



**10th International Stakeholder Conference
of Priority Area 9 “People and Skills” of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region**

**Young People in Times of Crisis:
Building Responsive Education, Training and Labour Market
Systems in the Danube Region**

Thursday, 9 June 2022
Flemings Conference Hotel, Neubaugürtel 26-28, 1070 Vienna, Austria

Report

The 10th International Stakeholder Conference, hosted by the *Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy* and the *Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research of the Republic of Austria* focused on challenges and future priorities with respect to effective education, training and labour market policies and related projects to support young people in the Danube Region in the context of current crises like the war in Ukraine, the COVID-19-pandemic and climate change.

Conference Design

This year, the Stakeholder Conference was carried out in a hybrid format, allowing participants to attend in person on site as well as to follow the conference online. To fit both requirements, a traditional setting was chosen that included a plenary session with two keynote speeches and a panel discussion, to give online attendees the opportunity to contribute via chat in the plenary; four working groups, among which one could be attended online.

Graphic Recording

Graphic designer **Chiara de Eccher** was keeping track of the contents and results of the debate to visualize them immediately on the spot. This helped to keep record of the conference proceedings in digital form.

Mentimeter

A common application for online polls was used as an icebreaker to start the conference and to engage the audience on site and online via simple multiple-choice questions (e.g. *How did you get to the conference venue? What do you expect from this conference?*). Answers from participants were evaluated and displayed in maps, diagrams, and figures immediately.

Objectives

The European Union has designated 2022 as the *European Year of Youth* (EYY), highlighting the role of young people for the future of Europe. Supporting young people in acquiring relevant knowledge and competences, as well as promoting opportunities for their personal, social, economic and professional development are among its objectives.

The war in Ukraine has not only affected the lives of the whole population of Ukraine and forced many to leave their country; it also has a strong impact on other Danube Region countries.

Due to the compounding impact of the COVID-19 crisis on educational outcomes, mental health, early school leaving and employment opportunities, specific focus to young people – particularly those from vulnerable groups – is needed to ensure that no one is left behind in education, employment, or training.

Young people are critical agents of change, participation of young people in the governance structures of the EUSDR therefore remains a key priority and attention must be paid to bottom-up initiatives. Digital and green skills will equip them for jobs in the 21st century and drive innovation and creativity, which are imperative in finding solutions for addressing complex challenges, such as climate change.

The 10th International Stakeholder Conference of PA9 provided inputs by experts on the current situation and highlighted existing initiatives and developments on EU and macro-regional levels. In addition, it gave participants the opportunity for networking, exchange and discussions about challenges in these times of crisis and how empowering young people through education and training, as well as labour market policies can contribute to a more responsive Danube Region.

Participants

A total of **122 participants** attended the conference on 9 June (**77 onsite, 45 online**) from the following economies: Austria (35), Romania (15), Slovakia (12), Ukraine (11), Serbia (9), Croatia (5), Republic of Moldova (5), Slovenia (5), Belgium (4), Czechia (3), Montenegro (3), Bulgaria (2), France (2), Germany (2), Hungary (2), Bosnia and Herzegovina (1), Italy (1), Jordan (1), Kosovo¹ (1), other/unknown (3). According to the online Mentimeter poll, **participants' working backgrounds** included Ministries of Labour (18%) or Education (10%), NGOs/CSOs (16%), EU institutions/agencies or international organizations (15%), educational or VET institutions (10%), private institutions (4%), research institutions (4%), or other institutions (21%).

The online poll showed that the majority (60.6%) had not attended a PA9 Stakeholder Conference before. When asked to indicate who is under 30 years old, two participants raised their hand.

Opening

After the introduction by the conference moderator, **Gabriele Stöger**, the meeting started with greeting words and opening statements:

Roland Hanak (Priority Area Coordinator, *Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy, Austria*) welcomed the delegates, emphasizing the number of attendees and registrations and the fact that all 14 Danube region countries were represented. He stated that another PA9 Stakeholder Conference, the 2nd in 2013, had taken place in the same venue. Referring to the dimension of time, he presented a brand-new publication, documenting the work of PA9 over a decade: *“Ten Years of Investing in People and Skills in the Danube Region”*. Participants each found a copy on their seat. He also thanked the organising team in L&R and OeAD and concluded with a statement confirming solidarity with Ukraine, *“war and aggression will never be as solution for conflict.”*

