



**SECTOR “EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL POLICY”**  
**Minutes of the XIII Plenary Meeting of the Sector Working Group (SWG)**  
**in the areas of education, employment and social inclusion**

**Venue:** Meeting with physical presence in restaurant Raguza 360

**Date:** 14.11.2023, Tuesday, 10:00 - 13:40

Meeting moderated by Ms. Kostovska, MES representative, and Ms. Trenkoska, MLSP representative.

Invited 143 attendees, 58 attendees were present.

**First session**

**Opening statements**

**Ms. Trenkoska (MLSP)** in the role of moderator of first session, opened the meeting with a short introduction for the meeting’s purpose and its agenda. She mentioned main priorities and targets of reforms planned to be presented and discussed by both ministries in EU integration perspectives and challenges, as well the importance of having feed-back by relevant stakeholders (development partners, social partners and civil society organizations).

Opening statements were done by Ms. Jovanka Trenchevska, Minister of Labour and Social Policy, Mr. Agim Nuhiu, Deputy Minister of Education and Science and Mr. Alexandru Albu, Head of Section, Delegation of the European Union.

**Ms. Trenchevska, Minister of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP)**, welcomed all those present at the 13<sup>th</sup> SWG plenary meeting by noting the importance of having a dialogue on the priorities and challenges set in the implementation of sectoral policies in the areas of employment, social protection and inclusion, as well as addressing the progress achieved in terms of the implementation of reform measures important for European perspective.

Efforts for recovering the national economy from the several years of global crises, facing with the consequences of these crises, from one side, and implementing reforms during the accession process of North Macedonia to the European Union, from other side, called for a conscious and responsible handling of the challenges, visible from a series of current processes. She highlighted as crucial the achieving of a consensus on the reforms initiated and the changes made in the medium and long term, as well as the tackling of current and future challenges, to be implemented through an inclusive process, dialogue and partnership with relevant stakeholders, thus ensuring that the joint efforts to be directed towards fulfilling the priorities related to national growth and development.

The core of sectoral policies and legislation is made up of equal opportunities, access to the labour market, fair working conditions, and inclusiveness, and the implementation thereof aims to create a fair and sustainable economy, to improve the standard of living of citizens, especially the most vulnerable categories of citizens, thus striving to eradicate poverty completely. Her particular emphasize was on the development of human capital through different approaches and opportunities and the support for young people in the labour market, social inclusion and full support for persons exposed to social risk enable accelerated and sustainable economic growth and development towards a better standard of living.

She mentioned several key processes in the dynamic areas of employment and social policies aimed at improving the living and working conditions of citizens in general. New Law on Labour Relations will aim to improve legal framework for protection of workers' rights and to provide harmonization with EU directives and ILO conventions with key innovations being new forms of employment contracts, arranging of transparent and predictable working conditions and creation of dignified jobs, equal opportunities for workers with family responsibilities, introduction of paternity and parental leave, and other aspects. As well, she informed that new Law on Safety and Health at Work is being drafted, aimed to regulate the areas identified as bottlenecks, to allow overcoming of identified problems due to overlap of competences between different institutions in several areas to further specify the elements primarily in the field of construction and construction sites, and other aspects. A new campaign for healthy workplaces in forthcoming 2 years would be implemented, aimed to raise awareness about the increasingly pronounced digitization in work and its impact on safety and health of employees.

She emphasized a country’s strong commitment to application of international labour standards, as one of few countries that ratified all conventions on freedom of association and collective bargaining, as fundamental conventions for labour law. Thus, the country is fully committed to the implementation of further processes related to social dialogue and collective bargaining and to adopting reforms in the labour area.

Since its introduction in 2018, she noted that above 80,000 young people taken part in Youth Guarantee. Follow-up indicators have shown about 40% of young people who received an offer were in a positive situation 18 months after leaving Youth Guarantee service provision system, and thus, they were employed or were undergoing certain training. Positive results from YG implementation present an incentive for further strengthened implementation of activities for greater coverage of young people and their inclusion in employment measures according to their needs. With a view to activate the unemployed persons in the labour market, she mentioned that the implementation of active measures and employment services would continue to take place, especially covering least qualified persons, as well as social assistance and guaranteed minimum assistance



beneficiaries. Accordingly, the efficient functioning of social dialogue at all levels, implementation of employment policies in compliance with labour market demand, Youth Guarantee, employment of Roma, long-term unemployed, low-skilled and persons with disabilities are priority goals in forthcoming implementation period of labour market policies was highlighted by her.

Minimum and average salary increase and all the measures and commitments have been undertaken to improve standard of living of citizens and to stimulate economic activity, labour productivity and competition. Her highlighted note was that living standards of elderly persons is crucial, and pensions have a major impact on overall poverty. The increase in pensions is in accordance with new methodology for it and economic trends, and measures are taken for purposes of providing financial support to most vulnerable category of pensioners.

Investments in social protection with the aim of activating vulnerable groups in labour market are key to achieving faster, more inclusive and more sustainable economic growth and development and lifting largest possible number of citizens out of poverty.

She emphasized the social economy as a potential for social integration, activation of vulnerable groups of citizens, and job creation and informed that Draft Law on Social Enterprises has been undergoing public review and public debates. Draft law would regulate the definition of social enterprises, legal recognition of social enterprises, establishment of a structure for continuous educational services, counselling and financial support for development of social enterprises and further promotion of social economy.

Her note on the reforms in area of social protection and inclusion, especially the established system of licensing of social service providers with 110 licensed social service providers, process of deinstitutionalization and decentralization of social policies, investments in child protection and ensuring greater accessibility and quality in preschool education and care, had been highlighted as priority goals for improving situation and creating opportunities for a prosperous life for all citizens.

The implementation of key reforms and initiatives are being implemented as a part of the started process of pre-accession negotiations and improvement of national legislation. Thus, high priority of human capital development could be achieved through credible sectoral policies aimed at concrete and visible results, jointly implemented and supported, whereby equality, non-discrimination and social justice must be top priorities. Particular importance different views and insights to be shared in order to ensure continuity in coordination, dialogue and cooperation between relevant ministries, institutions, social partners, civil society organizations and development partners aimed to achieve a high level of shared responsibility, optimal use of resources and achieving visible results for citizens, said Ms. Trenchevska.

**Mr. Nuhiu, Deputy Minister of Education and Science (MES)**, welcomed all those present at the 13th SWG plenary meeting and he noted that the key to unlocking our full potential, as a country and as a region, is to strengthen competitiveness in order to ensure higher rates of development of our economies, which will enable preparation for the challenges of the single market of the European Union.

He stressed that our action as a Government is aimed at building strong institutions, supporting and promoting small and medium-sized enterprises and creating qualified human capital. This is followed by the importance of research and innovation, which is reflected in the creation of the Strategy for Smart Specialization, which will enable more efficient and effective use of public funds.

