

**European Union Strategy for the Danube Region**

**EUSDR**

**Report June 2014**

**Priority Area 9**

*"Investing in People and Skills"*

*Education and Training, Labour Market, Marginalised Groups*

## **List of abbreviations**

CE	Central Europe
CEEPUS	Central European Exchange Program for University Studies
CSR	Country Specific Recommendations
DG EMPL	Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion
DG REGIO	Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy
DG EAC	Directorate General for Education and Culture
DR	Danube Region
EC	European Commission
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ERI SEE	Education Reform Initiative of South East Europe
ESF	European Social Fund
ESI(F)	European Structural and Investment Funds
ET 2020	Education and Training 2020
ETC	European Territorial Cooperation
ETF	European Training Foundation
EP	European Parliament
EU	European Union
EUSBSR	EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region
EUSDR	EU Strategy for the Danube Region
GAC	General Affairs Council
IOM	International Organization for Migration
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
OeAD	Österreichischer Austauschdienst
OMC	Open Method of Coordination
OP	Operational Programme
PA	Priority Area
PA9	Priority Area 9
PAC	Priority Area Coordinator
QA	Quality Assurance
SEE 2020	South East Europe 2020 Regional Growth Strategy
SG	Steering Group
SME	Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise
TA	Technical Assistance
TAF-DRP	Technical Assistance Facility for Danube Region Projects
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WBL	Work-Based Learning
YP	Youth Platform

## 1. OVERALL PROGRESS

### 1.1. State of play

During the third stage of its implementation phase (June 2013 - June 2014), the added value of the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) and more specifically Priority Area 9 "Investing in People and Skills" (henceforth to be referred to as "PA9") has shown further results of innovative approaches of bilateral, interregional, inter-institutional and transnational cooperation in the fields of education, labour market and inclusion. In particular, the Second Stakeholder Conference of PA9 held in Vienna on December 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>, 2013 with around 140 participants from all over the Danube Region has boosted the discussion, which started during the first Stakeholder Conference and provided space to the different participants for developing new and unique approaches.

#### Policy level

The Strategy provides a sound framework for strengthening the capacity of cooperation among the countries of the Danube Region and for addressing both challenges and opportunities in the policy fields of PA9. It has created an ongoing positive political momentum which facilitates new transnational initiatives and exchange of experience. Policy cooperation in the field of education and labour market is beneficial regarding the integration and cohesion of the Danube Region. This twofold process brings also common challenges to the fore, e.g. youth unemployment, migration or education reform. With regard to the financial and economic crisis, the area of education and training is becoming more and more important in the Danube Region, for socio-economic development and growth, but also equitable and inclusive societies, for the well-being and personal fulfilment of its citizens.

By adding emphasis to the social dimension and the creation of jobs through investing in people and skills the Danube Region can progress and grow further in a smart and inclusive way. Making best use of its human capital is therefore vital to the development of the region and the people who are living in it. Providing people with more and better skills and competences will not only promote growth but also contribute to the well-being and personal fulfilment of its citizens. Capacity-building and new approaches in initial and continuing education and training are therefore needed to empower and equip citizens with those kinds of required skills and competences. It is also necessary to ensure that education and training systems develop learner's creativity and capacity for innovation and deliver the knowledge needed in the Danube Region and in particular in a globalised labour market.

The main topics of PA9 (Education and Training, Labour Market and Marginalised Communities) are of utmost importance not only with regard to the Danube Region, but also in relation to the Education and Training (ET) 2020, the European Union (EU) 2020 and the South East Europe (SEE) 2020 strategies. As already highlighted in the 2013 report, the policy fields of PA9 have a most direct impact on three out of five EU 2020 targets<sup>1</sup>:

- **Employment** (75% of the 20-64 year-olds to be employed),

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<sup>1</sup> These targets comply with the thematic objectives (8) promoting employment and supporting labour mobility, (9) promoting social inclusion and combating poverty, (10) investing in education, skills and lifelong learning of the draft regulation of the common provisions on the ESI funds.

- **Education** (Reducing school drop-out rates below 10%; at least 40% of 30-34 year-olds having completed tertiary or equivalent education),
- **Poverty / Social Exclusion** (at least 20 million fewer people in or at risk of poverty and social exclusion).

This is also underlined by the fact that the thematic scope of PA9 has a prominent role within the set of the Country-Specific Recommendations (CRS) issued at the 2014 European Semester. In relation to this, the importance of PA9 topics within the strategy needs to be further emphasized, although the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Forum held in Vienna on 26 and 27 June 2014 offered a positive momentum to point out the importance of PA9 topics for the overall development. In particular, plenary session 2 "Danube Challenges INVEST IN PEOPLE" provided a space to discuss and exchange views on specific issues and fostered the consciousness of the territorial and macro-regional dimension of these topics.

The third year of the implementation of PA9 made clear that in addition to funding and programme planning, increased cooperation and networking among participating countries, the Strategy also needs a clear structure regarding its governance. In May 2014 the European Commission has published a report on "Governance of the Macro-regional Strategies", where stronger political leadership and decision making from countries and regions, as well as a greater clarity in the organisation of work is required. Based on this report further discussion and clarity on specific issues is needed.

Also the 2<sup>nd</sup> Stakeholder Conference in Vienna on 5 and 6 December 2013 made clear that it is necessary for all actors and stakeholders to see the Strategy as an instrument to be used and designed by them and therefore participate in it while using synergies. In this regard, it was also pointed out that the equality of marginalised groups and minorities and their full participation in society and labour market is an important prerequisite for the stabilisation and expansion of social prosperity in the Danube Region. The fields of education and labour market are understood as decisive elements for the entire region as a failure of the development of education and labour market systems is associated with high social costs.

