

EUSDR Report June 2013

Priority Area 09

To Invest in People and Skills

Education and Training, Labour Market, Marginalised Groups

List of abbreviations

CBC	Cross-border Cooperation
CIP	Competitiveness and Innovation Framework Programme
CEEPUS	Central European Exchange Program for University Studies
CSR	Country-specific Recommendations
DCC	Danube Competence Centre
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
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
EU	European Union
EUSDR	EU Strategy for the Danube Region
GAC	General Affairs Council
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance
LLL	Lifelong Learning
LLP	Lifelong Learning Programme
NEAP	National Employment Action Plan (Serbia)
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
SEIO	Serbian European Integration Office
SG	Steering Group
SME	Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise
TA	Technical Assistance
VET	Vocational Education and Training

1. OVERALL PROGRESS

1.1. State of play

During the second stage of its implementation phase (July 2012 - June 2013), the added value of the EU 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 the first concrete results of innovative approaches of bilateral, interregional, interinstitutional and transnational cooperation in the fields of education, labour market and inclusion. The first stakeholder conference of PA9 held on 13 and 14 June in Vienna with more than 150 participants from all over the Danube Region has led to a first stock taking of actors in the policy fields mentioned above (see sub-chapter 1.2) as well as to a sustainable process of implementation.

Policy level

The Strategy provides a robust framework for addressing both challenges and opportunities in the above mentioned policy fields of PA9. In addition to this, it offers a positive political momentum which facilitates new transnational initiatives and exchange of experience. Policy cooperation in the field of education and labour market is conducive to two essential aspects of the Strategy which mutually condition each other: integration and cohesion. 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, it should also be borne in mind that education and training are more than ever of key importance 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. In addition to this, the policy fields of PA9 have a most direct impact on three out of five EU2020 targets¹:

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

The Danube Region can progress and grow in a smart and inclusive way by investing in people and skills and making best use of its human capital. In this respect, more needs to be done to ensure that education and training systems develop learner’s creativity and capacity for innovation and deliver the required skills and knowledge needed in an increasingly macro-regional and globalised labour market. In order to be prepared for the changes and challenges ahead, it requires capacity-building and empowerment of actors and institutions on all levels, fighting poverty and modernising labour markets, training and social protection systems. Nevertheless, there are a few challenges to be

¹ 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.

addressed. The second year of the implementation of PA9 brought i.a. worthwhile clarifications about the fact that in addition to funding and programme planning, the Strategy is also about cooperation and networking. 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 ET 2020, the Europe 2020 and the SEE 2020 strategies. 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 issued at the 2013 European Semester. In relation to this, the importance of PA9 topics within the strategy needs to be further emphasized. The EUSDR fosters the consciousness of the territorial and macro-regional dimension of these topics. Danube Region Countries should fully use the potential of ESI funds to support reforms in education and training as well as labour market systems.

Project level

The Strategy has contributed to concrete action within the fields of labour market and education policies, with a more streamlined use of resources and an innovative combination of both bottom-up and top-down processes. The Strategy is not only about projects, but also strengthens existing initiatives and fosters the development of new networks and innovative forms of cooperation. New working methods and initiatives have been and will be developed. Already existing initiatives and networks now cooperate under a new umbrella. In addition to that, the Strategy is fostering the development of new inclusive networks, as well as increased cooperation and a better division of labour for existing networks. It provides a common reference point for many organizations, initiatives and networks in the Danube Region. Increasingly, people and structures are familiar with the priorities set out in the Work Plan of PA9 of the Strategy and take them into account within their activities. Thus, the Strategy has contributed a strengthening and a new momentum of existing projects and initiatives, e.g. ERI SEE whose international secretariat will be established in Belgrade.

Furthermore, the EUSDR serves as a catalyst for the development of new project ideas and more specifically their territorial, transnational and macro-regional dimension. PACs have deepened the rolling stock-taking process of both existing and new projects, whereas the concrete criteria for projects to be labelled or recommended as EUSDR projects developed by the SG of PA9 have proven to be an efficient tool to assess the macro-regional impact of projects.² PACs provided continuously assistance to Lead Partners by making use of already existing sources of information and developing common positions on several topics.

