities being exacerbated as a result of the effects of climate change in the EU. In terms of lessons learnt, she emphasises the need for the cohesion policy to evolve

towards a more performance-based delivery model that should accelerate implementation as well as the need to further enhance the policy's build-in flexibility in order to enable a better reactivity to unforeseen crises and adjustments to emerging challenges, while at the same time maintaining a stable framework.

In the context of the EU enlargement process, the EU Macro-regional Strategies (MRS) are expected to be of particular importance for reinforcing the institutional capacities in candidate countries. This applies in particular to the EUSDR, as the Danube Region comprises five candidate countries, and more specifically to the PA9, which is being jointly coordinated by Austria, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova.

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

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

Cristina Cuc presented the DSP support frame that consists of activities related to the support of EUSDR core stakeholders, monitoring and evaluation, communication, capacity building as well as youth support, embedding and funding.

Monitoring and evaluation activities include contributions to the 5th EC Report on the Implementation of MRS and to the EUSDR Implementation Report, both scheduled to be completed in 2024. Another measure is the nomination of Danube Strategy Flagships, which are projects or processes that are particularly relevant for ensuring cohesion in the region and that demonstrate exemplarily the progress achieved in implementing the strategy. At the same time, flagships support the external communication by improving the visibility and public perception of the strategy.

Cristina Cuc pointed out that a Capacity Building Needs Assessment is currently ongoing in order to develop a Capacity Building framework for the EUSDR core stakeholders. Based on the results of this process, the DSP will provide over the course of next five years annual training sessions addressing the identified needs, with a first session scheduled for the end of 2024.

In terms of youth support and involvement, she highlighted DSP's close working relationship with the Danube Youth Council (DYC), as well as its active participation in the planned establishment of the Danube Youth Organisation Network (DYON).

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

Danube Region Programme

Update on the Second Call of the Danube Region Programme and the Seed Money Facility (Stephen Halligan, DRP)

Stephen Halligan congratulated the team on the success of the 12th PA9 Stakeholder Conference held yesterday.

In relation to the second call of the Danube Region Programme (DRP), he highlighted the large number of submissions under PA9. A total of 17 applications were registered under the Specific Objective (SO) 3.1 "Accessible, inclusive and effective labour markets" and 37 applications

under SO 3.2 “Accessible and inclusive quality services in education, training and lifelong learning”, which marks a significant increase compared to the first call. He pointed out the importance of open invitations and consultations and expressed satisfaction with the recent contact from the ESF Managing Authorities (MA). He also mentioned that the meeting of the Monitoring Committee for the approval of projects is scheduled for April 2025, with projects expected to commence in June 2025.

With regards to the Seed Money Facility call, he commented that five applications assigned to the PA9 were submitted, involving seven countries from the Danube Region.

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

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

Tour de Table

HR – Tamara Drljanovčan Ruk (Labour Market): Compared to previous years, the unemployment rate in Croatia has decreased and is currently at 6.2%. Although the decrease – especially for certain groups (women, disabled persons etc.) – is still below the EU average, it is noteworthy that these groups are strongly encouraged to actively participate in the labour market.

Overall, a slight loss in the working population is being registered in Croatia, which can be attributed to population aging and demographic change. However, positive trends in the economy can be observed, and for this reason work permits are being issued for foreign workers. Additional support measures such as language learning programmes for foreign workers are being implemented and particularly target specific sectors (e.g. construction).

In support of lifelong learning, a voucher system is being implemented in Croatia, through which unemployed persons can apply for special educational programmes financed by ESF+. Currently, 1,250 programmes covering 500 skills are being provided. However, the number of vouchers available differs by sector and programme duration.

HR – Petra Reiner (Education): Within early and pre-school education in Croatia, the major reform is related to raising its accessibility by ensuring infrastructural capacities. By the end of 2023, two calls were published for constructing and extending kindergartens (by awarding grants through the Recovery and Resilience Facility). In addition, to ensure the fiscal sustainability of kindergartens, the *Regulation on Criteria and Benchmarks for Determining the Amount of Funds for Fiscal Sustainability of Kindergartens* was adopted, determining the price standard for kindergartens. To this aim and according to a special Decision, a total of 428 local self-government units (cities and municipalities) received funds for kindergartens for the 2023/2024 pedagogical year (for the purpose of covering the operational costs of kindergartens).

