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**ACTION PLAN**

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COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

**European Union Strategy for the Danube Region**

{COM(2010) 715}

## 9) TO INVEST IN PEOPLE AND SKILLS

### Presentation of the issue

By investing in people and making best use of its human capital, the Danube Region can progress and grow in a smart and inclusive way. To arrive at a knowledge based and inclusive growth it requires empowering people through high levels of employment, investing in skills, fighting poverty and modernising labour markets, training and social protection systems.

Making best use of its human capital, the Danube Region can build on several opportunities but also needs to address certain challenges<sup>113</sup>. The Danube Region's population is younger than the average of EU 27, although the overall population has started to decline due to a negative birth balance. Indicators on early school leavers are considerably better in the Danube Region than in EU 27, despite the fact that the share of population with tertiary education is lower. Unemployment is less pronounced in the Danube Region, but less people are in employment and the shares of employment in traditional sectors, such as agriculture, are still high. On the job market, mobility of workers needs attention. This is to give people real opportunities to work near where they live, and to make well informed choices on mobility that benefit all. Better opportunities to live and work close to family and place of origin require better local job opportunities, also important so that the Region does not suffer brain drain and its accompanying loss of return on skills investment. Mobility issues are especially in relation to legal and administrative factors, linked to social security and the recognition of qualifications. In addition indirect obstacles linked to accommodation, language, the employment of partners and spouses and the “psychological” obstacles, in particular the issue of returning to the country of origin and the lack of recognition of mobility, need to be addressed. Work induced migration flows follow an east-west pattern, motivated by considerable income disparities in the Danube Region, thus resulting in brain drain in some parts and excess supply in others. The opening of German and Austrian labour markets to the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Slovenia may also reinforce this development. Mobility of researchers and students, and thus knowledge, is lower in most of the Danube Region than in other parts of Europe and needs special attention.<sup>114</sup>

To make use of the full potential of the labour force and to fight poverty, the Danube Region's labour market also needs to be more inclusive. Regarding equal opportunities between men and women, inequalities are more pronounced in upper parts of the Region than in lower parts. The general employment rate for women and men is lower than in EU 27. In addition, a healthy population is a critical factor behind sustainable economic development, and severe disparities in health conditions still prevail in the Region. About one third of EU's population in risk of poverty live here, many of them coming from marginalised groups, and including 80% of Roma in Europe. Apart from poverty, Roma communities especially suffer from social and economic exclusion, spatial segregation and sub-standard living conditions. While their inclusion is many times approached only from the point of discrimination, the socio-economic aspects and environmental consequences of improper living conditions and infrastructure are equally important. Failing to address adequately the Region's ten million Roma has implications for the whole EU.

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<sup>113</sup> Sources: Eurostat, European Innovation Scoreboard 2009, DG Education and Culture, Socio Economic Analysis.

<sup>114</sup> Low levels of inbound mobility of students in large parts of the Region, except for Austria and Germany; High levels of outbound mobility in Bulgaria, Slovakia, Croatia, Germany and Austria. (EUROSTAT and DG Education and Culture)

### Danube Region specifics

This analysis calls for actions across a whole range of fields, with emphasis on more coherence. Policies in the fields of education, labour market, integration, research and innovation should be mutually reinforcing. Prominence should be given to capacity building on all levels, whether individual, organisational, regional, national or macro-regional. It should include developing key competencies and organisational skills, promotion of innovative partnerships, and governance in the regional/ national context. Stronger joint efforts are needed to enhance performance by shared European benchmarks in education and training.

Stronger cooperation of labour market institutions regarding policies, measures and information exchange is needed. To encourage mutual exchanges of employees, researchers, students and practitioners and to reduce one-way migration flows, cooperation between bodies in primary, secondary and tertiary education needs to be strengthened and the mutual recognition of professions and diplomas accelerated. Specific added value lies in the greater participation of the Western Balkan countries and other third countries in the Region in existing programmes and cooperation structures. Existing cooperation between Member States and third countries could serve as a base.

There is also much scope in the Danube Region to work together to fight the social and economic exclusion of marginalised communities, especially Roma. Funding needs to be targeted. Policies need to be developed together based on best international practice. Actions need to be enlightened and effective. On the level of governance, it is often at the level of ordinary interventions in regions and cities that human rights need to be further emphasised. Local, regional and national authorities have a key role to play in their day-to-day application. As noted, particular attention has to be paid to the situation of the Roma communities<sup>115</sup>. Projects that open community boundaries and bring together Roma and people from other communities are particularly important.