Based on the ongoing Stock-taking process, PACs have compiled a list of projects and project ideas in PA9 (see annex 2). More than 50 projects/planned projects/project ideas have been identified so far. In the current reporting period (June 2012 - June 2013), four planned projects and project ideas were awarded letters of recommendation, 12 have been added to the rolling Work Plan of PA9 (see annex 1). Including the recommended projects, more than 30 projects and cooperation platforms have been labelled as EUSDR projects (see annex 2). Some of these projects already make use of the EUSDR visual identity provided by the INTERACT programme.

Of particular relevance in PA9 is the project “Empowering Young People – Connecting Europe”, which is one of the selected specific EUSDR pilot projects financed the EU. The project (running

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

from 2012-13) supports innovative school-based projects and promotes dialogue between cultures, active citizenship and commitment to sustainable development. A project portfolio will be developed to support dissemination and sustainability within the Region. A project homepage informs about the project and is also used as a communication tool within the project (www.empoweringyoungpeople.net).

Further project ideas and synergies between already existing projects have been created at PA9's stakeholder conference on 13 and 14 June 2012 and at other various events (see chapter 1.2).

Lessons learned

The following conclusions can be drawn after the first two years of implementation:

- The implementation of the Strategy requires a sound coordination by the PACs. 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.
- The implementation of the Strategy requires a clear commitment from all the stakeholders. PA9 invites the Commission to safeguard an involvement of stakeholders concerned from all levels in the Region. SG members of PA9 have stated and repeatedly confirmed their commitment, e.g. from Baden-Württemberg and Bulgaria.
- 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, since not everything can be done by the PACs alone. A clear progress can be seen since the last reporting period, which is also emphasized by some SG members, e.g. from Bulgaria.
- More needs to be done 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. In this regard, the period between June 2012 and June 2013 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.
- 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 programme following the Lifelong Learning programme in the upcoming budget period). Nevertheless, ESIF can be seen as a main instrument to reach the EU2020 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 OMC and steering processes related to the EUSDR. In Austria as well as in Serbia, national platforms on the EUSDR are organised on a regular basis and contribute significantly to a mutual exchange. Moreover, informal meetings between PACs and Austrian SG members of other PAs are held on a regular basis. Also in Baden-

Württemberg, the government strongly supports the EUSDR; an inter-ministerial working group brings together the involved ministries 2 to 3 times per year. In addition, it has been agreed to regularly hold cross-sectorial meetings of the PAs 8 and 9 in order to share information and coordinate the efforts more effectively.

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, e.g. within the ETC objective of the ERDF, the ESF and the upcoming EU Programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport.
- 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. Setting-up a macro-regional ‘small project fund’ and a ‘Project Preparation Facility’ within the ETC objective of the ERDF would help creating synergies across the Danube Region networks, exchanging know-how and disseminating results.
- Since the adoption of the Strategy, many 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 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 upcoming financial framework 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 SG can be seen as the main body of the coordination within the framework of PA9. 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 in different work stages have increased significantly since the last reporting period made a valuable contribution in this respect. The first stakeholder conference of PA9 on 13-14 June 2012 has led to a first stock-taking of 150 stakeholders and created a sustainable network of more than 500 actors/institutions in the contact list of PA9.

While the overall participation of DR countries in PA9 was in general satisfactory, the involvement of some of the DR countries could be improved (e.g. participation of all Danube Region countries in the SG meetings). 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. Hence, all National Contact Points 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 contributed a lot to the implementation process.

Table 1: Attendance of PA9 meetings

Event	AT	BA	BG	CZ	DE	HR	HU	MD	ME	RO	RS	SI	SK	UA	ETF	REGIO	EMPL	EAC
Conf.	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	-	x	x	x	x	x	x
SG4	x	-	x	x	x	x	-	x	x	x	x	-	x	-	x	x	-	-
SG5	x	-	x	x	x	x	x	-	-	x	x	-	x	-	x	x	-	-

Progress has been made 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). PA9 organised on 17-18 October 2012 a strategic meeting for the development of Working Groups linked to education (Working Groups 1, 3, 4, 5; see chapter 2 and annex 3) in Vienna. The goal of this meeting was to clarify the work plan of the working groups at the content level, to constitute and further establish the Working Groups on a formal and structural level and to support them to become able to function and to establish roles and responsibilities. Moreover, it aimed at developing and clarifying further steps for exchange and cooperation of the working groups involved within the framework of PA9.