Jürgen Schick (Priority Area Coordinator, *Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, Austria*) welcomed all participants online and on site to this anniversary

¹ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

conference. He thanked the PA9 Co-Coordinator from the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, representatives of the European Commission, international organizations, national ministries and stakeholders for the good cooperation and work in the framework of the EUSDR so far. He pointed out that continuing cooperation within PA9 over the past years provided a platform to learn from each other through conferences, steering group meetings, joint projects, monitoring and platforms. Together with the *European Training Foundation*, a new Danube Region Platform has been launched to promote regional exchange on vocational excellence in the areas of going green and social inclusion. He expressed his solidarity with Ukraine and Ukrainian pupils and students who *“have been deprived of their right to education”* due to the war. The lives and the future of young people have been severely affected by the pandemic, climate change and war. The conference is a forum to take stock of existing and needed initiatives at national, regional and European level to create better opportunities for young people and equipping them with the competences needed in the future.

Felicia Bechtoldt (Secretary of State, *Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, Republic of Moldova*), representing the PA 9 Co-Coordinator, the Republic of Moldova, reminded the audience of the fact that 2022 was declared the *Year of Youth* by the EU. Since the current crises and the war in Ukraine have an enormous impact on young people, creating opportunities for them is crucial for the future. It could be observed that young people from poor social background, those with disabilities and living in rural areas, Roma and also those who get little support from their parents have poor access to digital devices and skills and therefore face huge barriers in employment and higher education.

The war has aggravated the situation, forcing half a million Ukrainians to cross the border, with at present 80.000 staying in the Republic of Moldova. They are allowed to work without documents to assure their financial independence. The majority of refugees are women with children and this means *childcare is crucial to allow mothers go to work*. In this situation women help each other. Still, playrooms for children, day care centres at the work place for children up to two years old or home-based day care are urgently needed and the employers have to be more flexible. Another problem she mentioned occurs for students and pupils from Ukraine, who had to leave school before they could graduate and now need support to finish their education. Concluding she quoted Pablo Picasso: *“The young do not*

know how to be prudent, and therefore they attempt the impossible and achieve it, generation after generation.”

Next, the representatives from Ukraine gave their welcoming statement online via Zoom:

Olha Revuk (Deputy Minister on European Integration, *Ministry of Social Policy, Ukraine*) welcomed the audience on behalf of the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine. She provided an insight into the awful situation in her country after the Russian invasion, forcing eight Million people (out of 42 Mio) to leave their homes for an uncertain future, after homes and infrastructure were destroyed and thousands of people killed or injured and many people lost their jobs. The government undertakes all possible efforts to finance all previously assigned social benefits, but in Ukraine the economy is not working, resources for social protection in the country are not sufficient and payments through banks are difficult. In this situation, any support possible by international partners will be needed. In a future post-war period, stimulating entrepreneurship will play an important part to restore Ukraine, disabilities have increased as a consequence of the war. International investment has to be attracted, the EUSDR and working on a macro-political level is extremely important! *“Crisis times call for greater solidarity between European countries.”* Therefore, she welcomed the new Interreg program for the Danube Region for the next 7 years, as one of the financial instruments for the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, which will provide participation of the whole territory of Ukraine in the Danube Region Program and allow the allocation of EU funding from suspended programs with Russia and Belarus to strengthen transnational cooperation with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova.

Oleksiy Shkuratov (Deputy Minister on European Integration, *Ministry of Education and Science, Ukraine*) described the devastating effect of the Russian aggression on the education sector since February 24, on the whole country and in consequence on the European Union. Almost 2000 educational institutions were bombed, almost 200 of them are totally destroyed. Students and educators are among casualties of the war and among the several millions of refugees that have left the country. Despite the situation, Ukraine remains committed to implement policies in the framework of the EUSDR Action Plan and to continue the systemic transformation process. Priorities include:

- to guarantee access to quality education;
- to ensure the continuity of teaching and learning;
- to support digital transformation;
- to reach EU candidate status.

Concluding, he expressed his gratitude for the support to Ukraine and its education system and reinforced the call for peace.