In addition, to support the country's economic development, it is important to ensure access to finance, which is inevitable on the way to integration into global value chains and developing advanced human capital. Hence, the Deputy minister took the opportunity to thank the new initiative of the European Commission "EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans 2024-2027" - EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans 2024-2027" where in the section of the Human Capital pillar the value of education is clearly recognized. Also important is the support for the country that is provided through the Instrument for macro-financial assistance from the European Union.

It was noted that Vocational education in the Republic of North Macedonia in recent years has seen serious reforms involving the Ministry of Education and Science, local authorities and companies. The cooperation between these three systems and their cohesion, as well as the vision for the development of vocational education, was recognized as contribution to the increase in the number of dual classes in secondary vocational schools, and thus to the increase in the number of students. It was also clarified that this school year, more than 560 companies are involved, which include 3,755 students. Last school year, there were 450 participating companies and 2,763 students were included.

The fact that the interest in vocational education is growing, both among young people and among companies was backed by the numbers who speak for themselves. It was stressed that in both cases, the profit is mutual, the students receive practical teaching and knowledge directly at the companies, and the potential employer provides educated and professional staff who are ready to join the production process immediately after completing the education. In order to create prepared personnel, it was explained that the Ministry act through three aspects, infrastructure improvement, new curricula and textbooks and raising the motivation for work of the teaching staff. Three Regional Centers for vocational education and training have been opened with EU support. Additionally, according to the Analysis within the framework of the IPA project: Increasing the attractiveness, inclusiveness and relevance of VET and adult education, two new Regional Centers for Vocational Education and Training have been selected. Two municipal secondary vocational schools have been selected, namely Secondary School "Nikola Karev" in Strumica (south-eastern region) and Secondary School "Kole Nedelkovski" in Veles (Vardar region). The Government of the Republic of North Macedonia has made a decision to take over the founding rights and obligations of



secondary professional municipal schools. The further procedure for the transformation of these schools into RCVET and starting with the implementation of staff training as well as the preparation of technical specifications for equipment in the schools follows.

In addition, it was mentioned that the Ministry of Education and Science also awards scholarships to students enrolled in vocational schools, as an additional motivation for their professional development. MoES also introduced scholarships for students from deficient professions and from dual education, which also helped in raising the motivation for enrolment in secondary vocational schools, as a kind of motivation, but also support for the educational process of young people. Within the framework of adult education, the programs are designed so that 70% of the lessons are practical, that is, the training participants attend practical sessions at an employer, that is, a company.

In his speech the deputy minister noted that for the first time, the new Law on Secondary Education defines career counselling and career counsellor and the establishment of Career Centers is planned. In such a way, with the systematic introduction of career counsellors, the students will be guided in choosing their future career in accordance with the supply and demand of the labour market.

The importance of the digitization process was also highlighted. According to the European survey on skills and work, 23% of the examined Macedonian population stated that new digital technologies have been introduced in their workplace, this percentage in the EU is 43%, definitely digitization is becoming more and more part of the everyday working and learning environment in our country. The institution strongly believes that public opinion regarding the application of digital technology today, unlike 3-4 years ago, has changed significantly, our society is aware of the benefits that information and communication technology can offer us in our daily functioning. So, more and more procedures for realizing the students' rights to scholarships, for accommodation in school and student dormitories, for enrolment in primary and secondary education, nostrification of diplomas, etc., began to be carried out electronically.

Also, the ongoing procedures for upgrading the school network infrastructure in 40 primary schools were mentioned. This activity will cover 23,782 students and 3,126 teachers. And according to the Concept for Primary Education, digitization of textbooks for the fourth, fifth and sixth grades is planned for 2024. This activity will cover 61,789 students. Also, for the school year 2026, in accordance with the new curricula for the seventh, eighth and ninth grades, the digitalization of the textbooks for these grades will be planned.

At the end in the context of the energy crisis, when we meet the challenges of digitization and climate change, and recover from the Covid-19 pandemic, it was emphasized that the mental health and well-being of children, youth and adults is set as a priority. In the past few months, the Ministry of Education and Science has been working on the professional development of professional associates, a Program for psychosocial assistance and support in primary and secondary schools has been developed, around 700 professional associates from primary and secondary schools - mental health professionals - have been trained in this program, and they are part of communities for exchange and collegial support. All data from a new survey in October 2023 carried out in primary and secondary schools on the mental health and well-being of children and young people will be an integral part of the National Action Plan for the mental health and well-being of children and young people.

It was stated that this concern must be part of reforms at any educational level. In that direction, the new Law on Secondary Education emphasizes the principle of the well-being of students, because only in this way will we be able to create a healthy human capital that will support the inclusive economic development of the country.

**Mr. Albu, Head of Section, Delegation of the European Union (DEU)**, reminded shortly on this forum purpose to provide a clear overview of sector policies, to exchange on reforms' progress to analyze bottlenecks and to find ways to overcome them, to discuss strategic priorities and resources to achieve them.

Last time, this forum had met in May and these meetings are scheduled to take place twice a year. Since then, important developments happened in EU-NM relations in EESP sector. The screening meetings of EU Acquis of relevant chapters took place this year. Moreover, the European Commission adopted 2023 Enlargement Package last week, including the 2023 Annual Report for North Macedonia. He noted that the report provides fair assessment where the country stands and provides clear guidelines on reforms' steps that the country should take.

He mentioned the most relevant points from 2023 Annual Report for the country, referring to the EESP sectors in question:

- On chapter 19, the Report stipulates North Macedonia is moderately prepared in the area and some progress has been made, notably, on steadily reducing the unemployment and increasing the social assistance benefits.
- Youth Guarantee scheme has been implemented successfully throughout the country.
- As response to energy and price crisis, the actions had been undertaken of application of social benefits' measures for most vulnerable groups ensuring the poverty rate would not increase.

Last year recommendations had been partially implemented and therefore, the country should particularly in coming year to:

- Continue to implement Youth Guarantee and activation measures for vulnerable groups, as well to set-up the system to appropriately to evaluate these measures.
- Enhance the inspectorate capacity of State Labour Inspectorate to better address matters related to Occupational Safety and Health.
- Develop the system for tracking and monitoring the injuries and fatalities at work.



- Continue to enforce tripartite and bipartite social dialogue focusing on collective bargaining and to strengthen the rule and activities of social partners in private sector.
- Country has been recommended to finalize monitoring system and ensure proper evaluation of social assistance and social services.
- Continue the social protection reform with an emphasis of employment activation.