At the 1st Annual Forum of the Strategy in Regensburg held on 28-29 November 2012, Workshop 5 “Promoting Smart Skills, Empowerment and Inclusive Growth” was coordinated by PA9 in close cooperation with DG REGIO and INTERACT Point Vienna (see annex 5). It involved a vast variety of stakeholders from line ministries, the Commission, public institutions, intergovernmental organizations, NGOs, the industry as well as the civil society and thereby led to an increased visibility of the various fields of activity of PA9. The 4th meeting of the SG was held on 30 November back-to-back with the Annual Forum (see annex 6).

PACs have set several initiatives for project development. For example, on 4-5 October 2012, the Austrian National Agency for Lifelong Learning “OeAD” and its national counterparts in the Danube Region in cooperation with the PACs invited teachers from Member States in the Danube Region to a contact seminar to develop project ideas in the field of Comenius School and Regio

partnerships. Another contact seminar with a strong link to the Strategy was held on 19-21 June 2013, this time with a focus on the development of Comenius eTwinning projects. More than 3000 Comenius eTwinning projects are currently being implemented by Danube Region countries and their respective partners. The German federal state of Baden-Württemberg has confirmed its intention to carry out Danube Region projects within the existing Lifelong Learning Programme such as Comenius multilateral projects.

In the reporting period, PACs have sought to create stronger synergies of PA9 of the EUSDR with the educational policies and initiatives of the European Union. For Instance, on 5-6 December, a Peer Learning (PL) event on VET was held by the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, the Arts and Culture and involved representatives of both the Education Committee and actors of the EUSDR. The PL event has given valuable insights into the Austrian VET system, which could – together with other well performing systems – serve as a model for reform of VET in Europe, especially in some countries of the Danube Region.

The above mentioned cross-sectoral approach was promoted at the joint meeting of pillar 3 “Building Prosperity” of the Strategy on 15-16 May 2013 in Bratislava, where synergies have been sought with Priority Areas 7 (Knowledge Society & Research) and 8 (Competitiveness). The 5th meeting of the SG of PA9 was held back-to-back in Bratislava and gave a well-structured overview of project development and ongoing projects of PA9. For instance, information on the “Frame” project of the ETF³ was provided. Its overall objective is to promote sustainable economic development and social cohesion, with particularly reference to EU2020 and the SEE2020 Strategies, guided by the IPA II principles.

The Coordinators of PA9 have participated at the 3rd meeting of National Contact Points and Priority Area Coordinators meeting on 30-31 January in Brussels. Moreover, they took actively part in the PAC meeting in Sofia on 29-30 April.

Additionally, the Coordinators of PA9 and several of its SG members have participated and actively contributed in a wide range of conferences, workshops and meetings organised by other actors. For example, the Hungarian SG member took part in a conference of the Association of Hungarian Settlements’ and Regions’ Developers organised in Linz (Austria) on 16 October 2013 and made a presentation about the Hungarian elements of PA9.

The visibility of PA9 within the Strategy has been further improved by making use of the visual identity of the Strategy provided by INTERACT point Vienna on both the project level and the PA level in general. For instance, the Conclusions of the CEEPUS Senior Officials meeting held in Budapest on 15 February 2013 include that networks would be invited to use the EUSDR-PA9 label together with the CEEPUS logo.⁴

In order to support the coordination and communication within PA9, the website ‘www.peopleandskills-danuberegion.eu’ has been continuously updated and expanded. It also promotes public awareness on the Strategy. Furthermore, electronic PA9 newsletters are periodically distributed among relevant stakeholders.

³ See http://www.etf.europa.eu/web.nsf/pages/Frame_project

⁴ Cf. www.ceepus.info

Next steps

- *Annual Forum in Bucharest, 28-29 October 2013*
- *6th Steering Group Meeting 29-30 October 2013*

The Coordinators of Priority Area 9 are ready to share their expertise in the planning of workshops related to the thematic scope of PA9. A workshop related to the topics of PA9 as held at the first Annual Forum in Regensburg is considered to be worthwhile and conducive to foster the sustainability of the network of PA9. This is even more important as the 6th SG meeting of PA9 is going to be held following the Annual Forum in order to ensure synergies with the Annual Forum and facilitate the participation of SG members from third countries through the Technical Assistance.
- *Stakeholder Conference in Vienna, 5-6 December 2013*

The Coordinators of Priority Area 9 are going to hold the 2nd Stakeholder Conference of Priority Area 9 on 5-6 December. The conference will involve a great diversity of different stakeholders from all levels by making use of innovative methods of organisation development. Back-to-back with the conference, a seminar is planned on 4 December 2013 involving the National Agencies for the Lifelong Learning in the Danube Region as well as other funding institutions and programme authorities.
- *7th SG meeting spring 2014*

The 7th meeting of PA9 will be held in spring 2014.