Johan Magnusson (Team Leader Danube and Baltic Sea Regions, *Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO), European Commission*) gave his welcome statement onsite. He thanked the PA Coordinators from Austria, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine for the important conference in a hybrid format allowing to discuss an essential theme which was recognized by the EU declaring 2022 as the *Year of Youth*. But of course, he continued, the work with young people is not new: He mentioned the Interreg volunteer youth programme launched in 2017 that gives 18-30-year-olds the chance to serve as volunteers in Interreg programmes. Since then, more than 500 young people have participated and have directly experienced cooperation at a practical level.

The *Youth Manifesto*, launched in Oct. 2020, marking the 30th anniversary of Interreg as a result of discussions with young people from all over Europe, covers five areas of concern: 1) education and training opportunities; 2) employment and job opportunities; 3) digitalisation; 4) climate change; 5) citizens' engagement. Earlier this year, the EC organised for the third time its annual *Macro-Regional Strategy Week*. Already in 2021 and this year, emphasis was put on working together *with* young people rather than *for* them.

In closing, he stated that the subject of young people will remain a priority for the future and is addressed in initiatives such as the Danube Youth Council.

Warm up

After these welcoming words, participants on site and online were invited to do a short interactive exercise via Mentimeter, using their smart phones or computers. The moderator invited them to exchange with their neighbours when answering the questions like: *From where do you join us?*; *How do you feel?* (Awesome – 64%, Danube Blues? – 36%). It became evident, that the majority (40 out of 66 respondents) had not attended a PA9 Stakeholder Conference before. The topics of PA9 were more or less familiar to most of them and about 1/3 knew about them

very well. Expectations ranged from “*learning about new developments and exchange of experience and information to networking and meeting colleagues onsite*”. The results of the survey are available here: <https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/events/10th-stakeholder-conference/>

The conference proceeded with two keynotes by experts:

Keynote 1

“Impact of the Pandemic on Education, Employment and Equity – Making sure Young People are not left behind”

Mario Steiner, Institute for Advanced Studies Vienna (IHS):

He first talked about the impact of the pandemic on education, employment and economy. Most relevant findings were:

The educational Impact: According to an *IHS-Teacher-Online-Survey* in the course of the first two lockdowns teachers, are increasingly worried that competences will decrease (56.2%) and that pupils are heavily stressed (60.1%) in consequence of Lockdowns and Home-Schooling. They assumed that almost 40% of all pupils and almost 80% of disadvantaged pupils will face a loss of competences. It seems evident, that those who receive support by their parents learn more effectively. In consequence this means an increase of social inequality. Looking at student’s careers in Austria we can see a tendency for reduced drop-out from educational tracks which pupils entered before the pandemic, but on the other hand, severe difficulties for those at the transition from lower to upper secondary education during pandemic.

For *Early School Leaving* (ESL), gender and citizenship play a role (male pupils and students from non-EU countries being more affected).

The impact on employment: As an effect of the pandemic labour-market-integration declines; the lower the educational level, the higher the youth unemployment rate (significantly high in Montenegro). The average of EU-27 shows more than 20% with educational level ISCED 2 or lower, who are unemployed (2019-2020), in Slovakia and Croatia more than 50%.

Further, the number of young people *Not in Education, Employment or Training* (NEETs, 15-29 y.o.) increased and especially non-EU-citizens are highly concerned. In this sense existing social differences have been widening.

The economic impact of the pandemic results in rising material and social deprivation of youth (16-29 y.o.) the extent depending on educational level and country of birth. Social differences grow even further: those disadvantaged before the pandemic are even more effected by its impacts.

On the macro-economic level a decrease of GDP / Capita could be observed.

Regarding the costs for individuals and society, school closures lead to a decrease in prospect income of pupils and a reduction of future GDP.

Conclusions:

Summarizing these effects, short term measures are needed and the resilience of educational systems must be strengthened.

Short term measures could be guidance at transition, coaching and active integration strategies for drop-outs, ESL and unemployed youth.

Support structures in schools (e.g. social work, school-psychology...) should be increased to allow teachers to concentrate on pedagogics/didactics.

In order to strengthen the resilience of educational system, digitalization should be improved (not only hardware but also digital competences and didactics), in order to avoid a digital divide that restricts students from reaching the same level of education.

It will be also vital to empower main actors: pupil's capability of independent learning should be enhanced and autonomy of teachers and schools supported, to enable them for finding individual solutions.