As far as the education sector has been concerned, he noted:

- North Macedonia is moderately prepared in the area of education and culture, and limited progress was made within the reporting period due to adoption and introduction of guidelines and programmes for strengthening the inclusiveness and green skills.
- Report recognizes that the implementation of 2018-2025 National Education Strategy continues to be slow, as it needs development of proper monitoring system.

In regards to recommendation, North Macedonia should particular in coming year:

- Adopt the Law on Secondary Education.
- Adopt the Law on Vocational Education and Training and set-up and operationalize the regional VET centers.
- Adopt the Law on Adult Education.
- Improve the access to quality education for all, in particular for the Children with Disabilities and Children from Roma communities.
- Increase the pre-school enrollment.
- Continue to provide support to teachers’ training and professional development.

He expresses the hope of DEU that the assessment presented in the annual report would also serve to the authorities to better mobilize, increase the administrative capacities and focus on those issues that require urgent action in order to step-up reforms in employment, education and social policy.

Priorities of this sector remain to address the labour market challenges, including the low labour participation, skills mismatch, labour market exclusion, as well as to create more inclusive, flexible and responsive educational system that empowers individuals, eradicates poverty boost economic growth and place a foundation for more resilient and prosperous society.

At the end, he was keen to hear the presentations of MLSP and MES about the status and way-forward to achieve necessary policy priorities to implement the underlined measures. He highlighted the EU support on disposal to national authorities of substantial financial assistance that involve a variety of programmes for EESP policies. At the same time, the EU puts on disposal of national authorities a significant technical assistance covering these sectors. Therefore, their vision of both ministries was expected to the presented in order to demonstrate how significant EU assistance would be used to boost the reforms in labour market, education and social policy. He also stressed on DEU awareness that the administrative capacities of EESP sectors remains as a concern. Thus, EU support would continue for investing in public administration, strengthening the sector policy making and dialogue and establishing clear objectives, indicators and budgets.

Multilateral dialogue at the meeting, involving authorities, donor partners and civil society organizations, he emphasized as a tool to support the reform processes. He pointed out that all partners would agree that SWGs are central point for improving the capacities of national authorities to coordinate, monitor and communicate on the reforms. In order to make the SWG meetings more effective, he noted that it is important to review, coordinate and balance political and technical discussions. The interest would be to see an open and productive dialogue among all involved stakeholders about challenges in EESP sectors and overall, how they would be addressed and what needs to be done to ensure substantial progress in near future. He reassured the attendees that the EU would continue to support EU integration path of North Macedonia by providing necessary financial and technical assistance, including exchange of best practices. Knowledge and expertise from EU member states.

At the end, he stressed that the EU is keen to support the policy development and implementation, including a new Growth Plan for Western Balkan countries.

#### Presentation of the main priorities and targets of reforms of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy in EU integration perspectives and challenges

**Ms. Trenkoska**, noted on the reminder of recommendations stipulated in EU Progress report for the country for 2023. She invited and briefly presented the presenters of MLSP due to presentations planned for priorities and challenges in the areas of employment policies and labour market legislation, employment of vulnerable groups and social entrepreneurship, social care and deinstitutionalization of social services, early childhood development and care, pension reform and disability insurance, equal opportunities and anti-discrimination and Roma integration.

**Mr. Stajovanovski, State Advisor for Labour Legislation and Employment Policies in in MLSP**, shortly noted on structure of his presentation due to strategic priorities, challenges and regulatory mechanisms of employment policies and labour legislation with mid-term perspectives.

Decreasing the unemployment rate would be as one of top strategic priorities. North Macedonia has been permanently



decreasing the unemployment rate in continuity. Years before, this rate was high with estimates around 30%. Currently, the unemployment rate is above 10% and it is not within the normal European standards in regard to labour market flows around 3-4%.

Labour market activation and inclusion of hard-to-employ persons would be another mid-term strategic priority. Majority of active and passive job seekers are with low-educational qualifications (with primary education) or without qualifications and other categories of unemployed persons without skills required by the labour market.

As third mid-term priority would be youth unemployment and youth (aged 15-29) are driving labour force of every national economy, especially in regard to its development and growth and it is crucial for having employable and skilled youth.

He noted a strategic priority on labour relations in regard to real protection of workers' rights and widening the certain part of rights based on labour relations.

Ensuring high level of protection of job positions of employed, especially those imposed to harder working conditions for performing the working tasks, job positions imposed to harmful influences and job positions on which the employees and their working capabilities, as well pregnant women, elderly employees, employees with disabilities, etc., would be a priority. As well, ensuring the high-level standards to performing the working tasks for young employees and protection of workers' rights in cases of insolvency of their employers are important to be considered.

He summarized in order to accomplish these mid-term strategic priorities, certain challenges are in front of us and appropriate solution must be found for their overcoming. As challenges identified are opening of new job positions and increasing the opportunities for entrepreneurial activities (such as those through different forms as done in previous period, as granting and lending for self-employment), which it is evident from the results achieved so far. The growth, maintenance and boosting of development and growth of existing legal entities have been identified as necessary in order to ensure these entities to be further competitive at European level markets. Further on, implementation of different training programmes for gaining job skills has been recognized, as well considering that North Macedonia has certain number of unemployed persons with low or without qualifications, the contemporary stadium of development and technology requires also those employees with certain skills and knowledge for performing working tasks to be permanently ungraded in order to address the challenges of today's economic activity.

As legal tools that would support the accomplishment of mid-term priorities and overcome the challenges, he enlisted as foreseen:

- National Employment Strategy 2021-2027 with three main priorities of actions and measures foreseen,
- Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan 2023-2026,
- new Law on Labour Relations (which it is in final stage and embedded new legal instruments for certain improvements of workers' rights and existing legal institutes that through time-being have been recognized and shown certain weaknesses in implementation),
- new Law of Occupational and Safety at Work, expected to increase the standards of working conditions, especially to those as high risk of working positions and those to certain categories of positions in certain sectors whereas the standards must be respected,
- due to insolvency and in order to protect the workers' rights in cases of insolvency of their employers, new Law on Employment and Insurance in Case of Unemployment would be drafted in which these aspects would be considered.

**Mr. Tomsic, Special Advisor for Social Protection in MLSP**, shortly noted on structure of his presentation due to strategic priorities and challenges.