In this respect it is necessary to grant this thematic field a high significance in future initiatives and programmes such as the European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) DANUBE programme. Additionally, access to funding instruments like the ESF, Erasmus+, etc. will be important for implementing the strategy in these fields.

As far as the reform priorities in education and labour market policy are concerned, several countries of the region are dealing with similar priorities and challenges. The reform measures that were rolled out range from early-childhood education to lifelong learning or the reduction of the youth unemployment rate and aim at enhancing education outcomes, often in particular of disadvantaged groups. They concern i.a. the following: increasing the attractiveness of Vocational Education and Training (VET) and work-based learning, reducing drop-outs, reduction of the number of students in classes, reform of teacher education, new legislation on the employment and payment of teachers, educational standards and reforming funding of public institutions.

### Project level

The Strategy has contributed to concrete action within the fields of labour market and education policies with an innovative combination of both bottom-up and top-down processes. In this way PA9 has successfully established a network of different stakeholders who guarantee efficient cooperation between relevant actors, i.a. through the involvement of existing regional cooperation

networks and initiatives. Thus, the activities are not only focussed on the development and implementation of projects and project ideas, but also on strengthening existing initiatives and fostering the development of new networks and innovative forms of cooperation. In this way, Priority Area 9 of the EUSDR serves as a common umbrella and provides a common reference point for many organizations, initiatives and networks in the Danube Region. The priorities set out in the Work Plan of PA9 of the Strategy are becoming more visible and are being increasingly considered in activities set by the stakeholders. Thus, the Strategy has contributed to the further evolution of existing projects and initiatives.

In addition, the EUSDR acts as a useful instrument to develop new project ideas and to ensure the projects' territorial, transnational and macro-regional dimension. Based on the progress so far, PACs have further deepened the rolling stock-taking process of both existing and new projects. Furthermore, the letter of recommendation and the possibility of labelling, developed by the SG of PA9, have proven to be an efficient tool to assess the macro-regional impact of projects.<sup>2</sup> PACs provided continuously assistance and information to lead, as well as potential project partners in order to facilitate the implementation of projects and the development of new ones.

Based on the ongoing stock-taking process, PACs have compiled a list of projects and project ideas in PA9 (see Annex 1). More than 50 projects/planned projects/project ideas have been identified so far. In the current reporting period (June 2013 - June 2014), six additional projects were labelled out of which one was awarded with a letter of recommendation. Some of these projects already make use of the EUSDR visual identity, provided by the INTERACT programme. Further project ideas and synergies between already existing projects have been created at PA9's 2<sup>nd</sup> stakeholder conference on 5 and 6 December 2013 and at other various events (see Chapter 1.2. "Process").

Of particular relevance in PA9 is the project "Empowering Young People – Connecting Europe", which is one of the selected specific EUSDR pilot projects financed by the EU. The project (running from 2012-14) has been supporting reconciliation and excellence through education and training targeting the youth of the Danube Region. Active citizenship, creativity and intercultural dialogue have been sustained through innovative and joint school projects in the Danube Region. In June 2013 the project schools shared their project results and experiences at a final event in Vienna. A teacher's guide reflecting the experience, approaches and ideas was developed from October 2013 until May 2014 and then disseminated to participating teachers, teachers from Bosnia-Herzegovina and schools in the region (link to the portfolio: [www.mahara.at/user/kulturkontakt-austria](http://www.mahara.at/user/kulturkontakt-austria)).

Based on the first and second call of the TAF-DRP (Technical Assistance Facility for Danube Region Projects, deadline September 2013), PACs invited and supported the SG members regarding the submission of project applications with a clear EUSDR added value. Within the first call, PA9 submitted together with KulturKontakt Austria as the potential project leader the project "Enhanced Competitiveness and Employability through Innovative Work-Based Learning in VET". The project builds on the work of a PA9 VET Working Group coordinated by Romania and supports the establishment of national and (macro-)regional platforms of dialogue on WBL and the piloting measures at national levels in selected partner countries.

### Lessons learned

The following conclusions can be drawn after the third year of implementation:

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<sup>2</sup> see <http://www.peopleandskills-danuberegion.eu/pages/projects>

- The implementation of the Strategy requires a sound coordination by the PACs and a clear commitment from all stakeholders. This calls for action on different levels and within different policy frameworks. Ownership by a very broad stakeholder community, including local and regional authorities, national ministries, the relevant Commission's services, private sector representatives and NGOs is therefore essential. PA9 invites the Commission and the National Coordinators to safeguard an involvement of stakeholders concerned from all levels in the Region.
- Under these premises, PACs have established a sustainable and concrete cooperation network of national counter-parts and identified possible relevant stakeholders, with particular emphasis on Project Leaders. Nevertheless, the question of funding of this cooperation structure remains a challenge when it comes to the coordination of the Strategy.
- The PAC's role should be supported by the allocation of sufficient human resources within participating countries, since not everything can be done by the PACs alone.
- The 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Forum held on 26-27 June 2014 in Vienna offered a positive momentum to highlight the valuable input of PA9 topics for the overall development of the Strategy. However, continued work is needed to strengthen the thematic scope of PA9 and raise awareness about the importance of PA9 topics (Education, Labour Market, Marginalized Communities) in the framework of the Strategy and related programmes.
- On the project level, a twofold approach should be privileged where additional attention is spent on selected strategic projects without losing sight of other relevant projects covering a vast diversity in terms of size and structure.
- The complementarity of the Strategy with other EU programmes which are not related to ESIF plays an essential role, also by taking into account the various financial needs of the EUSDR (in particular the new programme Erasmus+). Nevertheless, ESIF can be seen as a main instrument to reach the EU 2020 targets and to undertake measures related to the Country-Specific Recommendations.
- National coordination networks have proven to be useful and worthwhile when it comes to coordinating the implementation process of the EUSDR, both with regard to policies which are implemented through the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) and steering processes related to the EUSDR. In several countries national platforms on the EUSDR are organised on a regular basis and contribute significantly to a mutual exchange. PACs regularly attend Austrian national coordination platform meetings as well as informal meetings between PACs and Austrian SG members of other PAs.