The full presentation is available here: <https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/events/10th-stakeholder-conference/>

The **discussion** focused on migration, brain drain and differences between countries. Migration should rather be regarded as a chance to use existing competencies and allow active integration. Young people could thus play an important role to improve integration.

Keynote 2

“COVID-19 and Invasion of Ukraine – What do We Learn about Young People in Times of Crises”

Maryna Tverdostup, Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (wiiw):

The pandemic and the war in Europe have confronted us with two historically unique events with far-reaching consequences, she stated. Both will have long-lasting effects on the society, the economy and on the geopolitical landscape.

Young people are more vulnerable, since they work in the sectors most vulnerable to the crises (in case of COVID-19), they are prone to lay-offs, cuts in wages and working hours and often have precarious working contracts with low and irregular income. In addition, the importance of investment in youth human capital has not been valued enough.

The [Danube Region Monitor \(Report 2021\)](#) shows recent trends on youth employment and education and suggests that previous positive developments may have been halted or reversed by the pandemic. Youth employment decreased and the NEET rate increased. It is too early to see the effects of the pandemic in the area of formal education, but an impact on educational attainments and the commitment to pursue education is likely. With regard to digital skills, young people (20-24 y.o.) have, on average, higher ICT competences than older age groups (in all countries across the Danube Region).

What is the impact of the invasion of Ukraine and the refugee crisis on youth employment in the Danube Region?

Since February, 6.8 million Ukrainians left the country, 2.2 meanwhile having returned (first mainly men, later women and children who left the country earlier). Within the Danube Region, the highest number of registered refugees (as % of the total population, figures as of May 29) is found in the Republic of Moldova (11.89%), followed by Slovakia (8.45%), Hungary (7.07%), and Romania (5.14%).

In general – compared to earlier refugee waves in Europe – we find a different situation: Mainly young women with children, well-educated women, but lacking work experience, with a higher distribution in EU-CEE countries and the Republic of Moldova and not necessarily the intention to stay long-term. The attitude of the EU is unprecedentedly welcoming. The refugees have different needs, but will need support in integration (at least initially).

Thanks to a very welcoming response in the EU and beyond, with temporary protection schemes and (relatively) easy movement within the EU, refugees have good chances to find a job that matches their skills and they face less risk of exploitation. Whereas Ukrainians who are mostly well-qualified probably will find at least temporary jobs easily, due to the lack of labour in many EU countries, over-qualification is also likely. In addition, employment possibilities of women with

minor children are limited by the lack of childcare. In order to foster the integration of Ukrainian refugees, it will be necessary to provide accessible, full-day and affordable childcare, to enable a quick, unbureaucratic recognition of educational credentials, to identify intentions to stay and to offer opportunities for training, re-education and long-term employment.

The full presentation is available here: <https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/events/10th-stakeholder-conference/>

Panel Discussion

“Challenges of and responses to current crises in the field of labour market and education systems”

After the break, the meeting continued with a panel discussion, assembling main actors and representatives from the EU, the OECD and the national level:

- **Stefaan Hermans**, Director – Policy Strategy and Evaluation, *Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC), European Commission*
- **Veerle Miranda**, Senior Policy Analyst, *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs*
- **Oleksandra Husak**, Priority Area Coordinator, *Ministry of Education and Science, Ukraine* (participating online)
- **Anna Gherganova**, Priority Area Coordinator, *Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, Republic of Moldova*

The moderator, **Gabriele Stöger**, opened the discussion by asking: *How can education and labour market systems better respond to current crises?*

Stefaan Hermans highlighted the support of the European Commission for transnational cooperation within the EUSDR – between public authorities and with the engagement of civil society. He referred to the work of the Commission on the European Education Area to support Member States in strengthening their national systems and make transnational cooperation easier. With regard to young people, priorities include addressing early school leaving, basic skills acquirement, and challenges related to COVID and the Ukrainian war.

OECD representative **Veerle Miranda** added that the situation requires a quick reaction, regarding the impact of the crisis on the labour market. Many countries

introduced measures specifically directed at young people during the COVID-19 pandemic, but one major issue remains: mental health problems. One out of two young people show signs of depression, two in three are worried about their household's finances.

Oleksandra Husak joined in online on this subject. She stated that, in the context of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, mental health is a big issue and will have a long-term effect needing strong efforts to recover. Ukrainian education and labour market policies need to be as flexible as possible to tackle current challenges.