In the area of employment of vulnerable groups and development of social enterprises, as strategic priorities with mid-term perspectives are enlisted:

- Digitalization of administrative procedures of social cash benefits according the Law on Social Protection and linkage with social protection services, whereas the MLSP is in development stage of integrated software planned to be in test phase during next year and afterwards, functional. Thus, it would be possible to monitor the cases on household level and the case management would be improved for further appropriate support of households.
- Draft Law on Social Enterprises is in its final stage, as well published on ENER system (Unique National Electronic Register of Regulations) for public consultations and public debates were organized. After this public review, the draft law shall enter in governmental procedure and afterwards, to be adopted by the Macedonian Assembly. As further activities in forthcoming years, the development of social enterprises is envisaged in order from the group of organizations that have social economy activities to create a capacity of social economic entities further to be a support in work capability and work integration of long-term unemployed persons. Moreover, the draft law would give an opportunity few types of social enterprises to be established for activities related to work capability and work integration for persons outside of labour market. As well, this draft law could be linked to the Law on Public Procurements which foresees reserved public procurements for social enterprises which it could not be implemented because the definition of 'social enterprise' does not exist in Macedonian legal context. Additionally, the draft law would provide an opportunity for activation of beneficiaries of Guarantee Minimum Assistance (GMA).
- Strengthening the capacities of Social Work Centers (SWCs) and Local Employment Centers (LECs) due to development



of Individual Activation Plans (IAPs), in which regard there are consultations for amending the Law of Social Protection in order a GMA beneficiary, if it would get employed, its household to continue to receive the social protection benefit in forthcoming 12 months. It is reconsidered that the poor households would be encouraged to be involved further in labour market activation and to get employed, as well to be unafraid to lose the right for GMA benefit in that period. As well, there are reconsidered several options for improvement of the system for case management preparation and monitoring of IPAs.

As challenges in regard to implementation of Law on Social Protection since May 2019, he noted the following:

- Low level of motivation of GMA beneficiaries to be employed and to be included in educational and training programmes, whereas these persons are mainly with primary education or without any educational attainment, not to mention to have secondary education which is obligatory as well.
- Adoption of Law on Adult Education would be beneficial to be done as soon as possible, as well opening of VET Centers, whereas tutorial counselors could be employed and to do the assessment and validation of non-formal and informal education and training.
- Ensuring additional trainings for these categories of persons in order to enter the labour market.
- Uneven cooperation between SWCs and LECs to be overcome by strengthening this part with adoption of new or amending existing bylaws, and moreover, the improved software connection of these institutions whereas IPAs could be prepared in real time.
- Disadvantage of not having the facilities for work capability and work integration planned to be overcome with Draft Law on Social Enterprises, whereas the ESA may provide through mediation the vulnerable groups to become employable and to be employed further.

In the area of social care and deinstitutionalization of social services, as strategic priorities with mid-term perspectives are enlisted:

- In regard to deinstitutionalization process, it could be noted that new Law for Assessment of Persons with Disabilities has been adopted. Whole system is in preparatory phase and new methodology should be adopted for assessment of PwDs in coming 12 months. First phase foresees to have training of trainers’ activities and further they would have an obligation to train experts to perform assessments. The law is complex and covers big scope with linkages to many sectors, such as social protection, health, education, pension and disability insurance. Each PwD would go through one assessment and based on its findings would accomplish the rights of social protection.
- Implementation of National Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2023-2030, which had gone through public consultations and it is within governmental procedure for its adoption planned to be done by end of 2023. According its Action Plan, the software toolkit is under preparation planned to support National Coordinative Body for Rights of PwDs to monitor the implementation of the strategy.
- Continuation of deinstitutionalization process and transformation of public institutions that accommodate PwDs, and there are only two left, such as Special Institution in Demir Kapija and Public Institute for Rehabilitation of Persons with Physical Disabilities in Banja Banska – Strumica. Whereas 108 PwDs are accommodated in these residential. He noted that the resettlement process of these PwDs would continue through supported living in community-based service at local level. Further, it is envisaged the plans to be made for reconstruction and adaptation of facilities of these two institutions that would be transferred to centers for social services at local communities and partly to become homes for social services for elderly persons.
- Implementation of second phase for development of social services. First phase has delivered significant results due to expanding the network of pre-school facilities, social services development and introduction of licensing system. As it is expected the WB project would continue from 2024 in order variety of social services to be further developed, especially in local communities.
- Bylaw of participation in social services in which document would be planned to be linked with household incomes and thus, the potential beneficiaries who do have higher household income to participate in total amount for social service pending on the income thresholds. Thus, the beneficiaries with no income would be provided with free-of-charge social services.

As challenges in regard to these areas, he noted the following:

- Shortage of professional staff and experts, especially in small municipalities throughout the country, as well hard to find and involve persons to be part of trainings and provision of social services in care economy.
- Deficiency of combined health-social services based on influence from practical work that there are bigger number of PwDs who require social services and have certain mental disorders. Thus, the focus would be put on development of these types of social services and their capacities in local communities.
- As noted in EU Annual Progress Report for 2023 for Chapter 19 and on bilateral meetings, the recommendation is establishment and development of quality control system for monitoring and evaluation of social services and development quality standards. The need for proper control of delivery of social services has been increasing as the network of social service providers expanded up to 110 licensed providers, as well ensuring their provision of equal quality throughout the whole country.



In the area of early childhood development and care, as strategic priorities with mid-term perspectives are enlisted:

- Development of Action Plan for Development of Rights of a Child pursuant to the relevant UN Convention, whereas preparatory meetings were held. In cooperation with UNICEF Country Office, the expertise has been engaged for preparation of an analysis for assessment for relevant areas (social protection, health, education, etc.) due to aspects of Child Guarantee and linked to EU recommendations, which findings would be addressed in the Action Plan foreseen.
- As the planned action in Road-map for Chapter 23 till 2027, the country would undertake activities to plan 30% increase of programme budget till 2030, as a country commitment for child poverty reduction and ensuring services according to the children’s needs in key areas.
- Adoption and implementation of National Strategy for Responsible Parenting 2023-2030 and its Action Plan.
- Adoption and application of revised formula for financing of pre-school education and care system, which it is simulation stage of draft formula. Its idea is to be used the staggered payment for entering in pre-school education and care, i.e., the families with lower income to pay less for their child and those with bigger income to pay appropriate amount of participation.
- Investment in new kindergarten and daily centers facilities and thus, to ensure wider coverage of children aged 0-6 in pre-school education and care system. Unused facilities are planned to be adopted and reconstructed for further use as pre-school facilities. Thus, the target planned is to ensure children aged 0-6 to be involved in pre-school education and care up to 50% till 2027 and 80% till 2030.

As challenges in regard to this area, he noted the following:

- Ensuring adequate resources according the children’s’ needs in each household.
- Ensuring adequate coverage of the rights for cash payments within the pre-school education and care system.
- Ensuring equal and quality child protection and care for all children, commencing from pre-school education and further in primary-secondary-tertiary education, and thus to avoid children not to have opportunities for quality education as important aspects for their entering in labour market.