### Next steps and challenges

- A long-term and sustainable cooperation framework needs to be enabled which promotes decentralised but also coordinated work. A demand for professional exchange to develop ideas and to collaborate in concrete projects is clearly visible.
- To that end, efficient and targeted funding for increased Danube Region cooperation both on policy (e.g. thematic working groups) and project level in the field of education and the labour market needs to be provided. In particular, it is of utmost importance to develop a simple and reliable funding mechanism that facilitates and supports the activities of the Priority Area Coordinators.
- A particular need for improving the access to funding for small (transnational) projects as well as supporting activities of project development can be identified in education. TAF-DRP and START represent two important pilot programmes enabling the preparation and development of projects and project ideas. However, in order to create synergies and exchange know-how across the Danube Region networks, a reliable funding mechanism must be ensured in the long run.

- Since the adoption of the Strategy, a lot of very ambitious ideas were raised. It should however be continuously examined to what extent the Danube Region scope can deliver the potential for realistic next steps, where the issues require solutions at local, national state or European level. Learning from others experience and joint development of projects can make very important contributions, but will not replace policies.
- Where sustainable development is to be initiated it is necessary to undertake efforts to go beyond isolated projects. On the other hand, social innovations, e.g. through education projects, are mostly connected with a certain need for social recapitulation and adaptation. This requires time and, very importantly, a long-term approach, and it should not be confused with inefficiency.
- The budget period 2014-2020 provides a unique opportunity to make the Strategy a success on all levels of intervention (policies, politics and projects). It must be ensured that new impulses are set by taking this new momentum into consideration.

## 1.2. Process

The overall participation of DR countries in PA9 is in general satisfactory. However, still not all DR countries are represented in the SG both in the area of education and labour market. Therefore a cross-sectoral approach and discussion in the area of PA9 could still be further improved. All National Coordinators and the Commission are invited to ensure that the nominated members to the SG attend the next meetings. In addition to this, DG REGIO is invited to facilitate the participation of other DGs related to the thematic scope of PA9 (DGs EAC and EMPL). The ongoing participation of the ETF in the process has a high added-value for the implementation process, for instance in the context of the ETF "FRAME" project where Serbia and other participating countries are drafting on the document Skills 2020.

<i>Event</i>	<i>AT</i>	<i>BA</i>	<i>BG</i>	<i>CZ</i>	<i>DE</i>	<i>HR</i>	<i>HU</i>	<i>MD</i>	<i>ME</i>	<i>RO</i>	<i>RS</i>	<i>SI</i>	<i>SK</i>	<i>UA</i>	<i>ETF</i>	<i>EAC</i>	<i>REGIO</i>	<i>EMPL</i>	<i>IO M</i>
<i>Conf.</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	-	x	x	x	-	x
<i>SG6</i>	x	-	x	x	x	x	x	-	x	x	-	-	x	-	x	-	x	-	x
<i>SG7</i>	x	-	x	x	x	x	x	-	-	x	-	-	x	-	x	-	x	-	-

Table 1: Attendance of PA9 meetings

The SG can be seen as the main body of the coordination within the framework of PA9. Moreover, the continuity within the SG of PA9 is of utmost importance in order to make the implementation of PA9 a success and thereby ensuring the regional ownership. The chosen work mode of the PACs, which has put the ownership of initiatives and common success strongly at its centre, provides a sound basis for future cooperation. Personal contacts at different work stages have increased significantly since the last reporting period made a valuable contribution in this respect.

The 6<sup>th</sup> meeting of the SG was held in Bucharest on 29-30 October 2013, back-to-back with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Forum (see Annex 4) and provided space to discuss the impressions on the Forum and in particular on the workshop of PA9 "Smart and Inclusive Danube Region". It also dealt with the conclusions of the GAC on the added value of Macro-regional Strategies and informed SG members about the DANUBE Programme and TAF-DRP. The 7<sup>th</sup> meeting of the SG of PA9 was held in Turin on 15-16 May 2014. It gave a well-structured overview of project development and ongoing projects of PA9 and discussed among other things the issue of the governance of EU macro-regional strategies, as well as the issue of funding and project development. Based on a Romanian initiative, the idea of establishing an ad-hoc group on green competences was discussed and agreed upon the SG members. With regard to the transformation towards "green" jobs, the ad-hoc group shall act as a facilitator for knowledge sharing and policy recommendations. In order to best prepare a common approach, it is planned to organize a preparatory meeting in the second half of 2014 for the countries interested in joining this initiative.

In the reporting period a 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting of Working Group 3 "Creativity and Entrepreneurship" took place in Ruse on 28 April 2014. Based on the first meeting of the group in Sofia 2013, it followed the approach of gathering existing directly transferable practices as a basis for the development of further projects.