As of the current school year, the implementation of the pilot project of introducing the whole-day school started in 62 primary schools in Croatia. The project is to be implemented throughout the ensuing four school years. This is one of the major reforms in recent decades

in Croatia that will encompass all primary school students, aiming at increasing the number of teaching hours in key literacies and improving educational outcomes. During 2023, the participating schools were prepared (adapted and equipped) for carrying out the project, and moreover, the employers' salaries were increased. Additionally, the Ministry and education agencies carried out trainings and other information activities for teachers, non-teaching staff and school principals, which is to be continued.

Within the e-School project, further investments will focus on maintaining the IT infrastructure and accompanying equipment, to ensure keeping up with technology trends and users' requests. Teacher trainings on IT skills and competences will continue, as well as the designing and application of education tools, informing about the potentials and risks of applying digital technologies in the classroom and preparing for the use of artificial intelligence in education (the activities will be carried out by CARNET – the Croatian Academic and Research Network and are to be funded through ESF+). Finally, the comprehensive informatization of the education system is planned.

In relation to VET, within the project of Modernization of the Vocational Education and Training System, 130 VET curricula are open for public consultation.

In relation to adult learning, the consultation with the interested public on the *Ordinance on the manner of submitting an application for and implementing the evaluation of prior learning* has been completed and its adoption is expected.

In relation to higher education, within the e-Universities project, the Digital Diploma Register was established in Croatia, to enable higher education institutions to issue certificates, diplomas and diploma supplements in the digital form (according to *the Ordinance on the form and content of certificates, diplomas and diploma supplements*) as of 1st of January this year. Also, the Register makes it possible for HEIs to store data on diplomas that have been issued in the last 40 years.

RS - Boško Latković (Labour Market): The Action Plan for the period from 2024 to 2026 for the implementation of the Employment Strategy in Serbia elaborates new strategic approaches focusing on increasing the employment of groups that are hard to integrate into the labour market (people with disabilities, women, Roma etc.).

One of the main challenges in Serbia is the relatively high unemployment rate among young people, which 2023 amounted to 24.9%. In response to this issue, a new Action Plan for the Implementation of the Youth Guarantee is being developed in cooperation with experts from the EC and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and will be entirely in line with EU recommendations.

As a result of new measures, the unemployment rate in Serbia recorded a decreased compared to last year and is currently situated at 9.4%. At the same time, a slight increase can be observed in the employment rate, which currently stands at 50.5%.

RS – Danijela Šćepanović (Education): Serbia’s performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 was the highest in the region. Serbia has made significant strides in developing a comprehensive education strategy, aligning with international standards and fostering public participation. However, challenges persist in strengthening the Education Management Information System (EMIS) and implementing a national assessment framework to monitor student learning outcomes effectively.

Serbia has taken positive steps in standardising competency standards and professional development programmes for teachers. Challenges remain in formalising accreditation systems and implementing comprehensive evaluation mechanisms.

School-to-work transition in Serbia has improved. Employment rates of recent graduates have increased to 72.2% in 2022, one of the highest in the region. In addition, Serbia’s NEET rate (Not in education, employment or training, age 15-24 years) is the lowest in the region (13% in 2022).

Serbia has established strong legislative and strategic frameworks to improve vocational education and align with labour market needs. Efforts are needed to streamline accreditation procedures and enhance data collection mechanisms.

While Serbia has laid groundwork for digital skills development in education, challenges persist in addressing digital infrastructure and monitoring digital skills acquisition. Additionally, the integration of green skills into education policies requires further attention to adequately prepare for the green transition.