Anna Gherganova emphasized that, in order to support young people best, systems need high flexibility in the labour market and education systems have to be adapted: Employment programs, re-skilling, e.g. for skilled women re-entering the labour market, upgrading and – not to be forgotten – information of opportunities. For young NEETs different means are necessary, e.g. psychological consultants and social workers to reach them. At present, capacities are not sufficient and this could be an issue for collaboration in EUSDR.

Digital skills will remain a priority, online learning increased and has become essential for job seekers. Language learning is a priority with regard to refugees.

Veerle Miranda stressed the importance of reaching out to young people who are not registered with public employment services. They could be addressed by collaboration with other stakeholders. Examples from Portugal and Sweden proved that actors in areas like culture and sports have better contact with young people and can identify dropouts and their individual needs.

Stefaan Hermans provided figures on the most vulnerable: ¼ of young people have difficulties acquiring basic skills and have fewer chances on the labour market. He mentioned the upcoming initiative “Pathways to School Success” to support young people in this regard. There are lots of areas to be addressed and this requires collaboration.

Subsequently, **Oleksandra Husak** was asked by the moderator: *How can young people be supported in current crises and which skills and competences do they need now and for the future?* She started by giving a picture of the current situation of the Ukrainian education system: Almost 2,000 educational institutions bombed, almost 200 totally damaged, 600,000 students and 25,000 school teachers were forced to go abroad. Nevertheless, teaching and learning at all education levels was

resumed by mid-March and continues, thanks to several online tools developed during the pandemic.

There are policies to involve young people in education and labour market systems, like courses for re-training and career guidance. New approaches are needed to define wartime and post-war professions (e.g. agriculture and construction). Development partners and civil society are providing tremendous support.

At the level of the EU, **Stefaan Hermans** mentioned the activation of the temporary protection directive for Ukrainian refugees that enables fast registration to gain access to education and the labour market. The integration of Ukrainian children in the education systems of the EU Member States as well as the continuity of access to the Ukrainian culture and language need to be ensured. Erasmus+ and school education platforms can support engaging Ukrainian teachers and schools.

From the plenary, a participant from the National Youth Council of Serbia remarked that especially for NEETs and in the transition from education systems to labour market, a peer-to-peer approach has proved successful.

Anna Gherganova confirmed this. Peer-to-peer is a good way to better understand and address the needs of young people and help them find a place. It demands a common approach of different sectors, social service, education and business sector, and initiatives of social economy.

A Bulgarian participant from the Danube Youth Network in the plenary commented that the procedure of applications to programmes, e.g. Erasmus+, is too slow and too complicated in order to quickly react, since rapid measures are needed. Civil society is often reacting much faster than institutions.

Stefaan Hermans replied that the EC has reacted immediately in terms of creating flexibility within its programmes, but certain things take time (processing of applications, legal compliance, budgetary elements).

The moderator asked the panellists for a closing statement, quoting *Jean-Claude Juncker*, who had said, *we should be big on big things and small on small things*, and invited them to answer the following questions: *In your opinion, which small things could be big in the future? What is the role of labour market and education policies in an ever-closer Europe?*

Anna Gherganova started by questioning “*What is a small thing?*” – Countries have to act on a national level and at the same time cooperation between countries will be essential to face COVID and the war, not to think and act differently. The consequences for education and employment in an ever-closer Europe are huge, she mentions the brain drain and the fact, that *conventions already ratified, are now violated.*

Oleksandra Husak stated that it will take years to get over the damages of the war. The attitude of the citizens, their engagement and *contact people to people* will be important.

Veerle Miranda focused on the climate change and the need to involve more young people in the decision making, the small thing that could become big is the *intergenerational imbalance* – youth must not be left behind.

Stefaan Hermans closed the panel discussion with the urgent plea for a life in peace and dignity, which includes a good education, access to the labour market, and decent work, with wages commensurate with *a decent life in peace* for everyone.