Based on the success of the first stakeholder conference of PA9 on 13-14 June 2012, the second conference on 5-6 December 2013 boosted the discussion and provided space for reflection and interaction in order to develop new projects and innovative approaches. In the framework of this event, progress has been also achieved when it comes to involving a variety of stakeholders and



promoting the cross-sectoral approach of the Strategy (cf. *conclusions* of the GAC on the EUSDR of 13 April 2011). The conference provided a laboratory of ideas and a fully collaborative approach which put the ownerships of the participants at the heart of the Strategy. The conference was designed according to the open space approach which is a working method for meeting of large groups requiring little structural pre-settings. Participants of the Open Space Conference created the agenda at the beginning of the event by expressing their interest about certain questions and issues. In this way, the conference ensured that all participants are involved in the discussion. About 140 participants – from 13 of 14 Danube Region countries, non-governmental organisations active in the field of human capital building, education and labour market experts, researchers, international organisations and media representatives – worked on joint issues and possibilities of future cooperation at strategic level. The conference was closed by high-level representatives of the host country (Federal Minister of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection Rudolf Hundstorfer, Director General in the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education and Women's Affairs Hanspeter Huber), the European Commission (László Andor, DG EMPL, Pierre Mairesse, DG EAC) and the European Parliament (Evelyn Regner, Member of the EP). Federal Minister Hundstorfer addressed the broad thematic approach of the Danube Strategy and emphasized the key role of the DANUBE Programme as a funding instrument closely referring to multilateral projects. Director General Huber highlighted the important role of vocational training in context to the EU 2020 and SEE 2020.

In the framework of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Stakeholder Conference a workshop on "Financing Action in the Field of Human Capital in the Danube region" was held in Vienna on 6 December 2013. The workshop dealt with the identification of relevant funds and invited stakeholders to exchange with representatives from various EU programmes (Austrian National Agency for Lifelong Learning, ESF and SEE Joint Technical Secretariats (see also Chapter 1.3. "Funding")).

Coordinators of PA9 and several of its SG members have continued to participate in a wide range of conferences, workshops and meetings organised by other actors. In particular, PACs have participated at the 4<sup>th</sup> meeting of National Contact Points and Priority Area Coordinators meeting in Vienna on 11-12 March 2014.

Further progress in promoting the topics of PA9 has been made also in the framework of the EUSDR Annual Fora. At the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Forum of the Strategy in Bucharest held on 28-29 October 2013, workshop 3 "Smart and Inclusive Danube Region" dealt with the topics of education / skills and provided space to highlight concrete projects / actions and issues.

At the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Forum of the Strategy in Vienna held on 26-27 June 2014, Plenary Session 2 on "Danube Challenges INVEST IN PEOPLE" dealt with the issues of education and training, how employment opportunities can be created for young people and how labour mobility and the related brain circulation can be shaped to the advantage of all involved. The session was introduced by Austrian Federal Minister of Education and Women's Affairs Gabriele Heinisch-Hosek. Furthermore, a workshop on "Investing in inclusive and innovative education and training for better socio-economic outcomes" was coordinated by PA9 during the Forum. The session was structured around three panels on "Cooperation platforms and networking", on "Improving the quality and attractiveness of VET" and on "Transversal key competences, active citizenship and innovative learning environments" (see Annex 3) and provided space for strategic considerations, reports from good practice projects and ideas for future actions. The workshop was chaired by PAC9 (Jürgen Schick, Federal Ministry of Education and Women's Affairs) and included interventions by DG EAC and representatives of key partner institutions from the region such as ERI SEE, Interkulturelles Zentrum, Business Support Center Ruse, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports Baden-Württemberg, National Centre for TVET Development Romania and KulturKontakt Austria.

Another workshop coordinated and chaired by PA9 during the Forum was "Empowerment for an Inclusive Labour Market". The workshop combined four working areas of Priority Area 9 "Investing in People and Skills" of the Danube Region Strategy: innovative labour market measures to facilitate the entry into changing labour markets, questions of demography and migration, empowerment of marginalised groups, like the majority of the Roma population, and promotion of gender equality comprised the broad range interventions. Strategic reflections, reports from good practice policies and projects and outlines for future actions were presented. The Session was opened by Roland Hanak, Priority Area Coordinator 9 "Investing in People and Skills" of the EUSDR, Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection, Austria. Interventions followed by Ann-Jasmin Krabatsch, European Commission, DG REGIO, Ventsislav Petrov, European Commission, DG EMPL, Unit for Romania, Bulgaria and Malta, Andreas Polsterer, ÖSB Consulting GmbH, Vienna, as well as Karl Zehetner, Public Management GmbH, Vienna. Polsterer reported on Labour market Cooperation between Austria and the Ukraine, whereas Zehetner reported on the cooperation of Bulgaria and Austria in the field of the ESF.

Furthermore, during the Forum PA9 was represented at the exhibition fair with the topic "Youth and Work - Measures against Youth Unemployment", together with the representation of the European Commission in Austria.

Finally, PA9 was also strongly represented within the Danube Cosmos through several presentations and Speakers' Corner such as EUSDR pilot project Empowering Young People – Connecting Europe, i.e. SMART, CEEPUS etc. Moreover, PACs engaged in a meeting with EUSBSR coordinator of PA Education discussing possible further collaboration in Vienna on 26 June 2014 within the framework of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Forum.

Several related events were held within the framework of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Forum dealing with PA9 topics. For example, the conference "Civil Society Forum Participation Day: Local Actors and Participation" in Eisenstadt on 25 June 2014 enabled the international civil society and local actors from the 14 EUSDR countries to meet, exchange views and perceptions and dealt in particular under thematic village "Youth: Education-Participation-Qualification" with topics such as transition between education and labour market, linking formal and non-formal education, competence development of young people etc. The conference was organized by Civil Society Forum in collaboration with PA9 and PA10. In the framework of the "Participation Day" a joint working group meeting of PA9/Working Group 6 and PA10/Working Group 1 took place in Eisenstadt on 24 and 25 June 2014. It was organized by IOM as a joint meeting of Working Group 6 on cross-sector policy coordination to address demographic and migration challenges under PA9 and Working Group 1 on Public Administration Reform under PA10 (see Chapter 2, Work Area 6).