HU - Tímea Farkas (Labour Market, Education): 15 years ago, Hungary was positioned at the tail-end of the European Union in terms of employment rate. Today, according to the latest data, Hungary ranks in 7th place in the Member State Ranking List. Among Member States located in the Danube Region, the employment rate is higher only in Germany and in Czechia. The Hungarian Government aims to raise the current employment rate of 81% among people aged between 20 and 64 years, to 85% by 2030. In order to achieve this result, about 200-300 thousand more people need to be integrated into the labour market.

The biggest challenge in reference to employment in Hungary is the labour shortage, which concerns almost every sector, and is further aggravated by present demographic processes. At the same time, this constitutes a serious barrier to growth possibilities of enterprises. The definite goal of the Hungarian government is to satisfy the labour demand of enterprises from the inner national labour reserve, which presently consists of around 300 thousand people, and that of EU Member States as far as possible. The labour market inclusion of third country workers and employees is subject to strict conditions in Hungary. In order to protect the national labour market, the number of work permits that can be issued annually is limited (65 thousand work permits were approved this year) and designated occupations can only be practiced by workers and employees from within the EU.

In relation to vocational specialization, Hungary participated in the third session of the Danube Region Platform of Centres for Vocational Excellence (CoVe) in April 2024. The insights gained from the conference will be channelled into the future implementation of the EUSDR. Specifically, Hungary continues to actively participate in the operation of the Platform and to promote application opportunities in connection with CoVe among Hungarian partners (primarily vocational training institutions).

Recent policy amendments in the field of education and training in Hungary include changes in training and exit requirements, the relaunch of the Apáczai Scholarship as well as the launch of the Vocational and Adult Education Career Tracking System and the development of vocational training institutions.

Hungary has concentrated efforts on the promotion of inclusion in to the labour market. In 2011, Hungary was the first country to prepare the National Social Inclusion Strategy for the period up to 2020, in line with the relevant EU recommendations. This strategy also laid the foundations for national and EU anti-poverty developments in the 2014-2020 programming period. The associated Action Plan currently in force ends this year. However, Hungary is already preparing a new Action Plan for the period between 2025 and 2027, which will include measures in the field of child well-being, education, employment, housing, territorial disparities and the fight against discrimination, in line with the EU strategic framework. At the same time, the sectoral preparations for the Hungarian EU Presidency are currently on their way. In this role, Hungary aims to prepare Council conclusions in order to draw attention to social inclusion issues in territorial development policies and interventions.

SK – Lucia Auxtová (Education): In March 2023, Slovakia released its first regional forecast predicting the number of pupils and teachers until 2030. This forecast, developed by the Slovak Academy of Science in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, simulates educational policy impacts considering economic and demographic changes. Slovakia is striving to enhance pre-primary education quality and availability, although many children still do not attend kindergarten. New legislation ensures a place for 3-4-year-olds in public early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings, with legal entitlements starting for 4-year-olds in 2024/2025 and for 3-year-olds in 2025/2026, according to the School Act Amendment.

A comprehensive school education reform, supported by the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) funds, aims to enhance digital skills, critical thinking, creativity, inclusiveness, teacher mentoring, and methodological support. In 2023, new curricula for primary and lower secondary education began testing in 40 pilot schools, with full implementation planned for 2026-2027. The 2023 School Act Amendment promotes inclusiveness, ensuring support for children with special needs by 2026, contingent on adequate and sustainable funding.

Higher education and research quality are also being strengthened with EUR 159 million from the RRP. A new university programme accreditation approach was introduced in 2022. In 2023, a EUR 72 million call for proposals was launched, aimed to foster university cooperation, joint

study programmes, and integrated research and IT systems. Additionally, EUR 227 million in RRP calls were issued for research and innovation projects, and EUR 53 million were allocated for university infrastructure, including dormitory renovations. The ESF+ Programme Slovakia (2021-2027) also supports higher education through counselling and support services.

An evaluation report on Slovak science and research, published in January 2023, provided feedback from external evaluation committees on the quality of higher education institutions, based on a peer review. The next evaluation in 2026 will include assessments of research infrastructure and societal impact.