Working Groups

Before the Lunch break, the four Working Groups were introduced briefly, and participants were invited to make their choice and register for one of them over lunch. Among the four options one was also available online:

- **Working Group 1: Integrating refugees in labour market and education**
Facilitator: Barbara Willsberger, *L&R Social Research*
- **Working Group 2: Promoting green and digital skills and jobs for young people.**
Facilitator: Sarah Fellner, *OeAD – Austria’s Agency for Education and Internationalisation*
- **Working Group 3: Strengthening skills and empowering young people in the COVID-19 recovery and beyond**
Facilitator: Tina Šarić, *Secretariat of the Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE)*
- **Working Group 4 (online participation possible): Overcoming marginalization: Young Roma in times of crisis**
Facilitator: Jörg Mirtl, *L&R Social Research*

During the lunch break, proceedings of the morning session, visualised via graphic recording, were displayed on the screen.

In the afternoon, groups worked in different rooms for 90 min. In each group, presentations on the subject initiated the discussion among participants. The presentations are available here: <https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/events/10th-stakeholder-conference/>

After the coffee break, participants met in the plenary to listen to reports from the working groups. All four rapporteurs were present at the panel and the moderator invited them to answer one by one to the working group questions. The following summaries are based on the reports by the rapporteurs.

Working Group 1: Integrating refugees in labour market and education

Rapporteur: Nadija Afanasieva, Ukrainian Institute for International Politics

To initiate the discussion in the group, there were two presentations by experts:

- **Gabriela Sonnleitner, MagDas HOTEL** – a social enterprise (starting from 2015) for people with a refugee background.

The business combines an unusual hotel concept („where refugees become hosts“), with the need for migrants to be trained on a job. Recycled furniture, due to low budget, creates a special atmosphere that guests appreciate (it received the Austrian Design Prize a few years ago). There are now 35 employees from 15 countries (50% experts:50% trainees) and up to 50.000 guests per year. The hotel does not get any public funding, following the aspiration to solve social problems with business means.

- **Sergiy Bogdanov, Centre for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support, National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy**

Psychological support is needed by 15 Mio Ukrainians, 3-4 Mio need medical psychiatric support.

The requirements are urgent, in order to

- scale up rapidly;
- precisely target on various children's needs that can range from psychological support to severe mental health problems;
- support not only students, but also school workers and parents;
- help to integrate young UA refugees into educational systems.

There are step-by-step-care models – starting from the lowest level – from schools as example, a safe space program and training for teachers – how to integrate kids and socialize.

Questions

Q1: What is the main impact of current crises in this field?

- Special support and fast reactions are needed. The society has to adapt to situation, but this is the start of a transformation.
- There should be no timeline for continued stay of UA refugees in host countries.
- Refugees are the opportunity for development - solve social problems with business means!
- Double sided approach – refugees can start totally new professions, language, culture, society whereas the host country gets new labour force, with new qualifications and the challenge to socialize - for both it's a training to *stay open minded and thinking outside the box!*

Q2: Which policies, actions and projects are needed to address these issues?

- Integration (social, cultural, cross-sectoral);
- Psychological support for children and adults;
- Socialization;
- Listen to each other, the words help!!! Communication;
- Digitalization as main instrument for communication and integration.

Q3: What is the added value of international cooperation in this field and what could be the contribution of the EUSDR?

- Use all the components you have in the country – easier, quickly to adapt, rapid answer to the challenges;
- Motivation and how to motivate: refugees need a frame for socialization and clear rules;
- Get into the labour market in very early stage – starting a successful career in the country helps integration;
- In international cooperation, stay open minded, search for strengths rather than weaknesses (*I have 99 abilities, and everyone is pointing at my disability – said a blind person*);

- UA people need more information about EU society, EU integration is supported, but there is little information about what country Ukraine really is.

Working Group 2: Promoting green and digital skills and jobs for young people

Rapporteur: Ulrike Damyanovic, European Training Foundation

In the workshop, there were three presentations on good practice examples:

- **Stephan Waba**, *Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research of Austria*
- **Abayomi Ogundipe**, *TEKEDU, Republic of Moldova: Project “GirlsGoIT”*
- **Margit Helene Meister**, *State of Lower Austria: Project “Green jobs for you”*

Q1: What is the main impact of current crises in this field?

- COVID and crisis helped to boost reforms in the education system, so in brief there were not only negative consequences but also positive impact. It is important is to see both sides of the coin.
- The labour market also reacted with support measures from governments, with stimulus for demand and job openings and policies and commitments to the twin digital and green transition, and
- Young people showed interest and commitment.