**Ms. Ramadani, Head of the Department for Pension and Disability Insurance in MLSP**, noted on mid-term priorities for approximation of national legislation with relevant EU Acquis and their implementation as important for pension and disability insurance system, as well wider for social security scheme and ensuring free movement of workers within the EU without decrease or loss of their rights, such as:

- Ensuring quality data for provision of social insurance rights by establishment of Unique Register for Social Insurance. Its establishment is done as a component of WB SIAP project and it would ensure all the registers managed by the institutions within the social security insurance to unify in one. Thus, all the inconsistencies would be overcome in their evidences recognized in previous period. Law for Establishment of Unique Register for Social Insurance has been adopted by Macedonia Assembly and published in Official Gazette on 5 October 2023 with its deferred implementation at earliest beginning of 2025. In meanwhile, a lot of activities should be done in order this register to be functional, such as transfer of data from different evidences from existing registers. The register, as central point, would ensure digitalization of processes and procedures in regard to social insurance rights and their evidences, as well electronic exchange of data and connection with ESSI system of EU for data exchange of coordination of social security schemes.
- Analysis of national legislation and of administrative and institutional capacities of social security system in regard for further implementation of relevant EU Directives in the area of social security systems, i.e., EU Regulation No. 883/2004 and its amendments and the EU Implementing Regulation No.987/2009, due to further fully-fledged membership of North Macedonia in EU. There has been already ensured technical support through the EU Sociex+ instrument and its work plan is under preparation.
- Liberalization of labour market through amendments of current national legislation, as well adoption of new Law for Employment and Work of Foreigners. In this regard, the Macedonian Government on its session held on 31 October 2023 has established Working Group which has to give a proposal in forthcoming 3 weeks due to change and amendments of this law order to facilitate the procedure for issuing working permits for work engagement of foreigners on territory of North Macedonia.

As challenges in regard to this area, she noted the following:

- Transfer of existing evidences from different registers within social security system within Unique Register for Social Insurance.
- Linkage of Unique Register for Social Insurance with other institutions within the system and its linkage with ESSI system of EU.
- Ensuring of financial support for upgrade of systems and capacity building of institutions to implement EU Acquis.
- Provision of quality labour force in regard to liberalization of labour market.

**Ms. Cvetkovska, Head of the Department in MLSP**, referred on presentation’s content on mid-term priorities for the areas of equal opportunities and anti-discrimination as defined in the National Strategy for Gender Equality 2022-2024. Gender equality and anti-discrimination are fundamentals as cross-cutting issues of overall sectoral policies created and implemented



in the country. Therefore, the mid-term priorities emphasized are:

- Adoption of Law on Gender Equality aims at advancement of gender equality situation, efficient functioning of its mechanisms, establishment of Secretariat for Gender Issues in the Government and mainstreaming of gender equality concepts towards improvement of the status of women and girls.
- Implementation of new Strategy for Gender-Based Violence and Domestic Violence (under preparation), as one of strategic area derived from the ratified Istanbul Convention and finalization of Action Plan 2018-2023 for its implementation. Evaluation process has commenced and working group would be established for preparation of this strategy.
- A set of documents required to be prepared and their implementation for further advancement of situation of women' victims of gender-based violence, such as rulebook for integral data collection and analysis for these victims, in order to ensure creation and implementation of evidence-based policies.
- Adoption and implementation of programme for reintegration of women' victims of gender-based violence and domestic violence, that would ensure their integration within the communities and life without violence after their accommodation or provision of services in shelter centers.
- Establishment and functioning of services pursuant to the standards of Istanbul Convention and their support has been programmed within the IPA III action programmes.
- Adoption and implementation of Law on Harassment and Protection at Work, with an aim for approximation with relevant ILO convention No.190 due to protection from harassment and violence at work, ratified by Macedonian Assembly in previous period.
- In regard to protection against discrimination, review of the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination is foreseen and its approximation for efficient functioning of the Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination and Paris Principles for its bigger financial independence of functioning.
- Preparation and implementation of relevant documents due to conducting the Law on Budgets in relation for ensuring further application of gender-responsive budgeting, including separate bylaw for preparation of gender-responsive statements, amendment of the methodology for strategic planning and preparation of annual programmes. These documents would ensure mainstreaming of gender concepts in sectoral policies at country and local self-government levels.
- Capacity building of administration would remain as a mid-term priority. Resource center for gender-responsive creation of policies and budgeting was opened and functional according to the programme prepared and implemented.

As challenges in regard to these areas, she noted the following:

- Harmonization of national legislation with the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination, having in mind that many laws have to be approximate and fall under competences of several ministries.
- Integration of LGBTQ+ persons, as target groups, within the National Strategy on Equality and Non-Discrimination, having in mind the latest anti-gender movements which are against their consideration. MLSP has coped with stereotypes and prejudices raised by these movements in the country for clarification of the related issues, which brought confused understanding and mis-lead the public opinion from the aspects of human rights protection of women and men, as well of LGBTQ+ persons.
- Establishment of the management system of integral data collection and analysis of cases of women' victims of gender-based and domestic violence, as an activity programmed within one of IPA III action programmes. Moreover, this integrated database would collect information from all relevant institutions which have differentiated evidence registers for such cases, such as courts, public prosecution office, Ministry of Interior, Social Work Centers, Ministry of Health, etc.

**Ms. Kamberi, Head of the Department in MLSP**, referred on presentation's content on mid-term priorities based on previous achievements for the areas due to Roma integration issues, on which the MLSP is a National Coordinator and the activities are conducted in cooperation of relevant ministries. As commencement of international initiative for Decade of Roma Inclusion since 2005, North Macedonia has been involved actively with preparation and implementation of 2 strategies consequently, first for the period 2005-2015 and second for the period 2016-2020. In regard to their implementation, the action plans in relevant areas were prepared and adopted by Macedonian Government. Current Strategy for Roma Integration prepared covers the period 2022-2030 and encompasses the recommendations of Poznan Declaration and European Commission, as well National Action Plans for 7 areas are adopted.

She noted that Roma has been actively involved in preparation of Operational Plan for Active Labour Market Prograames and Measures and Employment Services. Overall, 3-4% of Roma, as job seekers, had been included in implementation of Operational Plans in previous years. Macedonian Government has defined 5% quota for Roma involvement from job seekers registered in ESARNM during the implementation of 2023 Operational Plan.

Compared to the countries in region, North Macedonia has better position in regard to Roma inclusion in public administration as employees. Data for 2022 from the Ministry of Political System present that there is an increase of Roma employments in public administration. Based on Report of Register for Employees in Public Administration, 1651 administrative servants were Roma from total number of 110 465 employees (or 1,49%) and compared to data for 2021, when 1344 were Roma employees from 112777 public servants (or 1.19%).

Therefore, as one of the challenges in regard to Roma integration, she noted the reintegration of Roma in labour market and





implementation of programmes for development of measures for support of entrepreneurship and employability.