SK – Drahuša Kalmanová (Labour Market): In the April 2024, the Slovak Republic had the lowest unemployment rate since its establishment (6.0%, calculated from the total number of unemployed in the economically active population). The share of unemployed people of working-age was at the level of 4.6% in April, while the share of available jobseekers in the working-age population reached 3.8%. Although unemployment has reached its historic minimum, there are still a total of 165,000 unemployed people in Slovakia. Furthermore, considerable regional differences still persist in the Slovak labour market. The east and south of the country still have an average unemployment rate of over 7.5%.

There are currently about 80,000 job vacancies in Slovakia, but the shortage of skilled labour still remains an issue. In addition to positive numbers regarding unemployment, the number of foreigners working in Slovakia also rose to a record. A total of 105,000 foreign workers were registered in April, with over 41,000 coming from Ukraine.

For these reasons, the Department of Labour has already launched several programmes in April 2024 as part of its active labour market policy measures. The following projects are mainly aimed at integrating the young unemployed into the labour market:

The project “The Right to First Employment” aims to support job creation for the unemployed and addresses all jobseekers who have been registered at the labour offices for at least two months and haven’t yet had an employment relationship lasting more than six consecutive months. As part of the project, a financial contribution is provided for a period of six months to participating employers who hire jobseekers from the project's eligible target group with a fixed-term employment relationship. After the initial period of six months, the employer is obliged to maintain the employment relationship for another six months without a contribution.

The project “Motivate Yourself to Work” aims to encourage new employees to stay in their new job. It is intended for employees who, immediately before being included in the project, were registered unemployed for at least two months and were removed from the register for jobseekers due to the creation of an employment relationship. Financial contributions are provided to employees by the labour offices during the duration of the employment relationship for a maximum of six months.

The project “Education of Young Adults” pursues the goal to contribute to the independence of young adults from the Centres for Children and Families and to increase their chances of finding employment. It addresses persons registered at the labour office as jobseekers or those interested in employment. As part of the project, the state contributes to courses for obtaining a driver's license of group B or higher groups as well as a driver's qualification card.

ME – Ivana Šučur (Labour Market): In preparation of the EU accession process, Montenegro has started working on transposing EU directives into national legislation. In the previous period, the Work-Life Balance Directive and the Directive on Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions were already adapted to the Montenegrin policy framework.

Moreover, the Montenegrin Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion fosters close foreign relationships with Austria and Croatia. Also, initiatives were launched to implement bilateral agreements for social security with Greece and Malta.

At the moment, two EU-funded projects focusing on advancing the digitalisation of employment and of processes relating to the labour market administration are being implemented in Montenegro. Meeting the requirements for the EURES implementation in Montenegro constitutes a main task of these projects. For this goal, in a first step new hardware was procured and at the moment new software is being developed. Employment agencies in Germany, Estonia and Slovakia play a crucial role in supporting the implementation of these projects.

In February, the unemployment rate in Montenegro stood at 13%. Among young people between the ages of 15 and 29 years, an unemployment rate of 19% was recorded in April, indicating that youth unemployment presents a major challenge for Montenegro. In response to this issue, the ministry has started drafting the national plan for the implementation of Youth Guarantee, in line with the specific needs of the Montenegrin labour market.

ME – Marija Đurišić (Education): Efforts are currently underway to change the Higher Education Law in Montenegro, including the preparation of a new financing model and a dedicated portal for student employment at the University of Montenegro, where over 50% of students are enrolled. A digital format for diplomas using EUROPASS credentials is being introduced and learning outcomes for 30 study programmes have been prepared to address integration challenges for bachelor's degrees in Montenegro. These learning outcomes are being adapted to help overcome this challenge, and a development plan is being crafted for all Western Balkan countries. Within higher education, new key indicators have been developed: 60% of education must include practical training, and there must be increased cooperation with social partners.

In primary and secondary education, there is a need to have more STEM graduates involved in the teaching process, addressing the current situation where one teacher often teaches several subjects.

Career guidance and counselling are being enhanced through an independent professional career guidance body and the establishment of a national career guidance centre.