1.3. Funding

The alignment of policy and funding towards the Strategy is crucial. It should fully utilise the ESIF, the pre-accession and neighbourhood instruments in non-EU countries, but also all other available sources of EU and national funding. 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 (particularly in Cohesion Countries and less developed regions), whereas the ERDF might provide the opportunity to implement projects with a strong transnational element and involving (potential) candidate countries as well as countries of the European Neighbourhood. The agreement on article 3 of the draft ESF regulation which sets out the scope of ESF support provides a solid framework to invest in VET policies which are crucial in order to tackle youth unemployment and other negative effects of the financial and economic crisis in the Danube Region. Article 10 of the draft ESF regulation defines the possibility of transnational cooperation and is of particular interest for those countries in the Danube Region which intend to gather expertise from other Danube Region countries, especially when it comes to a more efficient absorption of existing funding. The thematic concentration mechanism will require Member States to focus i.a. on their respective country-specific recommendations (for CSR in the Danube Region, see annex 4).

For education projects in a focussed and specific sense, the upcoming EU programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport will provide a strong transnational element and thereby support European cooperation in the field of education and training, including strategies in the field of regional policy.

The financing of projects will be a main challenge in the implementation of the PA9, especially with regard to upcoming budget period and its legislative framework. Existing programmes did not meet the “pattern” of the Danube Region and the specific needs of PA9.

Existing programmes at local, regional, national and Community level mostly differ 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 the follow-up of the current LLL programmes, the inclusion of some third countries will be challenging. This also applies to the follow-up of the INTERREG IV C programme of the ERDF. Possibilities to support an “all-inclusiveness” of the Strategy should be identified, e.g. by making available funding for countries to participate in projects under programmes, in which they are not eligible (cf. article 60 of the common provisions on the ESIF).

Several Danube Region Countries have undertaken concrete measures to foster the inclusion of topics of PA9 into programming. *PAC Austria* and some other Danube Region Countries as well as the European Parliament have proposed for macro-regional strategies to be considered within the upcoming EU programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport.

In *Bulgaria*, the development of the new OPs 2014-2020 related to human resources and education takes the priorities of the EUSDR into account. Moreover, efforts are being made for incorporating the thematic objectives related to human resources and education into the next CBC Programme Romania-Bulgaria 2014-2020 through a strategic project for development of a Common territorial strategy for the cross-border region Romania-Bulgaria, incorporating as well its element education and training and development of human resources. In *Serbia*, the National Employment Action Plan (NEAP) for 2013 intends to improve labour market institutions, support the development of regional and local employment policies and support employment in less developed regions, enhance the quality of the workforce and support the employment and social inclusion. Thus, all listed NEAP's priorities support the EUSDR PA9's actions and targets. In order to insure integration of the EUSDR priorities in the 2014-2020 programming process, SEIO's plan is to integrate members of the Danube WG in the work of Sector Working Groups for IPA II programming which will design strategic and programme 2014-2020 documents. In that way the importance of regional initiatives will be reflected more strongly in the programming work for the period 2014-2020. IPA remains the most important external scheme for financial support to reform and development of the educational system in Serbia.

Within the ERDF and more precisely the Transnational Cooperation of the European Territorial Cooperation objective, projects in the field of education and the labour market are not the primary focus. Within the Operational Programmes of the Transnational Cooperation, there seems to be a contradiction between the prioritization (4-5 priorities) in the upcoming budget period and the 11 priorities of the EUSDR: This particularly matters for priorities and thematic fields that are not primarily targeted by the ERDF, such as education and labour market. In terms of visibility and public relations, the prioritization might also raise questions about the Strategy among potential project leaders and stakeholders of those thematic fields which are priorities of the Strategy, but would not be investment priorities of the Danube programme.