Another important event was the "Thematic Conference: learning, teaching, exchanging – School cooperations in the Danube Region" on 25-26 June 2014 in Vienna which focused on teacher cooperation in the Danube Region (see Chapter 2, Work Area 4).

PACs have also set several initiatives for project development. For example, the planned project on "Enhanced Competitiveness & Employability through Innovative Work-Based Learning (WBL) in VET" is being developed by KulturKontakt Austria under the umbrella of Priority Area 9 of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region. The projects' aim is i.a. to support the establishment of national and (macro-)regional platforms of dialogue on WBL and the piloting of policy measures at national levels in selected partner countries. The project builds on the work of PA9 VET Working Group coordinated by Romania and should be submitted to the forthcoming ETC DANUBE Programme. A workshop on WBL will be organized for those countries interested in joining the ETC-application as full and co-financing partners in October 2014.

In order to support the coordination and communication within PA9, the website [www.peopleandskills-danuberegion.eu](http://www.peopleandskills-danuberegion.eu) has been continuously updated and expanded. This approach contributes to raise public awareness on the Strategy. In addition, electronic PA9 newsletters are periodically distributed among relevant stakeholders. Moreover, in the current reporting period an updated EUSDR PA9 Project Folder was developed, providing an overview of on-going and selected finished projects as well as some project ideas for which PA9 of the EUSDR serves as a common umbrella. By making use of the visual instrument (PA9 Logo) of the Strategy, provided by INTERACT Point Vienna, the common identity is strengthened on both the project level and the PA level.

### Next steps

- 8<sup>th</sup> Steering Group Meeting, 5 November 2014, Vienna (Austria)
- 9<sup>th</sup> Steering Group Meeting in Spring 2015 (tba)
- Thematic conference: "Foster integration of marginalised group through education and training systems in the Danube Region" (Working title), 2-3 October 2014, Vienna (Austria)
- Workshop on "Enhanced Competitiveness & Employability through Innovative Work-Based Learning in VET" in October 2014, Vienna (Austria)
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Stakeholder Conference of PA9, 6-7 November 2014, Vienna (Austria)
- 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Forum, 29-30 October 2015, Ulm (Germany)

### **1.3. Funding**

The alignment of policy and funding towards the Strategy is crucial. Danube Region Countries should fully use the potential of ESI funds, the pre-accession and neighbourhood instruments in non-EU countries, but also all other available sources of EU and national funding in order to support reforms in education and training as well as labour market systems. With regard to this, it should be considered that Cohesion Policy is a main financial instrument at EU level to invest in human capital. The ESF can make a major contribution in financing reforms of education and training, whereas the ERDF might provide the opportunity to implement projects with a strong transnational element and involving non-EU member states. The main thematic objectives for the ESF in 2014-2020 are 'promoting sustainable and quality employment and supporting labour mobility', 'promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination', 'investing in education, training and vocational training for skills and life-long learning' and 'enhancing institutional capacity of public authorities and stakeholders and efficient public administration'. Therefore the ESF is i.a. financing initiatives to improve education and training in order to ensure that young people complete their education and get the skills making them more competitive on the job market. Reducing school drop-out along with improving vocational opportunities are priorities as well. This is of particular interest for countries in the Danube Region dealing with those issues. In order to implement PA9 projects through the ESF, its transnational element would need to be strengthened. This could be done by making use of article 10 of the ESF regulation and might i.a. lead to an accelerated absorption of EU funds through exchange of expertise.

The new EU programme Erasmus+ provides a strong transnational element and thereby supports European cooperation in the field of education and training, including strategies in the field of regional policy.

However, the financing of projects remains a main challenge in the implementation of PA9, especially with regard to the budget period 2014-2020 and its legislative framework. It is still not fully clear, to what extent programmes will correspond to the "pattern" of the Danube Region and the specific needs of PA9.

So far, existing programmes at local, regional, national and Community level mostly differed in terms of their regional focus or refer to the different legal situations in the DR countries (member states, non-EU member states). This occasionally leads to challenges for innovative partnerships as

it creates barriers for joint actions. For instance, in order to implement PA9 projects within Erasmus+, the inclusion of some third countries will be challenging.

Within the ERDF and more precisely the Transnational Cooperation of the European Territorial Cooperation objective, there seems to be a contradiction between the principle of prioritization (4-5 thematic objectives) in the budget period 2014-2020 and the 11 priorities of the EUSDR, also in terms of visibility and public perception. This particularly matters for priorities and thematic fields that are not primarily targeted by the ERDF, such as education and labour market.

In relation to the proposed ETC DANUBE programme, it therefore has been essential to include the thematic fields and actions of PA9 into the OP, i.a. as human capital development constitutes the most direct link to the citizens of the Danube Region. Through sustainable efforts and contributions in numerous meetings and papers PACs<sup>9</sup> have reached a reasonable implementation of these topics in the area. Moreover, for projects in the fields of education and labour market, the DANUBE Programme could provide a bigger strategic and macro-regional impact. Projects in education and labour market can also build upon the experiences of a broad range of successful projects within Priority Area 9, mainly in the Central Europe Programme (e.g. i.e. SMART, ET-Struct, CE Ageing Platform, etc.).

In December 2013 PACs, after coordination with the SG, have sent "Proposals for integrating education and training and ensuring a 'social' dimension in the future programme" to the programming committee of the DANUBE Programme. In addition PACs participated in and informed the SG members about the public consultation on the draft DANUBE transnational cooperation programme 2014-2020 with deadline 13 June 2014. The web-based consultation enabled the stakeholders to verify and weight the thematic focus, as well as types of projects which stakeholders would like to see supported in the next period. Thus, the consultation served as a bridge between a top-down and bottom-up approach to developing the cooperation programme. Further discussions are required also on the relation of PACs to the new programmes or the future significance of the letters of recommendation.