In the area of Vocational Education and Training, new programmes are being created within the digital agenda. These programmes are already being implemented by external providers and in formal education. Within the green agenda, the provision of green skills needs to be further improved.

CZ – Nikola Strašek (Labour Market): In February, the share of unemployed persons in the labour force in the Czech Republic reached 2.7%, which constitutes an increase by 0.2 percentage points compared to last year.

Several developments in connection to employment and labour market administration have either already been carried out in 2024 or are expected to materialise starting with January 2025:

An important change concerns the Czech pension system. Specifically, the retirement age has been linked to transparent demographic indicators. Furthermore, the possibility for early retirement has been created for physically demanding professions, which currently applies to 119.000 people on the labour market.

In the area of digitalisation, an important recent development gives unemployed persons the ability to submit applications and communicate with the employment offices from the comfort of their home via the Jenda Client Zone.

Further developments have been set in motion in the areas of maternity and paternity allowance as well as pregnancy allowance and (long-term) nursing allowance. Moreover, an amendment of the Labour Code aims to provide more comprehensive support for reconciling the family and work life for parents with young children. Specifically, this concerns the simplification of procedures for giving notice and the extension of the probationary period up to four months. Also, this amendment creates the possibility for minors to work starting with the age of 14 years.

UA – Viktoriia Karbysheva (Education): Despite the war in Ukraine, work is being carried out on reforming the education system, including drafting of the National Strategy for Inclusive Education Development, conducting the New Ukrainian School reform, and creating the new draft Law "On Vocational Education" and the eDocument service.

In 2023, an order was issued defining learning modalities for children who left Ukraine due to the full-scale Russian military invasion to simultaneously receive school education in the host country and Ukraine. Such children can study remotely in established classes at school institutions defined by the local self-government authorities (up to five per oblast and Kyiv). In these classes, students will be able to study only subjects of the Ukrainian studies component. The educational process will be organized in accordance with the model educational

programme. The weekly load ranges from six hours in primary school to eight hours in high school.

By 2024, the government has allocated 500 million hryvnias for the creation of practical centres in vocational education institutions, with their further transformation into centres of professional excellence.

Free short-term courses for adults (including IDPs) to obtain partial qualifications are being organised. With the support of international partners, more than 114 online training courses in 33 categories have been developed.

In relation to higher education, the reform includes the development of individual educational trajectories and improvement of the educational process and is based on amendments adopted to the Law “On Higher Education”. Students will be able to individualize educational trajectories with the help of interdisciplinary educational programmes.

UA – Olha Dubovyk (Labour Market): The government is taking steps to ensure the social protection of people in Ukraine, however, the resources for social protection have become increasingly critical, as the number of people needing support has risen sharply. This situation necessitates new methods of delivering and financing social services. Both public and private providers, along with various agencies, are involved in these efforts. Furthermore, Ukraine is at the moment in the process of transitioning to a more targeted focus for providing social support.

A comprehensive reform for services catering to disabled individuals is underway in Ukraine, with teams of health and social workers delivering these services. The provision of prosthetics is a key element of this reform process.

A new approach to social services has been piloted in Ukraine, focusing on creating possibilities for returning to civil life as well as on the restoration of human capital and facilitating the return of citizens from abroad. By means of this approach, the ability of healthcare providers to offer psychological support and tailored healthcare services should be strengthened. Additionally, there are ongoing reforms aimed at improving the system of social infrastructure, and in particular improving conditions for persons with disabilities as well as implementing pension and care reforms.

MD – Anna Gherganova (Labour Market, Education): Lately, the overall labour market situation improved in the Republic of Moldova, as slight increases in the main labour market indicators were recorded. In 2023, the employment rate for population aged between 20 and 64 years was 55.7% and the participation rate stood at 58.4%. The unemployment rate for the same period of time was 5%.

At the end of last year, three major reforms have been set into motion in the Republic of Moldova. The first reform concerns the labour inspectorate and aims at building capacities to tackle informal employment. Secondly, the Public Employment System is undergoing a

comprehensive reform, with the goal of increasing the efficiency of employment services provided to employers and jobseekers. Finally, the reform of the social assistance system aims at activating jobseekers in close collaboration with employment offices.