In relation to the proposed Danube programme, it will be essential for the programming Task Force 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. Moreover, for projects in the fields of education and labour market, the Danube Programme could provide a bigger strategic and macro-regional impact. In addition to this, as mentioned in chapter 1.1 and with a view to the economic and financial crisis since 2008, education is on the top of the European agenda when it comes to reducing youth employment and tackling other negative social effects of the crisis. The transnational dimension of the labour market in the Danube Region should also be considered with relation to this. Projects in education and labour market can 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.). The importance to focus on the Transnational Cooperation of the ERDF's ETC objective was also emphasized by Baden-Württemberg.

In order to implement PA9 projects through the ESF, its transnational element would need to be strengthened. This can be done by making use of article 10 of the draft ESF regulation and might i.a. lead to an accelerated absorption of EU funds through exchange of expertise.

The Coordinators of PA9 have actively contributed to the respective meetings in Ljubljana (21 May) and Stuttgart (21 June), where links were established between programming activities and the Strategy. Further discussions are required, e.g. on the role of PACs with the future programmes or the specific significance of the letters of recommendation.

In this context, some scepticism has been voiced by Danube Region countries regarding point favouritism of EUSDR projects under the operational programs, e.g. by the Czech Republic which points out that labelling of the Danube projects will not be reflected by Operational Programmes. The *Czech Republic* sees funding potential in the future EU Programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport, where the resources to support cooperation in the macro-region could be found by stakeholders – like in the case of the programme Horizon 2020.

For *Bulgaria*, current funding opportunities mainly remained within the LLL Call for proposals 2013, with all strands of the Programme open for submission of project proposals. Another funding opportunity for very small projects involving countries in the Danube area have been identified within the frames of the Danube Competence Centre. As the DCC's focus is on tourism, the eligible projects should involve only activities related to the tourism sector. The on-going projects under the CBC Romania-Bulgaria Programme 2007-2013 also include features related to the PA9. However, the CBC Programme resources are all contracted. The Competitiveness and Innovation Framework Programme (CIP) also provided limited resources and a call for proposals, where projects dedicated to the Danube area have been identified and can apply for labelling. Opportunities are seen within the frames of the next generation of Programmes 2014-2020.

In case of *Croatia* new funding possibilities are related to the Croatia's accession to the EU in July 2013 and its access to structural funds. However, in order to access funding for education, it is necessary to integrate the EUSDR into programming documents for the European Social Fund. The EUSDR has contributed to adding visibility and relevance for labelled projects/programmes at the EU level and has the potential for facilitating access to EU funding.

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 MS 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 will provide a sound support for the preparation of strategically important PA9 projects with a clear EUSDR added-value.

2. PROGRESS BY WORK AREA/ACTION

In order to guarantee continuity and coherence with last year's report, PA9 reports in line with its 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 new realistic and feasible targets relevant to the macro-region on 6 December 2011 at its 2nd meeting in Zagreb, Croatia. These targets contribute to the achievement of the EU2020 and ET2020 strategies of the EU.

In relation to this, the SG decided on the merge actions 4 and 5 as well as actions 7 and 8 of the Commission's Action Plan to Work Area 4 and Work Area 7 respectively. Beyond that, two new Work Areas related to active citizenship and gender equality were introduced.

- (Merged) Work Area 4: "To support lifelong learning and expanding learning mobility"
- (Additional) Work Area 5: "To promote equity, social cohesion and active citizenship through education and training"
- (Merged) Work Area 7: "To fight poverty and social exclusion of marginalised communities in the Danube Region, especially the Roma communities"
- (Additional) Work Area 8: "To promote gender equality on the labour market, especially in payment"

The compliance of PA9's targets with its Work Areas is demonstrated in the Work Plan (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.

Work Area 1 "To enhance performance of education systems through closer cooperation of education institutions, systems and policies" (Action 1)

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 3).

In the current reporting period, major progress was achieved through already on-going projects and within cooperation platforms and networks. For example, countries cooperate in clusters to improve the attractiveness of VET and to increase capacities for evidence-based policy making in education, respectively. Work is also done in the fields of school leadership and teacher professionalism. On the level of platforms, the Education Reform Initiative in South East Europe (ERI SEE) is in the process of becoming an intergovernmental organisation with an international secretariat in Belgrade. ERI SEE has also been increasingly recognized by the Commission as a potential partner within the Western Balkan Platform on Education and Training as well as for the implementation of regional projects. Moreover, ERI SEE is actively involved in the development of the SEE 2020

strategy. Croatia is a lead country in the ERI SEE Cluster of Knowledge on Development of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF), the Croatian Ministry of Education organised an international seminar on recognition of prior learning (validation of informal and non-formal learning) on 6 December 2012 in Zagreb and on quality assurance systems on 28 June 2013 in Biograd na Moru, Croatia. Regional meetings and seminars held within the Cluster have enhanced expertise and quality in the implementation of the European Qualifications Framework.