However, challenges remain, like

- Need for quality of education and its outcomes;
- Need for practical work experience and for flexible forms of work;
- Further development of hybrid learning and working environments.

Q2: Which policies, actions and projects are needed to address these issues?

a) Reach out actively to young people and truly involved them in reforms and the teams, including:

- Reaching out to villages and not only capital cities to involve young people from the very beginning; young people are the best role model for each other
- Involving and fostering school networks, career counsellors, multipliers like NGOs;
- Benefiting from the *Year of Youth* to push the agenda ahead;
- Involving Youth Councils and Education Councils in the policy dialogue and its implementation, like the *EU Youth Guarantee Scheme*;
- Talking the language of young people and not the ones of bureaucrats;

- Motivating and reorienting young people for upskilling and reskilling in the way to a green and digital economy.

b) Foster comprehensive reforms of education policies, while paying particular attention to the whole LLL system, including non-formal and informal learning.

Focus on:

- Digital school and school development plans and not singular measures, linking pedagogical concepts with technology and devices;
- Applying and deploying EU tools like DIGCOMP [*European Digital Competence Framework*] or SELFIE;
- Involving parents and world of work, providing timely and relevant education and training offers, like IT and STEM [*science, technology, engineering, and math*] for girls, or competences and skills for green jobs.
- Set up proper monitoring systems and benefit from participation in international studies for solid evidence to inform about reforms and updates of curricula and qualifications.

Q3: *What is the added value of international cooperation in this field and what could be the contribution of the EUSDR?*

- Continue networking education and world of work and involve new partners and in particular young people;
- Benefit of new tools for networking and for making initiatives well known;
- Promote successful role models to stimulate reforms;
- Foster Centres of Excellence and dialogue and mutual learning in the way to green and digital transition;
- Promote the *Danube Youth Council*.

Working Group 3: Strengthening skills and empowering young people in the COVID-19 recovery and beyond

Rapporteur: Dorota Korczyńska, European Commission (DG REGIO)

Three experts were present at the workshop to give inputs:

- **Stefaan Hermans**, *DG EAC, European Commission*
- **Lyuben Georgiev**, *Re-Act, Bulgaria: Danube Youth Network*
- **Sabine Koch**, *WUK, Austria: Job Assistance*

Q1: What is the main impact of current crises in this field?

- Negative impact of COVID-19 crisis:
 - Depression, passivity, social division between groups (better prepared vs. worse prepared);
 - Difficulty in connecting with students (esp. those from vulnerable groups);
 - Difficult life choices: 1 laptop, 7 children; electric power for laptop or fridge;
 - Difficulties in accessing internships (you need machines, you can't do it online, businesses were closing);
 - For higher education: too much pressure on work, additional tasks;
 - Lots of stress, impact on mental well-being, financial difficulties (losing of jobs by young people);
 - Young people became inactive and detached
- Positive impact of COVID-19 crisis:
 - More influence from the teachers' side;
 - New skills (mostly digital);
 - New ways of adapting, also from the labour market side;
 - Quick reaction from the education community,
 - A lot of investment in the digital infrastructure of schools.

Q2: Which policies, actions and projects are needed to address these issues?

- Digitalization -> new EU policies
 - Digital Education Action Plan (to measure digital skills)
 - Pathways to School Success – new EU initiative for vulnerable groups
 - Recovery and Resilience Facility – a lot of interest from EU member states to support education (not only digital, but also as a system)
 - Erasmus+, European Solidarity Corps, Cohesion Funds
- Danube Youth Network
 - *Danube Participation Days*
 - *Shoot by Youth* –video competition (about problems in the community, 500€ prize, encouragement for young people to be proactive).
- Work Assistance
 - Individual approach, guidance, flexibility,
 - Support for employer;

- Change the workstyle; more projects for people with specific needs [Example of good practice: WUK offers training opportunities for young people with mental health problems: *Relationship is the key to success in work and training*];
- Better data (statistical);
- More free places for psychotherapy and treatment;
- Not only digital skills, but also social and emotional skills (e.g. focus of a joint Slovak-Czech project).

Q3: What is the added value of international cooperation in this field and what could be the contribution of the EUSDR?