Regarding funding of the coordination activities, the Technical Assistance (TA) which was granted by the Commission to the PACs has proven to be very supportive. This technical assistance supports i.a. the facilitation of Steering Group Meetings, Working Group Meetings and Stakeholder Conferences, and in particular supports the participation of non-EU member states at these events through covering travel and accommodation costs.

The development of qualitative projects in a transnational, macro-regional environment is a challenging venture with very specific needs, especially in the thematic areas of PA9. The Technical Assistance Facility for Danube Region Projects established by the Commission is seen as an important instrument for the preparation of strategically important PA9 projects with a clear EUSDR added-value. For this reason PACs assisted and supported the submission of project ideas by the SG members regarding the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> call of the TAF-DRP.

The new pilot initiative "START – Danube Region Project Fund", launched and coordinated by the City of Vienna, is a welcome development, as PA9 has continuously addressed the need for financing of smaller transnational projects. The objective of the new programme is to help organisations and institutions in the Danube Region to develop and implement their project ideas. PACs participated at a workshop on START held in Vienna on 11 July 2014.

In addition a workshop on "Financing Action in the Field of Human Capital in the Danube region" was held back-to-back with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Stakeholder Conference in Vienna on 6 December 2013. The workshop aimed at identifying relevant funding sources for transnational education and training

projects and bringing together key stakeholders of both the policy and the programme level. Therefore, representatives from the EC and national funding authorities such as National Agencies for Lifelong Learning, ESF authorities and Joint Technical Secretariats were invited to participate at this event.

## **2. PROGRESS BY WORK AREA/ACTION**

In order to guarantee continuity and coherence with last year's report, the following chapter is structured in line with the PA9 Work Areas. Work Areas have been established according to the Actions of the Action Plan published by the Commission on 8 December 2010. PACs have examined the Commission's target examples provided in the Action Plan accompanying the Communication on the Strategy. The SG of PA9 agreed on targets relevant to the macro-region on 6 December 2011 at its 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting in Zagreb, Croatia. These targets contribute to the achievement of the EU 2020 and ET 2020 strategies of the EU.

The compliance of PA9's targets with its Work Areas is demonstrated in the Work Plan (see Annex 1). PA9 has reached a common understanding where Working Groups can implement either entire Work Areas or thematic fields belonging to them. It is thereby ensured that several Working Groups have the possibility to implement one single Work Area.

The main challenges, in particular following the 2<sup>nd</sup> Stakeholder Conference, currently to be addressed deal i.a. with improving the transition from school to work, fostering work-based as well as company-based learning and with access to further education. In addition, the conference made clear that efforts should be made towards the establishment of a DR youth platform on formal and non-formal learning. With regard to the issue of increasing qualifications and preventing de-qualification, the field of green jobs and competences was identified as an interesting area to intensify cooperation.

The conference also underlined the necessity of an active participation of all relevant stakeholders from an early stage on. The Strategy has to be seen as an instrument providing a framework in which the process is in the hands of the participants. Activities contributing an added value to the work area of PA9 often will need to combine funding from different sources, to create links between different networks or to develop pilots with strong partners/change-agents in both urban and rural areas.

### **Work Area 1 "To enhance performance of education systems through closer cooperation of education institutions, systems and policies"**

The work area on "Enhancing the performance of education systems" deals with improving the quality and efficiency of education and training. It is also about ensuring the acquisition of key competences, high quality teaching and improving leadership in education as major challenges, while developing the attractiveness of education at all levels, VET in particular. Furthermore, it addresses developing effective QA systems and to promote evidence-based policy and practice. The main methods of this Work Area consist in ad hoc meetings, project development meetings, project fair events and peer learning activities (see Annex 1).

In the current reporting period, the progress achieved so far was strengthened furthermore through the work and activities of already on-going projects and cooperation platforms and networks. For example, the Central European Cooperation in Education and Training (CECE) fosters the exchange of expertise and good practice on administration level through joint conferences, seminars and expert workshops. The initiative also promotes increased content-related and organisational cooperation on the EU level. In 2013, the responsible Ministers from Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia signed a new Joint Memorandum with the intent to continue and further their regional and EU-related cooperation in education and training. A coordination meeting on DG level was held on 13-14 February 2014 in Budapest and discussed i.a. the perspectives of future cooperation within CECE and concrete joint activities.

Furthermore, the Education Reform Initiative in South East Europe (ERI SEE), which is in the process of becoming an intergovernmental organisation with an international secretariat in Belgrade, has continued successfully its role as a regional platform for dialogue and cooperation in the field of education and training. Through activities such as enhancing institutional cooperation in vocational education and training, initiating policy dialogue on and cooperation in the field of reducing early school leaving and dropping out of school, it is strengthening cooperation between decision makers and key stakeholders in the region. For instance, the 6<sup>th</sup> meeting of the South East Europe Regional VET Network (SEEVET-Net) was held in Belgrade on 8-9 July 2013. The event brought together the representatives of the national VET institutions from SEE countries and dealt with the issue of enhancing capacity for independent implementation of policy and reform evaluation and to continue the support of institutional cooperation in vocational education and training in South East Europe. In addition, regional meetings and seminars have enhanced expertise and quality in the implementation of the European Qualifications Framework. An international seminar "Regional capacities for quality assurance and their relation to development and implementation of NQFs" took place on 28 June 2013 in Biograd na Moru, Croatia. Moreover, ERI SEE is actively involved in the development of the SEE 2020 strategy.