In regard to Roma returnees, North Macedonia has been involved in regional project implemented in 3 countries in Western Balkan region, whereas the partners in its implementation are UNDP and World Bank. As regards its objective and activities are aimed for improvement of capabilities for implementation of models for reintegration of returnees in 3 municipalities (Prilep, Shuto Orizari and Shtip). At local level, the support has been provided for stimulation for functioning of local platforms as local social councils through integration of challenges for returnees, development and implementation of strategies for local economic strategies. As well, it is foreseen resource center to be established in municipality of Shuto Orizari for provision of information support for returnees and marginalized groups. Moreover, the measures for basic digital skills of 2023 Operational Plan would be supported by coverage of around 600 persons to improve their employability at labour market.

North Macedonia has conducted many activities in the area of education and she referred only to data in regard to inclusion of Roma children in pre-school education and care. Project for inclusion of Roma children in pre-school education has commenced since 2016 and around 4500 Roma children had been involved free-of-charge in pre-school education facilities. Macedonian Government has recommended to all 21 local self-government units and its municipal councils, whereas Roma live, to adopt a decision for free-of-charge inclusion of Roma children in kindergartens. As important aspect, she noted that Roma children are not segregated in separate groups and 21 Roma caregivers have been employed in kindergartens, as well certain number of mediators have been involved. The project would continue to be supported by UNICEF Country Office. She summarized that inclusion of Roma children in pre-school education and care have resulted for their further inclusion in educational system and at the moment, more than 300 Roma students are enrolled in higher education.

In regard to civil registration, she noted that Law on Civil Registration of Un-registered Persons in Birth Register was adopted in 2020. Around 650 persons without birth certificates or other identification documents were identified. The support had been provided for fulfillment of questionnaire by each of them and to submit to the Directorate for Evidence of Birth Registers, whereas the checks were done due to citizenships of other countries and further issuing of temporary birth certificate and temporary biometric ID document. But, the transformation of their temporary status to regular register was done slowly. This law has ensured 4 rights to be made available for these persons, their children to be involved in education system, in labour market, to have an access to cash benefits of social protection and to have health insurance. In order to facilitate the transformation process, changes and amendments were done in Law on Birth Registers during May 2023 and the target for completion of transformation process of all persons with temporary documents by end of 2023 has been set for the Ministry of Justice and this Directorate. Overall, the strategic priority for Macedonian Government and UNHCR is all the persons to have personal documents by the end of 2024.

### Discussion among relevant stakeholders

**Ms. Trenkoska (MLSP)** noted on thorough presentations done by MLSP representatives and opened the discussion part for the SWG members to discuss the presented mid-term strategic priorities and their involvement in implementation of sectoral policies.

**Ms. Svetlana Ristovska Antic (Organizations of Employers of Macedonia - ORM)** noted that her organization has been involved in many activities coordinated by MLSP, as well in many processes of implementation of sectoral policies and preparation of mentioned legal documents. She made an emphasize on importance of Youth Guarantee, which have shown significant results, and noted that a scope of different opportunities should be ensured in order to better inclusion of youth at labour market and their employability. As well, she expressed an interest for possible involvement of ORM in mentioned Working Group for preparation of new Law for Employment and Work of Foreigners, especially that it was already noted on aspects of shortage of labour force that the economic entities are faced with.

**Ms. Trenkoska (MLSP)** informed that further support in regard to enhanced implementation of Youth Guarantee and labour market activation of vulnerable groups have been programme under IPA III support.

**Mr. Ramdani (MLSP)** explained that Working Group formed would on preparation of changes and amendments of existing Law for Employment and Work of Foreigners and involvement of other relevant stakeholders is welcome during the public consultation process.

## Second session

### Presentation of main priorities of the Ministry of Education and Science and targets for achievements in mid-term perspective

**Ms. Nadica Kostovska** invited and briefly presented the presenters of MoES due to presentations planned for priorities, reforms and challenges in all education levels as well some horizontal issues related to integration of Roma students, SEN students and the importance of mental health initiatives in the education.

**Mr. Qazimi, Head of the Unit for Higher education,** noted that the focus of the strategic documents related to higher education is the promotion of quality of education through a comprehensive and integrated approach. These documents serve as blueprints for institutional development, ensuring that higher education institutions remain dynamic, responsive, and



dedicated to the continual improvement of educational outcomes for their stakeholders. In addition, in the pursuit of comprehensive preparedness and sustained alignment with European integration objectives, the Ministry of Education and Science, in collaboration with key entities such as the National Council for Higher Education and Scientific Research, the Agency for Quality in Higher Education with the Accreditation Board, and the Evaluation Board, has delineated a strategic set of mid-term priorities within the higher education sector. The following ones were mentioned in the presentation:

- ✓ Revising the articles of the Law on Higher Education
- ✓ Decree on benchmark and criteria for financing higher education
- ✓ The National Program for Higher Education
- ✓ Application of the Rulebook on the standards and procedure for external evaluation and self-evaluation

Regarding the first mid-term priority *Revising the articles of the Law on Higher Education* it was noted that in 2018, a new Law on Higher Education was adopted, guaranteeing academic freedom of action and expression while securing rights and opportunities for educators, researchers, and students. In response to requests from the academic community, a process to revise and amend the law commenced, aiming to preserve the aforementioned rights and opportunities while facilitating a more streamlined implementation of the law itself. To this end, the Ministry of Education and Science formed a working group tasked with reviewing and synthesizing suggestions received from all relevant stakeholders engaged in the higher education process. For the next two mid-term priorities *The National Program for Higher Education* and *Decree on benchmark and criteria for financing higher education* it was said that The National Program for Higher Education and the Regulation for Financing Higher Education, as outlined in the Law on Higher Education, fall under the purview of the National Council (NC), comprised of 15 university professors from various institutions and academic fields. The NC has initiated the process of developing these documents by organizing a professional debate that included key figures in the country's academic sphere and institutions involved in higher education. This initiative signals a commitment to a broad, inclusive, and transparent process, with a focus on the competence of the teaching staff, advancing teaching methods, curriculum evaluation, improving the quality of accredited study programs, enhancing the social position of academic staff, and placing a strong emphasis on students' needs, expectations, and support for talented students and academic youth. Finally, in relation with the fourth mid-term priority *Application of the Rulebook on the standards and procedure for external evaluation and self-evaluation* Mr. Qazimi noted that before delving into the specifics of these documents, the NC has undertaken a study of European documents and good comparative practices. The objective is to ensure that the preparation of these documents is part of a comprehensive, inclusive, and transparent process, grounded in European standards and practices. He also added that in pursuit of network rationalization, a Regulation on Standards and Procedures for External Evaluation and Self-Evaluation has been enacted. This regulation mandates not only self-evaluation by higher education institutions but also external evaluation by professional committees composed of members of the Evaluation Board, as well as domestic and foreign experts or professors from universities in EU member states associated with the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). The goal of this process is to assess whether the internal quality assurance system of higher education institutions is established and effective in achieving its mission and overall development. The Ministry of Education and Science recognizes the role and significance of the evaluation process and is committed to improving the necessary resources to initiate and enhance the evaluation process.