### Actions

- **Action - “To enhance performance of education systems through closer cooperation of education institutions, systems and policies”.** Fostering efficiency, innovation and good governance in education and training is crucial in the face of the challenges posed by globalisation, demographic changes, rapid technological developments and increasing pressure on public budgets. This should be done in particular through the exchange of best practices of different education and training systems through transnational cooperation, joint development of programmes and materials, promotion of research on the economics of education, peer learning, and capacity building, i.e. for evidence-based policy and practice and for facilitating the policy learning process, strategy formulation and policy action. Specific added value lies in the inclusion of third countries and best use should be made of already existing programmes and cooperation structures.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Ten basic principles for Roma inclusion have been established in the conclusions of the EU Council on Employment, Social policy, Health and Consumers affairs of 8 June 2009. Some of them were used as baseline for the amendment of the ERDF regulation on housing. The amendment will allow explicitly though not exclusively to invest in new housing or renovate existing stock in both urban and rural areas if part of an integrated approach – coordinating education, housing, employment, and health policies. It is also important to develop linkages with, and reinforce actions undertaken as part of the Roma Decade (2005-2015).

<sup>116</sup> The main aim is to reinforce the European Area of Education (EAE) thus contributing to the success and sustainability of the EU integration process. Country specific needs and the demands of the EAE according to the EU Work Programme "Education and Training 2020" need to be taken into account and follow up. Work should build upon already existing bilateral cooperation projects and multilateral initiative.

- ⇒ *Example of project - “**To support sustainable education reforms in the Danube Region**”. Cooperation platforms for sustainable education reforms can improve educational outcomes and the quality of education systems in the Danube Region. Well established platforms include CECE<sup>117</sup>, focusing on mutual learning, capacity building and joint projects between EU Member States of the Region, and ERI SEE<sup>118</sup>, focusing in particular on capacity building and know-how transfer between EU Member States and non Member States and acting as an interface to developments in relevant EU, European and international initiatives in education. Both projects take into account the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (“ET 2020”).<sup>119</sup> (Lead: Proposed by the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Arts and Culture).*
- ⇒ *Example of project - “**To strengthen the networks of schools in the Danube Region**”. The Academy of Central European Schools (ACES)<sup>120</sup> aims to support the establishment of a Central European network of schools in the currently fifteen partner countries. The aim is to foster dialogue and cooperation of young people and to create a sustainable network of shared knowledge, mutual learning and innovation. Best practices should be exchanged with other ongoing international school partnerships, such as the project PASCH<sup>121</sup> (Lead: Proposed by the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Arts and Culture).*
- *Action - “**To foster cooperation between key stakeholders of labour market, education and research policies in order to develop learning regions and environments**”. To increase innovative capacities of the labour force in the Danube Region, new forms of partnerships and cooperation among key stakeholders (labour market, education and training, research and employers) need to be further developed. Employers (private, public and voluntary) have an important role to play in identifying the knowledge, skills and competences needed in working life. To increase the employability and entrepreneurial potential of all learners, communication and active cooperation should be further developed between education and training institutions on the one hand and employers on the other.*
- ⇒ *Example of project - “**To reinforce the Danube Region labour market, in the context of the EU labour market**”. While national labour markets in the Danube Region are subject to different framework conditions, economic ties and worker migration have started to dismantle borders between countries and markets. This project aims to build on existing bilateral cooperation projects, enlarging them to the Danube Region. It could emphasise mutual recognition of professions and qualifications, as well as targeted labour market policies (women, youth, long-term unemployed, minorities etc.) thus reinforcing a Danube Region labour market.*
- ⇒ *Example of project - “**To develop joint Danube Region labour market statistic**”. To form the basis for common labour market strategies the project aims at producing sound statistical data on the Danube Region labour market, including data on specific labour market demands, workforce flows, drivers and barriers of transnational labour mobility, differences in working conditions, disposable income and social security systems. Specific added value lies in the inclusion of Non-EU Member States in this cooperation. Existing*

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<sup>117</sup> Central European Cooperation in Education: [www.bmukk.gv.at/europa/bibildung/cece.xml](http://www.bmukk.gv.at/europa/bibildung/cece.xml)

<sup>118</sup> The Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe: [www.erisee.org](http://www.erisee.org)

<sup>119</sup> ET 2020 [http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc36\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc36_en.htm)

<sup>120</sup> <http://www.aces.or.at/start.asp?ID=120245&b=829>

<sup>121</sup> <http://www.pasch-net.de/deindex.htm>

*bilateral cooperation projects should be used to develop cooperation on the macro-regional level.*