The period between June 2013 and June 2014 has shown that on several levels, VET and work-based learning have turned out to be key issues in the Danube Region with a particular strong macro-regional impact. Cooperation projects between Austria and Romania as well as Slovakia and also other countries are being developed. In Romania, Austria is currently supporting a VET school project with a socio-educational focus of the Concordia Foundation. In April 2013 a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between Austria and Romania in order to strengthen the cooperation in vocational education and training.

As a follow up to the project "Capacity Building for Teachers of VET in the Danube Region", a Romanian-German working group on vocational education was set up in order to develop and implement a joint project on the topic of modernising the vocational system in Romania. The project "Optimizing the links between labour market and the educational system: modernising the vocational system in Romania" has developed a strategic action plan which should be operational in the near future with the support of the European Social Fund and of Erasmus+ Programme.

The planned project "Enhanced Competitiveness and Employability through Innovative Work-based Learning in VET" led by KulturKontakt Austria will also significantly contribute to the overall goal and activities of Work Area 1. The project builds on the work of PA9 VET Working Group coordinated by Romania and supports the establishment of national and (macro-)regional platforms of dialogue on WBL and the piloting measures at national levels in selected partner countries.

Another project in this area is "Edu.Region – Education Network for the economic area and the labour market of Lower Austria and the Southern Czech Regions" which is dealing with the issue of acquiring key competences deepened their cooperation through the realization of seminars, the provision of info folder, the organisation of events such as Junior Business Camps.

In the field of teacher education, the University of Vienna has developed an Erasmus+ project proposal on "Competence-Based Teacher Professionalism – The Innovative and Creative Turn".

**Work Area 2 "To foster cooperation between key stakeholders of labour market, education and research policies in order to develop learning regions and environments"**



The aim of Work Area 2 is mainly to increase innovative capacities of the labour force in the Danube Region and to establish new forms of partnerships and cooperation among key stakeholders (labour market, education and training, research and employers). 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.

Several other "Danube"-labelled projects have been continuing their roll-out, for example the "Qualification Network for Austrian Companies in Romania". The general objective of this project is the adaptation, setting-up and piloting of a qualification network for Austrian companies in Romania. Another project within Work Area 2 is the "Virtual Education Network for Austrian Companies in Bulgaria", which aims at the improvement of employee's qualifications as well as the human resources' standard.

### **Work Area 3 "To support creativity and entrepreneurship"**

Work Area 3 primarily deals with transversal key competences, entrepreneurship education and the promotion of innovative learning environments and creative partnerships between education, culture, civil society and the economy. The Thematic Working Group "Creativity and Entrepreneurship" is led by the Business Support Centre for SMEs in Ruse, Bulgaria. Two meetings of the Working Group were already held on 16 April 2013 in Sofia and on 28 April 2014 in Ruse. The Working Group has a strong link to the South East European Center for Entrepreneurial Learning (SEECCEL) as well as the "i.e. SMART" project, which was recommended by the SG and has been granted funding by the ERDF OP "Central Europe".

The "i.e. SMART" project has identified specific issues in the partner regions e.g. low survival rate of business start-ups, high youth unemployment etc. To tackle these issues, the project has developed and implemented a transnational management structure to link the involved regions so that they can provide their citizens with exciting sustainable labour market opportunities through a new multi-disciplinary training approach to innovation and entrepreneurship called the transformative business approach.

Within Work Area 3, the EUSDR Pilot Project "Empowering Young People - Connecting Europe" is being implemented by KulturKontakt Austria. The project has been supporting reconciliation and excellence through education and training targeting the youth of the Danube Region. Active citizenship, creativity and intercultural dialogue have been sustained through innovative and joint school projects in the Danube Region. In June 2013 the project schools shared their project results and experiences at a final event in Vienna. A teacher's guide reflecting the experience, approaches and ideas was developed from October 2013 until May 2014 and then disseminated to participating teachers, teachers from Bosnia-Herzegovina and schools in the region (Link to the portfolio: [www.mahara.at/user/kulturkontakt-austria](http://www.mahara.at/user/kulturkontakt-austria)).

The project "Dunavision" promoted people-to-people contacts and mutual entrepreneurial learning as well as sustainable development along the Danube. Its results will flow into the follow-up "100 day – unaVision lab 2014/2015". The plan is to establish a network of unaVision Being Spaces, which are incubators for the sustainable development of the society in the Danube region.

### **Work Area 4 "To support lifelong learning and expanding learning mobility"**

Progress in this area was achieved through activities and cooperation efforts addressing e.g. the development of NQFs and competence based assessment in VET as well as learning mobility. In this respect, the Work Area can build on on-going successful projects, such as the CEEPUS programme or the project "Training on competence based assessment for VET teachers". An international seminar "Regional capacities for quality assurance and their relation to development and implementation of NQFs" took place on 28 June 2013 in Biograd na Moru, Croatia (see also activities under Work Area 1).

In June 2014 a Thematic Conference on "learning, teaching, exchanging – School cooperations in the Danube Region" took place in Vienna providing the participants with the opportunity to learn more about the Danube Region and its challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and to create future partnerships. The seminar organized by the National Agency of Lifelong Learning, the Austrian National eTwinning Support Service and PA9 contributed to a better understanding of etwinning ([www.etwinning.net](http://www.etwinning.net)) and possible cooperations of school in the Danube Region. The outcome of the seminar resulted in an exchange of best-practice and ideas and the creation of 13 new etwinning projects.

### **Work Area 5 "To promote equity, social cohesion and active citizenship through education and training"**

Major challenges in this area are to work towards education and training systems that will enable all individuals to acquire and develop skills and competences required for their employability as well as to foster tolerance, intercultural dialogue and non-discrimination.