**Ms. Jancheva, Acting Head of Department for Primary Education in MoES**, noted on structure of her presentation highlighting the reforms in primary education.

Referring to the new concept on primary education she noted that successive introduction of new curricula and programs for primary education have been going on. Thus, the school year 2023/2024 began with the reformed teaching process for students from the sixth grade, which closed the reformed cycle in the first and second periods of primary education (ISCED 1 and ISECD 2). On the other hand, the curriculum for the 2024/2025 school year has been adopted, and with that the reforms are introduced in the seventh grade.

While discussing the Digitization in Primary Education Ms. Jancheva highlighted that Network infrastructure is being upgraded in 40 primary schools through the PEIP Project and this activity will cover 23.782 students as well as 3126 teachers. On the other hand, through the Ministry of Education, for the 2023/2024 school year, textbooks for the 4th, 5th and 6th grades are being digitized, and this activity will cover 61789 students.

In relation to Systemic regulation of primary education of minors in correctional and penitentiary institutions the following was mentioned:

- The Government procedure with proposed amendments to the Law on Primary Education has been passed
- Within the MoES, an amendment to the Regulation on the systematization of workplaces has been proposed, with which, pending the adoption of the amendments to the Law, it is proposed to open a Department for teachers who carry out educational activities for children who undergo an educational measure, referral to an educational institution. correctional facility in order to find a solution for continuous provision of teaching in correctional institutions.
- The challenge is the systematic solution, among other things, of the curricula and the pedagogical documentation for these students.

Ms. Jancheva thoroughly explained the achievements related to Training of teachers and professional associates by stating that within the scope of the World Bank Primary Education Improvement Project, The Bureau for Development of Education



organized accredited trainings for teachers and professional associates in primary education in the period 2022-2023. First, BDE issued Catalogue of Accredited Programs for teachers and professional associates consisting of 22 programs in total. Then, during the first training cycle in 2022, a total of 14.884 teachers and professional associates in primary education were trained, while in the second cycle, in 2023, 14 510 teachers and professional associates in primary education were trained. For the duration of the training project, the BDE is planning to provide training for all teachers and professional associates in accordance with the requirements for professional development stipulated in the Law on Teachers and Professional Associates. In the period 2024-2025 the estimates are that at least 30 000 teachers and professional associates in primary education will be trained. Apart from this, The BDE is providing continuous support to the teachers and professional associates through regular trainings in different areas of professional development. Approximately 5000 teachers were trained for the new curriculum in primary education. Currently, there are ongoing trainings for primary education teachers for media literacy and mental health.

While referring to National testing and participation on International testing, the following actions were mentioned:

- In 2023, according to the Concept for National Testing in Primary Education, pre-testing in the fifth grade was conducted
- Processing of the data and measurement of the psychometric characteristics of the tasks in order to select appropriate tasks for the main testing in the fifth grade, which will be conducted at the end of the academic year 2023/2024, is in progress
- At the end of 2023, the report on the results of the main test conducted in 2022 for third grade students will be published

for the national testing, and for the international testing, as follows:

- In 2023, the main testing for the international study TIMSS 2023 and pre-testing for the international study TALIS 2024 were conducted
- Preparations are underway for the international testing that will be conducted in the first half of 2024, i.e. the main testing for TALIS 2024 and pre-testing for PISA 2025.

At the end, for the needs of *Optimization of the school network* process she noted that working meetings were held with 7 municipalities out of 10 pilot municipalities, with the mayors, the responsible officers for education and the principals of primary schools within the framework of a Project for the optimization of the school network in order to improve the quality of primary education (a project in cooperation with the World Bank and UNICEF) - (Veles, Kumanovo, Gevgelija, Valandovo, Bitola, Berovo and Chair).

**Ms. Ramadani-Mora, Head of the Unit for secondary education**, presented the main achievements and challenges in the sector for secondary education. She presented the increase of the number of VET students in the last four school years compared to number of students in gymnasium. In addition, she also presented the increase of number of the students in dual education as well as number of the companies included in dual education in the last four school years.

While speaking about implementation of current projects of the sector for secondary education, the following projects/activities were highlighted:

- ✓ “20/20/20” Project in cooperation with EVN
- ✓ Dual vocational education Project in cooperation with the Delegation of German Industry and Commerce.
- ✓ Increasing Attractiveness, Inclusiveness and Relevance of VET and Adult Education Project (two new RCVET)
- ✓ Sector Reform Performance Contract “EU for Youth” Project (three RCVET)
- ✓ E4E and HELVETAS continuous cooperation for vocational education
- ✓ ETF continuous cooperation for vocational education
- ✓ UNDP continuous cooperation on inclusion
- ✓ Building capacity towards sustainable human capital development in North Macedonia – GIZ
- ✓ EU 4 Green Recovery: Support the implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans - OaED
- ✓ Guidelines for a just transition with 3 Working Groups (WG for requalification and training, WG for Economic Transition, WG on renewable energy and storing) - ME
- ✓ Active involvement in Guarantee for youth, second chance,
- ✓ UNICEF continuous cooperation (a new formula for the distribution of Block Grants in secondary education)
- ✓ Support in activities that ensure safe development and prevention of violence in secondary schools

Lastly, she referred on mid-term priorities of the secondary and adult education presenting the following ones:

- ✓ New Law on Secondary Education – 2024
- ✓ New Law on Vocational Education and Training – 2024
- ✓ New Law on Adult Education - 2024



- ✓ New by-laws – 2024/2025
- ✓ Increased gender equality in STEM – 2025
- ✓ Career Counseling System – 2025
- ✓ Inclusivity, green transition, digitization, micro-credentials, validation, ...

**Ms. Arabela Iljaz, higher associate at the department of the primary education**, in her presentation covered horizontal themes in education: Inclusiveness, Mental Health and Wellbeing. In relation to changes or achievements in special education she noted that Transformation of special schools into primary schools with a resource centre and special classes into centres to support the learning of students with disabilities (through Bylaws on Inclusive Education) was finished, as well as School inclusive teams were established. Different types of support for students with disabilities in primary education were offered, accessibility in schools was ensured and different types of projects for Inclusive Education are being carried out.