- The competition;
- The possibility to introduce it (copy, evolve) on a larger scale;
- The actions can be taken up in all EUSDR partner states;
- Slovak-Czech project on emotional and social skills -> already a cooperation, can be elaborated;
- Different needs and expectations from different generations (Danube Youth Network project stops; we need direct link to decision-makers: task for EUSDR);
- National and international networking can make a difference (better than a single person).

Working Group 4: Overcoming marginalization: Young Roma in times of crisis

Rapporteur: Barka Emini, Volkshilfe Österreich

Invited experts in the field were:

- **Milisav Milinkovic**, EHO, Novi Sad, Serbia: Project "With and for Roma in the Danube Region"

- **Tamara Muhič**, RIS Dvorec Rakičan, Muska Sobota, Slovenia: DREAM ROAD project

- **Vera Messing**, Central European University, Budapest, Hungary: Bridging Young Roma and Business project

Q1: What is the main impact of current crises in this field?

- COVID: Many Roma were used as scapegoats at the beginning of the crisis. The negative impact on NEET rates might be exacerbated due to the

lockdowns. Moreover, the dynamics on the labour market are not in favour of Roma, who often are active in precarious jobs.

- Ukraine: Many Roma from Ukraine were exposed to severe discrimination after fleeing. The negative socioeconomic consequences of the war will also primarily hit those at the margins of the society.
- Climate change: Discussants stated that Roma inclusion has also a strong territorial dimension. Informal settlements are typically more exposed to extreme weather conditions such as floodings or extreme heat, which is why the integration of Roma must go hand in hand with infrastructural improvements.

Q2: Which policies, actions and projects are needed to address these issues?

- Projects: Three projects were presented at the workshop.
- *“With and For Roma in the Danube Region”*: This project combines local approaches for e.g. the avoidance of domestic violence, educational programmes, capacity building, workshops on migration with a transnational approach, where SK, RO, RS and DE cooperate and exchange their experiences.
- *DREAM ROAD* is a Danube Interreg project that establishes learning labs and fosters Roma inclusion through participatory approaches and community empowerment. Learning and capacity building, as well as building trust are at the heart of the project.
- A third presented project, funded by OSF and implemented by CEU, focused on the *“barriers to mobility and coping strategies of highly qualified Roma youth on their way to the business sector in Hungary”*.
- Discussants stated that policies need to be brought to the ground, but also grassroots initiatives need to feed the processes of policy design. In the current situation of multiple crises, the specific vulnerability of Roma and their relevance in the Danube Region should be given additional attention.

Q3: What is the added value of international cooperation in this field and what could be the contribution of the EUSDR?

- International cooperation enables Roma to create a joint identity across borders and to jointly defend their interests;

- International projects facilitate the exchange of experience and thereby help to improve established approaches;
- The majority of European Roma live in the Danube Region. There should be no EUSDR without the participation of Roma and the EUSDR/PA9 provides an appropriate framework to address issues related to them, in addition to the pan-European strategies in place.
- International projects allow participants to work on their competences and to transfer established practices from one country or region to another.

After the presentation by the rapporteurs, who prepared their reports during the coffee break, the conference was summed up in an overview based on the graphic recording of **Chiara de Eccher** and in concluding words from the Austrian PA coordinators. The graphic recording is available here:

<https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/events/10th-stakeholder-conference/>

Jürgen Schick, Priority Area Coordinator, *Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, Austria*, thanked all participants and especially the speakers for their valuable inputs and thoughts for future action.

He placed special emphasis on three messages:

- Due to the recent crises, the challenges rise and add up;
- A multitude of measures both *for* and *with* young people have already been taken on EU and national level and in civil society to react to existing challenges;
- It is necessary to strengthen the systems. There is a high need and high willingness to cooperate. EUSDR brings people together and strengthens the links between projects and on a policy level.

Roland Hanak, Priority Area Coordinator, Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy, Austria, summed up the most important issues of the conference, highlighting especially

- The impact on young people, remarking that they face a deprivation of their right for education.
- The difficult situation of Ukraine following the Russian invasion and, as a consequence, of other countries such as the Republic of Moldova.



Referring to the panel discussion he concluded with his answer to the question which small thing could become big: *A small thing that might become big in future is PEACE.*

The conference was closed by the moderator with the request to give feedback on the questionnaire that was sent to participants a few days after the meeting.

Drafted by the moderator Gabriele Stöger