Important project examples in this area focus on fostering cooperation of young people, such as ACES which aims at creating a sustainable network of shared knowledge, mutual learning and innovation, and the cooperation between schools and communities, such as the "CoDes project". CoDeS is a Comenius multilateral Network funded by the Lifelong Learning Program from EU that focuses on school community collaboration addressing sustainability. The activities of the network aim at providing a European perspective on the processes of learning, models, values and tools for successful collaboration. The network produces, publishes and disseminates a range of products useful for school and community stakeholders to engage into successful practice such as case study reports, tool box, travelling guide, and different types of workshops.

Developing an operational platform for regional cooperation and exchange of information is pursued by the project "eSchool4S". The project strengthens the role of sustainability issues and the implementation of EU policies into the school curricula. It develops interdisciplinary, interactive and web-based teaching and learning concepts. Those materials show to which extent every country can contribute to the European integration, and what opportunities and challenges this integration would cause.

Within this Work Area, the "EUSDR Youth Platform" is being developed by the association "Interkulturelles Zentrum Vienna" in cooperation with PA9. The YP is intended to act as a meeting point between formal and non-formal learning institutions to share experiences, map existing projects, enable exchange and project development and explore possible funding opportunities for projects within the EUSDR. A first preparatory meeting was held in June 2014. The first meeting of the Youth Platform will take place in December 2014 in Vienna. With regard to the European integration process, promoting contacts and networking among young people from different countries will play a crucial role in developing the Danube Region.

## **Work Area 6 "To improve cross-sector policy coordination to address demographic and migration challenges"**

The aim of Work Area 6 is mainly 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. For example, the drafting of a "Law on Employment of Foreigners" is ongoing in Serbia. Drafting of 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, economic and cultural changes and possible responses in the framework of urban and rural development should be considered.

The working group serves as a platform for the exchange of information, especially the exchange of data on labour market demand and supply. The network of South East Europe Public Employment Services, the CENTROPE project partners, the CE ageing network, the RETURN network and the network of IOM Missions in the Danube region were listed as existing partnerships and networks which are used to set up a knowledge management tool in the form of a project proposal on the establishment of a web-based platform on labour mobility. Work has to be done to find an appropriate program for the project - most likely the DANUBE Programme - and to find co-funding from all participating countries.

There have been four meetings up to now within Work Area 6. The 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting of Working Group 6 was held in November 2013 in Belgrade, Serbia on the topic "Emigration of the younger and qualified segment of population". The last meeting took place on 24 and 25 June 2014 in Eisenstadt in the framework of the "Participation Day" within the EUSDR Annual Forum. It was a joint working group meeting of PA9/Working Group 6 and PA10/Working Group 1, organized by IOM as a joint meeting of Working Group 6 on cross-sector policy coordination to address demographic and migration challenges under PA9 and Working Group 1 on Public Administration Reform under PA10.

## **Work Area 7 "To fight poverty and social exclusion of marginalised communities in the Danube Region, especially the Roma communities"**

Working Group 7 deals with improving the situation of marginalised communities, 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. Actions to reduce the number of people in risk of poverty need to complement each other, applying an integrated approach. Especially on Roma communities, whose living conditions are often especially dire and with no place in 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe, special attention must be paid. Hence the coordination of efforts between existing initiatives and actors such as the Roma Decade (2005-2015), EU Roma platform for Roma Inclusion, EU-Roma network and NGOs active in this field in the Danube Region is indispensable for improving the situation for Roma. A project of NGOs from Austria, Bulgaria and Romania has been planned under the PROGRESS program. In the new programming period Austria has planned to start pilot projects under participation of Roma Organizations within the European Social Funds.

## **Work Area 8 "To promote gender equality on the labour market, especially in payment"**

Equality between women and men is one of the European Union's founding principles. The principle of equal pay for equal work dates already back to 1957, when it became part of the Treaty of Rome. To create equal opportunities for women and men on the labour market, discrimination, educational stereotypes, labour market segregation, precarious employment conditions, involuntary part-time work and the unbalanced sharing of care responsibilities with men must be overcome. The full realisation of women's potential and the full use of women's skills must be fostered with the emphasis to facilitate a better gender distribution on the labour market and to allow the number of quality jobs for women to be increased. Besides the discrimination against women in career opportunities, the discrimination against female employees with regard to their wage level is imminent. The so called gender pay gap (the average difference between men's and women's hourly gross earnings across the economy as a whole) in the EU remains at 17.8%, with heights around 30% in some EU member states.

To ventilate this topic a stakeholder forum involving social partners had been initiated. This forum explores possible ways to improve the transparency of pay as well as the impact on equal pay of arrangements, such as part-time work and fixed-term contracts.

State of play of this Working Group is to realize the 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting, in order to exchange information and experiences about the already identified common needs and topics gender equality strategies, parental leave schemes and working time arrangements. As performance of the Working Group should be improved, Austrian PAC became member in the Gender Mainstreaming Working Group of the Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection to prepare the development of project ideas.

***Annex 1: Work Plan of Priority Area 9 of the EUSDR***

***Annex 2: Conclusions of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Stakeholder Conference***

***Annex 3: Outcomes / Conclusions of Workshop of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Forum of the EUSDR:  
Investing in inclusive and innovative education and training for better socio-economic outcomes***

***Annex 4: Minutes of the 6<sup>th</sup> Meeting of Priority Area 9 of the EUSDR***

***Annex 5: Minutes of the 7<sup>th</sup> Meeting of Priority Area 9 of the EUSDR***

***Annex 6: EUSDR PA9 Project Folder***