The Peer-Learning Event on VET on 5-6 December 2012 in Vienna organised by the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, the Arts and Culture with participants from both the Education Committee and the Danube Region has contributed to the mutual exchange of experiences and education systems.

On the level of projects, the planned project “Competence-Based Teacher Professionalism – The Innovative and Creative Turn” led by the University of Innsbruck (Austria) as well as the ongoing project "Capacity-Building for Teachers of VET in the Danube Region - Project on in-service teacher training in VET" (lead: Landesakademie Esslingen; follow-up planned) will significantly increase the impact of this Work Area.

Work Area 2 “To foster cooperation between key stakeholders of labour market, education and research policies in order to develop learning regions and environments” (Action 2)

At the kick-off meeting in June 2012 Zagreb/Croatia has declared to invite relevant participants and organize the next meeting in Zagreb in September 2012. The meeting has been postponed to spring 2013 due to heavy workload related to preparations of Croatia to become a member of the European Union by July, 1st, 2013. State of play of this Working Group is to realize the 2nd meeting, in order to exchange information and experiences about the already identified common needs and topics youth unemployment, vocational orientation, labour market forecasts and local partnerships for employment and to prepare project promoters for the beginning of the new funding period.

Several other “Danube”-labelled Projects have been continuing their roll-out: The main task of the *NetLab* cooperation on the Austrian-Hungarian border was to create a network for solving problems arising in the region. The project was funded in the frame of the Austrian-Hungarian Program 2007-2013 within the European Territorial Cooperation Program funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), co-funded and by Austria and Hungary. In the new programming period the Hungarian partner plans to set up a new project by the help of the Danube Contact Point and by a new cross border program. In the same program the work within the *Austrian-Hungarian Expert-Academy-Expak* has been successfully continued, as well as the Project *IGR – Future in the Border Region* which gives highly relevant labour law information to commuting and migrating employees. Both Czech Republic and Slovak Republic closed their *Expak-Program* with Austria a few months ago. The Trade-Union lead projects *Zuwins+* (CZ, AT) and *Arbeitsmarkt+* are still operating. Know-how-Transfer Projects with Romania, Bulgaria and the Republic of Moldova are in the focus of the working group. Bulgaria and Austria have started a project in the field of know-how-transfer for the ESF-Administration.

Work Area 3 “To support creativity and entrepreneurship” (Action 3)

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 first meeting of this Working Group was held on 16 April 2013 in Sofia. The Working Group is led by the Business Support Centre for SMEs in Ruse, Bulgaria. The participants will agree on the terms of reference of this Working Group by 15 July 2013. This Working Group has a strong link to the South East European Center for Entrepreneurial Learning (SEECLE) 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”.

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 has been sustained through innovative and joint school projects in the Danube Region. On 3-5 July 2013, a conference will present the projects’ results in Vienna.

Furthermore, important activities are and have been implemented in the field of promoting entrepreneurship education, e.g. via training firms in business schools in the project ECO NET.

The ongoing project “Dunavision” promotes people-to-people contacts and mutual entrepreneurial learning as well as sustainable development along the Danube. It received strong support in Germany, Austria and Hungary. A follow-up is being planned for 2014 (“Caravan of Change 2014”).

In the Czech Republic, the member countries of the Education for entrepreneurship – EUROPEN/PEN INTERNATIONAL initiative (worldwide network, which brings the national headquarters of mini-company programmes together) was informed about existence of the EUSDR – about possibilities and challenges and regarding opportunity to foster the development of network thanks to the Strategy.

Work Area 4 “To support lifelong learning and expanding learning mobility” (Actions 4 and 5 curr.)

Progress in this area was achieved through activities and cooperation efforts addressing e.g. the development of NQFs (see cluster activities under Work Area 1) 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 Mobility Programme of the Task Force Fostering and Building Human Capital. At the CEEPUS Meeting of the Joint Committee of Ministers held on 4 April 2013 in Vienna, the ministers supported the proposal that mechanisms for access of CEEPUS to EU regional funding should be established at the national level.