Future plans include efforts to digitise the employment services. To this end, a new IT system is being developed for the Public Employment Service. In addition, a training on the implementation of EURES and the role of the Public Employment Services in managing this platform is also being developed in collaboration with Romanian colleagues.

Another main focus of future activities will be on supporting the integration of Ukrainians, as more than 100,000 Ukrainians are currently residing in the Republic of Moldova, of which 85% are women with children, elderly people and people with disabilities. Based on a new comprehensive action plan currently in development, suitable training offers will be extended to jobseekers, which will also involve non-formal education opportunities.

In the education sector, the programmes “Invest in Teachers” and “Inclusive Education” have been launched. Furthermore, programmes of state language training addressing minorities and Ukrainians have been initiated, and 65 digital laboratories have been established so far in schools.

AT – Jörg Mirtl (Labour Market): In April 2024, the share of registered unemployed people in Austria was 11.2% higher than the previous year. The main drivers behind this negative development are the overall difficult situation due to inflation, but also challenges connected to increased migration and an acute shortage of skilled labour force.

For instance, in the construction sector, the inflation severely increases costs for labour, products and services, while in the tourism sector it is a key determinant of the rising unemployment.

The skills mismatch and the lack of skilled labour force constitutes another pressing challenge on the Austrian labour market. Despite rising unemployment, Austria therefore continues to seek skilled workers and employees, primarily in the tourism and care sectors. To this end, turning to foreign labour force could serve as a valuable resource.

In Austria, migration plays a crucial role in labour market developments. Since the beginning of the EUSDR implementation, the share of foreigners working in Austria has more than doubled (from 488,000 persons in 2011 to 980,000 in 2023).

The Red-White-Red-Card provides means of determining the suitability of foreign workers for the Austrian labour market, by assessing their job-related skills and also considering their language skills.

In Austria, Ukrainians have direct access to the labour market. While there are currently around 80,000 Ukrainians residing in Austria, merely 10,000 Red-White-Red-Cards were issued for Ukrainians so far. Ukrainians that intend to remain in Austria beyond the duration of the war can apply for the highly qualified Red-White-Red-Card, which allows for a more permanent status.

AT – Jürgen Schick (Education): As reading literacy is a key skill needed to acquire knowledge and reach one's potential, as well as participate in society, its development is a key focus of the Austrian Ministry of Education, Science and Research this school year. New curricula introduced in schools in the fall of 2023 emphasize the targeted development of reading skills, especially in German classes at primary and secondary level, but also across all other subjects. The Austrian federal government is also implementing comprehensive child protection measures in schools, ensuring a safe learning environment for all children. Starting in the 2024/25 school year, a mandatory child protection concept will be introduced in all schools. These measures, supported by cooperation with teacher training colleges and the Centre for Violence and Bullying Prevention, aim to raise awareness of preventative measures and provide clear instructions for action in suspected cases.

The programme "Level Up - Adult education" expands the adult education funding programme in existence since 2012. Entering its fourth programme period running until 2028, the initiative provides free educational opportunities for young people and adults, covering digital know-how, basic writing, reading, and mathematical skills. The budget is of over 170 million euros, including European Social Fund contributions.

Addressing the shortage of teachers, the "Klasse Job" strategy was launched in October 2022 as around 20,000 additional/new full-time teachers will be needed in the next five years. It comprises a wide-ranging package of measures such as addressing new target groups (e.g. career changers) and improving personnel management. With the reform of teacher education in 2024, Austria has taken a necessary step towards making the teaching profession more attractive and bringing even more qualified teachers into the Austrian education system in the long term. An EU TSI-funded project will further optimise demand forecasting and personnel management to secure the long-term supply of teaching staff.

With regard to STEM, an Action Plan was published in 2023 which aims to inspire more young people, especially women, to pursue STEM careers. It addresses the whole educational chain.

Exchange of Views on Future National Policies Updates within the SG

This point was covered during the tour de table country reports.