- **Action - “To support creativity and entrepreneurship”.** A reorientation towards entrepreneurship and creativity is important as a prerequisite for businesses, in particular for small and medium sized enterprises, and thus for Europe's competitiveness. This could be achieved through the introduction of innovative teaching methods to support creativity and entrepreneurship at all levels of education, through the promotion of intercultural dialogue or through language training, making use of the linguistic and cultural diversity of the Danube Region. Specific attention should be drawn to rural areas and to developing alternative employment opportunities and economic diversification for people occupied in traditional sectors where restructuring is still under way such as agriculture.
- **Action - “To support the mobility of workers, researchers and students through implementing the European Qualification Framework”.** Countries in the Danube Region will coordinate on the development of National Qualification Frameworks. Specific added value lies in supporting non-EU Member States in drawing up their National Qualification Frameworks.<sup>122</sup>
  - ⇒ *Example of project - “To enhance capacities of key stakeholders in education, science and research”.* The project *Mobility programme for Capacity Building in Regional Cooperation in Education, Science and Research*<sup>123</sup> aims at fostering relevant capacities through peer-learning and exchange of expertise and know-how within ministries responsible for education, science and research in managing regional and international activities and programmes in the sectors concerned. As a measure of stakeholder empowerment, the project contributes to the strengthening of sustainable regional partnerships and consists of short-term placements at key institutions and networks in the area of cooperation for building human capital. (Lead: Proposed by the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Arts and Culture).
- **Action - “To jointly analyse implementation gaps in life long learning (LLL) policies and exchange best practices in implementation”.** Comprehensive LLL strategies and their implementation have been identified as a priority for the development of knowledge societies. Making these effective and increasing their impact for individual learners remains a critical challenge. Institutional capacity building of LLL bodies is a prerequisite for implementing these policies.
- **Action - “To improve cross-sector policy coordination to address demographic and migration challenges”.** Enhanced efforts should be pursued to develop knowledge on the status quo, on drivers and impacts of migration flows and demographic change, so to develop a basis for enhanced cooperation of different policies at all levels of governance. Cross-sector policy coordination between relevant government departments, education authorities, social services, healthcare services, cultural policy authorities, housing and spatial planning authorities as well as asylum and immigration services at local, regional and national level, as well as dialogue with civil society are essential to ensure an adequate level of support. Spatial consequences of migration-induced social, economical and cultural changes and possible responses in the framework of urban and rural development should be considered. Cooperation with existing organisations, such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), with their existing analysis and recommendations, would be particularly useful.

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<sup>122</sup> Coordination should be sought with the European Training Foundation.

<sup>123</sup> [http://www.taskforcehumancapital.info/fileadmin/documents/TF\\_Mobility\\_Programme\\_2010.pdf](http://www.taskforcehumancapital.info/fileadmin/documents/TF_Mobility_Programme_2010.pdf)

- **Action - “To fight poverty and social exclusion of marginalised communities in the Danube Region, especially the Roma communities”.** To make full use of the Danube Region's population specific focus needs to be put at empowering in particular groups in risk of poverty and ensuring them access and opportunities. Children, old people, mentally and physically disabled, immigrants, homeless, representatives of marginalised ethnic groups are the most vulnerable. Roma communities, whose conditions are often especially dire and with no place in 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe, need special attention. Actions to reduce the number of people in risk of poverty need to complement each other, applying an integrated approach<sup>124</sup>.
- ⇒ *Example of project - “To improve the living conditions of Roma communities”.* In the Danube Region, Roma are often living in environments with no drinking water, no sewage systems, no access to energy and no access to telecommunication services. In addition to these third world standards, they face natural risks such as floods, ground instability or proximity to dangerous waste. Projects need to focus on basic infrastructure needs, but also on creating sustainable rural livelihoods, especially for Roma populations, combining poverty alleviation and sustainable resource management. Much better use needs to be made of funding opportunities, especially e.g. Structural Funds.
- ⇒ *Example of project - “To implement the Roma dialogue with non-Roma”* is a long-term commitment to improve the situation of Roma in European society by giving Roma opportunities outside their own communities in social, environmental and cultural projects. The objective should be to broaden knowledge and skills and to support their entrepreneurship skills. It also includes non-Roma involvement in local community projects involving Roma, followed by engagement e.g. in public education. Initiatives could be built on existing mechanisms– the EU Roma platform and the Roma Decade and could be implemented through existing grant schemes and in cooperation with NGOs.
- **Action - “To implement the actions undertaken in the Roma Decade and to establish further actions to be implemented”.** The coordination of efforts between existing initiatives and actors, such as the Roma Decade (2005-2015), EU Roma platform for Roma Inclusion<sup>125</sup>, EU-Roma network and NGOs active in this field in the Danube Region is indispensable for improving the situation for Roma. The participation of non-EU Member States in the EU Platform for Roma inclusion should be encouraged. Activities of the Platform should improve the coordination of the implementation and the use of the resources at EU level, but also among candidate and potential candidates in the Danube Region, which will result in increased impact and effective utilisation of available resources. There is a particular need to capitalise on best practice elsewhere, applying enlightened approaches from the rest of Europe and the world to a chronic and dramatic social and cultural issue. Roma pride and dignity must better prosper.

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<sup>124</sup> In particular such actions could focus on the eradicating of child poverty, improving equity in education programs (from early childhood to postgraduate training), reducing the number of early school leavers<sup>124</sup>, providing access to health care, promoting active inclusion in the labour market, making efforts to provide decent housing for everyone, tackling indebtedness or on providing conducted training programs for local officials on governance of multiethnic communities.

<sup>125</sup> The Roma inclusion Platform was endorsed and launched during the Czech Presidency in October 2008. Its main objective is to call governments and main stakeholders to debate Roma inclusion, on topics such as education, health and housing, meeting on a twice-yearly basis.