New initiatives in the field of lifelong learning may be still developed, e.g. regarding topics of greater openness towards non-formal and informal learning and recognition of learning outcomes. A workshop aiming at developing new Danube Region projects on the topic of transition from school to work was organised by the Austrian NA for the LLP in October 2012. Another workshop of the same kind entitled “eTwinning in the Danube Region” was held in June 2013.

Within Work Area 4, a Working Group entitled “To support lifelong learning and expanding learning mobility - Innovative VET schools networks” is being coordinated by the National Centre for TVET Romania with a first meeting on 15 June 2013 in Bucharest. The meeting was held jointly with an ERI SEE cluster of knowledge and thereby strengthened synergies between the EUSDR and the ERI SEE (see Work Area 1).

Work Area 5 “To promote equity, social cohesion and active citizenship through education and training” (Action 5 NEW)

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. The work area can additionally build on the already finished Danube Region project EDTWIN.

Within this Work Area, a Working Group is being planned by the association “Interkulturelles Zentrum Vienna”, to establish a “EUSDR Youth Platform” and is cooperating with the Young Citizens Danube Network based in Budapest.

Work Area 6 “To improve cross-sector policy coordination to address demographic and migration challenges” (Action 6)

Working Group 6 held their second meeting on an invitation of Serbia in Belgrad in November 2012. The working group was used as a platform for 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-Program - and to find co-funding from all participating countries.

The Working Group met upon invitation of the Serbian Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Policy. At this meeting, the group agreed the exchange of data on labour market demand and supply was considered a high priority, a number of organizations taking part at the meeting already have considerable experience in monitoring of regional labour markets, producing job profiles, collecting data on labour market demand and supply in a transnational database. Working group members agreed to meet again at the beginning of November 2013 and Serbia expressed its willingness to also host the next meeting in Belgrade. It was also agreed that the future working group meetings should have a thematic focus. The topic for the next meeting shall be Youth employment in the context of labour migration.

During the respected period three new Migrant Service Centres become operational in Serbia, as a result of cooperation with the International Organisation of Migration (IOM) within the framework of “Migration for Development in the Western Balkans”.

Work Area 7 “To fight poverty and social exclusion of marginalised communities in the Danube Region, especially the Roma communities” (Action 7 and 8 curr.)

Working Group 7 met upon invitation of Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities of the European Commission in Budapest/Hungary in November 2012. The Meeting was also chaired by DG Employment. The aim was to develop possibilities of funding projects, in particular through the European Social Funds in the context of the EU-ESF-Roma-Platform. There was a high participation of Non-Government-Organisation taking part in the meeting, to improve the funding side a higher participation of funding organisation would be appreciated for the next meeting. This will stay a key issue as regards the development of projects.

PACs 9 and 10 took part in the meeting of the EU-Roma-Strategy in Brussels and presented the European Danube Region Strategy to an interested audience.

A project of NGOs from Austria, Bulgaria and Romania has been planned under PROGRESS program. In the new programming period Austria has planned to start pilot projects under participation of Roma Organizations within the European Social Funds.

A project idea was raised before the 5th SG meeting in Bratislava in May 2013: The Hungarian Product and Cultural Funds. Through the Funds the marginalised Roma communities will receive an opportunity to get necessary basic products to sustain their livelihood, through contribution of national product producers. Parallel with this activity newly organised Roma performing groups will give benefit concerts. Having the national Roma performing groups on stage performing with non-Roma celebrities will help to fight the cultural and social exclusion of the Roma community. Labelling of the project is under preparation.

Work Area 8 “To promote gender equality on the labour market, especially in payment”
(Action 8 NEW)

At the last meeting in June 2012 Slovak Republic has declared to host the next meeting in autumn 2012. The meeting has been postponed to spring 2013 but has been put off over again due to a lack of personal resources. State of play of this Working Group is to realize the 2nd 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 of 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: Projects approved by the Steering Group

Annex 3: Non-Paper on future perspectives for the education-related Working Groups

Annex 4: Table of Country-specific recommendations in the Danube Region as proposed by the Commission

Annex 5: Conclusions of Workshop 5 of the 1st Annual Forum of the EUSDR: Promoting Empowerment, Smart Skills and Inclusive Growth

Annex 6: Minutes of the 4th Meeting of Priority Area 9 of the EUSDR