State of Play PA9: News, Initiatives and Events

Take-Aways & Feedback on the PA9 Stakeholder Conference

Jürgen Schick summarised yesterday's Stakeholder Conference, thanking all Steering Group members for their participation and active contributions. More than 90 participants attended the conference. The working groups provided the opportunity for policy exchange and exchange of good practices, and resulted in lively discussions.

Update from the Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence

Jürgen Schick

In April 2024, the third meeting of the Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence titled “Greening of VET in the Danube Region: Changing Skill Demands and the Role of Centres of Vocational Excellence” was held in Vienna, welcoming more than 40 participants (members of the policy platform, representatives of CoVEs, the European Training Foundation) from the Danube Region countries. Having a sectoral focus on green energy and green construction, the meeting provided an opportunity for in-depth discussions and planning for the way ahead, as well as strengthening commitment and cooperation among the participants. More information on the Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence is available here: <https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/coves-platform/>

Update from the ESF Network

Barbara Willsberger

The ESF Network will meet again in September in Croatia – an event organised in cooperation with the Croatian PA9 Steering Group Member Filip Miličević and PA 10. For the first time, the network should be widened to also include EU Accession Countries. To this end, needs and wishes of Accession Countries are currently being collected and analysed.

Roland Hanak comments on the terminology used and points out the Candidate Countries do not yet have ESF Managing Authorities. For this reason, he proposes to use the name “ESF Network” instead, with the aim to prepare Candidate Countries for the future management of ESF within the framework of the network expansion process.

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

Outlook 2024

Thematic Workshop “Digitalisation of the Labour Market Administration”

A Thematic Workshop will be hosted jointly by the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare of Montenegro and the Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy of Austria on the 27th and 28th of June in Podgorica, Montenegro, with the aim to bring together stakeholders from the Danube Region, exchange good practices between countries in the region with different levels of digitalisation and to explore possible applications for digital services and tools, which could be integrated into the labour market administration of Candidate Countries. A strong focus will lie on the implementation of the Youth Guarantee.

Flagship “Bringing the Danube Region into the Classrooms: Promoting Cooperation of Schools and Teachers”

The next event of our Flagship initiative “Bringing the Danube Region into Classrooms: Promoting Cooperation of Schools and Teachers” will take place on 13 and 14 June in Krems, Austria, bringing together teachers from the Danube Region countries.

The Danube Region Monitor – People and Skills

The Danube Region Monitor will be updated in this programming period, starting this year. Steering Group Members have the chance to provide input on additional indicators to be included in the monitoring until the middle of June.

Further Events 2024

The 27th Steering Group Meeting of the EUSDR PA9 will take place sometime in the fall in Montenegro.

The 13th EUSDR Annual Forum will take place on the 20th and 21st of June 2024 in Vienna. PA9 will be hosting a session titled “Skills and Education for a Green Transition” on the first day of the forum.

SG Decisions

Adoption of the Rolling PA9 Work Programme

The updated Rolling PA9 Work Programme was adopted unanimously by the PA9 Steering Group. It is available on the PA9 website [here](#).

Discussion on Adoption of PA9 Danube Strategy Flagships 2024

Three projects / initiatives were nominated as Danube Strategy Flagships: The ESF Network in the Danube Region, the Education and Reform Initiative of South Eastern (ERI-SEE) (in continuation from 2023), and the Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence (in continuation from 2022).

All flagship proposals were adopted unanimously by the PA9 Steering Group.

Updates from Partners

European Training Foundation (Gordon Purvis, ETF)

The European Training Foundation (ETF) is led by its new director Dr. Pilvi Torsti since last year, continuing the work and goals already set out in the past. He underlines ETF’s strong support for Ukraine, as well as the solidarity for the Republic of Moldova. Furthermore, he highlights the ambition of ETF of working more closely together with Erasmus+, in order to strengthen Erasmus at the policy level in the future. Among recent project of the ETF is the conduction of the Jobs and Skills Survey, which will constitute the basis for future publications.

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

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

Apart from the regular activities that ERI SEE carries out, two projects are currently implemented. The project RESET (Renewable Energy Services in Education and Training) is a component of the Green Agenda: Decarbonizing of the Electricity Sector in the Western Balkans regional project commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). The main goal of the project is to answer to the increasing demand in the electricity sector for the implementation of an environmentally and climate friendly energy transition. The project will be implemented in the period between 2022 – 2025.

The EQET SEE project contributes to the reduction of youth unemployment in South-eastern Europe by supporting the development of labour-market oriented, socially inclusive and high-quality education.

Danube Youth Council (Maty Mihal'ko, DYC)

Maty Mihal'ko points out the close cooperation between the PA9 and the Danube Youth Council (DYC), most recently within the framework of the PA9 Stakeholder Conference where the DYC was invited to host one of the four Working Groups, and thanks the PACs for this opportunity. He sees this successful cooperation as a positive example on the topic of youth involvement for other PAs of the EUSDR.

An important achievement for the DYC was the approval of their request that 50% of the DYC members would prologue their membership by a 3rd year, a process that was started at the NC-PAC Meeting in January 2024 in Vienna. This request was approved under the consideration that this measure should ensure a proper continuation and knowledge transfer to the next generation of the DYC.

Furthermore, the DYC is currently working in collaboration with the Austrian Presidency on a position paper on the future of the Danube Region from the youth's perspective, which will prospectively be presented at the EUSDR Annual Forum in June 2024 in Vienna.

Any other Business

Good Practice Exhibition at the 13th EUSDR Annual Forum (20/21 June 2024)

The PACs invited the PA9 Steering Group Members to nominate good practice examples from their countries that would be presented at the EUSDR Annual Forum in June. The SG decided that due to high workload and tight timeframe PA9 will not contribute to the exhibition and will instead host a World Café on skills on the second day of the forum.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Roland Hanak and Jürgen Schick closed the meeting, thanking all participants for joining and highlighting the common understanding that cooperation and exchange is important to tackle the challenges ahead. A special thanks was also directed towards the Ukrainian colleagues for being here in person and continuing their input and work under these challenging circumstances.

Participants of the 26th SG meeting of the PA9 EUSDR:

First Name	Last Name	Institution	Country
Nadija	Afanasieva	Ukrainian Institute for International Politics	Ukraine
Lucia	Auxtová	Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth	Slovakia
Elisa	Cocco	DG REGIO, European Commission	EC
Cristina	Cuc	Danube Strategy Point	DSP
Tamara	Drljanovčan Ruk	Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy	Croatia
Olha	Dubovyk	Ministry of Social Policy	Ukraine
Marija	Đurišić	Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation	Montenegro
Flavia	Enengl	L&R Social Research	Austria
Tímea	Farkas	Ministry of National Economics	Hungary
Anna	Gherganova	Ministry of Labour and Social Protection	Republic of Moldova
Stephen	Halligan	Danube Region Programme	DRP
Roland	Hanak	Federal Ministry for Labour and Economy	Austria
Drahuša	Kalmanová	Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family	Slovakia
Viktoriia	Karbysheva	Ministry of Education and Science	Ukraine
Boško	Latković	Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs	Serbia
Maty	Mihaľko	Danube Youth Council	DYC
Filip	Miličević	Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy	Croatia
Jörg	Mirtl	Federal Ministry for Labour and Economy	Austria
Jutta	Moll-Marwan	Federal Ministry for Agriculture, Forestry, Regions and Water Management	Austria
Gordon	Purvis	European Training Foundation	ETF
Petra	Reiner	Ministry of Science and Education	Croatia
Tina	Šarić	Education Reform Initiative of Southeastern Europe	ERI SEE
Danijela	Šćepanović	Ministry of Education	Serbia
Jürgen	Schick	Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Research	Austria
Nikola	Strašek	Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs	Czechia
Ivana	Šučur	Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare	Montenegro
Jakob	Weiss	Agency for Education and Internationalisation (OeAD)	Austria
Barbara	Willsberger	L&R Social Research	Austria