The inclusion of the Roma students was presented through the efforts that are made in the primary, secondary and tertiary education. In primary education the state of play with the inclusion of Roma students is as follows: Roma educational mediators have been successfully introduced and this is systemic change since it is based on Article 37 of the Law on Primary Education; Rulebook on the method of enrolling children who are not included in education, and who are over the age limit has been created and also there are projects to support primary education of Roma (IPA II - grant scheme).

In the secondary education scholarships for Roma students from public and private secondary schools in RNM continuously are provided for several years and the good thing about it is that it is also already a systemic change since it is based on Article 54 of the Law on Student Standards and there is also Measure is introduced for enrollment in secondary education for Roma students with 10% less points than the required minimum.

In the tertiary education scholarships for Roma students from public and private tertiary education institutions and universities in RNM are also provided and it is also legally based through the Article 49 of the Law on Student Standards.

As for the Mental Health and Wellbeing she noted that Program for Psychosocial help and support to the improvement of well-being and mental health of children and young people in education, health and care institutions/environments have been created. Apart from that an Emergency response program in May 2023 (after a traumatic event in a neighboring country) was introduced and lastly Promotion of the HBSC results for North Macedonia from the survey in 2022 was carried out through several events.

Regarding the midterm priorities in this area, she noted that for the Special education needs the main priorities are: i) Budget increase; ii) New Law on Secondary Education and iii) Adoption of the National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities. As main priorities in regard to inclusion of Roma students were mentioned the following: a) Roma educational mediators in secondary education (funds provided within the 2023 budget, and foreseen with the New Law on Secondary Education); b) Implementation of measures from the National Action Plan for Education in accordance with the National Roma Strategy 2022-2030 (NAP for 5 years); c) Pedagogical assistants for Roma students in primary education; d) Amendment of Article 63 (regionalization) on the Law on Primary Education (working group already established) and e) Law on textbooks in primary and secondary education.

Finally, as main mid-term priorities for Mental Health and Wellbeing where numbered the following ones: a) Development of the National Action Plan for Mental Health and Wellbeing of students in primary and secondary schools 2023/2024; b) Implementation of the National Action Plan for Mental Health and Wellbeing of students in primary and Secondary schools 2024/2025; c) Developing and delivering a training course/module specifically designed for work with and for adolescents under the Program for Psychosocial help and support to the improvement of well-being and mental health of children and young people in education; and d) Participation in the HBSC study in next cycle in 2026.

#### Discussion among relevant stakeholders

**Ms. Bojana Naceva, Representative of the World Bank**, expressed congratulation that Nadica putted the work of the two ministries under a common umbrella: the development of human capital. She noted that the presentations are very clear and well done. The Human capital is important for a country. North Macedonia has to deal with the double challenge, aging population and migration. Inclusion as a process is not only important from a human rights perspective, which is the primary view, but inclusion is also important from a workforce perspective. Given that the cost of excluding people with different needs (Roma and other vulnerable groups) is also an issue related to a lack of quality workforce. The country very soon will face this challenge. It is necessary to take steps now so that a labor shortage does not occur. We must act immediately to avoid a labour deficit. The terms now refer to a probable labour shortage percentage rather than an unemployment rate. From that perspective, inclusivity is critical. Parents and students should feel comfortable in public schools; therefore, we should focus not just on reducing architectural barriers for inclusion, but also on improving the quality of education and increasing the support for teachers. And, in the context of the twenty-first century labour market, two concerns are essential: the quality of preschool and primary education, which serves as the foundation for human capital development. It is also worth noting that education should play a larger role in child care. The evidence from many studies indicates the significance of the critical period up to the age of five. Both intervention and assistance at this developmental time enable youngsters to reach their greatest potential later in life. That is, preschool education is more than just a Ministry of Education and Culture objective; it also requires cross-sector collaboration. With the current Human Capital plan, which should be adopted very rapidly, I would



also recommend the formation of a working group for preschool. In secondary education, the question arises as to what percentage of young people will be enrolled in VET. Does the state have a vision for the ratio between the VET and General Secondary Education. This ratio must be understood clearly. What are the capacities for offering quality WBL and practical education in VET, as well as for inclusion of the qualified workforce into the labour market? At the same time, what quality do we require from future academic citizens who will be the bearers of reforms, innovations, and so on. In addition, continuing education after VET completion is highlighted. We do not have short cycles of professional education (two- or three-year programmes) in HE; For any student, regardless of which educational path he/she chooses in secondary education, secondary education must not be a dead end. The student must have possibilities for further education, thus if we expand the number of students in VET, we should consider what we will do with those children in the long run. That is, possibilities for additional training, education, and entrance to higher education should be created. Furthermore, artificial intelligence and digitalization impose the need for much more sophisticated skills. Previously, following the state's independence, we had a very unpleasant experience with the Obligatory VET, when people who lost their positions in industries were unable to retrain and engage in new streams based on the requirements of the labour market. This error must not be repeated. I am pleased that higher education is back on the agenda. She regrets that the World Bank initiative, which has worked for four years with analysis and assistance to the Ministry of Education and Science, will no longer be able to assist. However, there is staff at the World Bank in the Global Support of Countries section, and if the Ministry of Education and Science required, she offers to discuss the solutions for the new financing formula, as well as to provide opinions and comments on the new legal solutions.

**Aneta Damjanovska, Embassy of Switzerland:** This platform should be utilized for coordination; the Swiss Embassy works to assist education via the lens of the economy. She followed up on the idea for efficient use of the available resource. In 2019, the MES asked for assistance in implementing a new formula for financing secondary education, including VET. She informed that several ministries, including the MoF, ME, MTSP, and other relevant institutions, contributed. In 2021, several acceptable models were produced, which became part of the Ministry of Education and Science's 2022 Work Programme and the Economic Reform Programme 2022-2024. However, it was surprising to learn that other development partners were in parallel requested to support the financing formula for secondary education. For every donor, it is critical that the help supplied is relevant, matches the needs of the state, and is used correctly. As a development partner, we contribute to several topics, so instead of overlapping, part of the funds can be addressed to something else that is a priority of the state.

**Aleksandr Nikolov UNICEF:** At the request of the Ministry of Education, we collaborated with Helvetas on the secondary education formula, and we made certain some additions. The efficient use of funding for both primary and secondary education is something that the state should prioritise in the future. According to the findings, 89% of the funds allocated as block subsidies for elementary schools are used to pay salaries, this percentage is even bigger with the 15% salary increase. Which means that less than 10% remains for all other needs (transportation of students, maintenance of facilities, equipment, professional development of teachers, inclusion of children with disabilities...). He stressed that this is impossible mission for the municipalities to deliver higher quality services. He welcomed that the Ministry of Education and Science informed the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia about the new financing formula, whereby this percentage of 10% should be increased by 20%. Referring to the optimisation of primary school network due to demographic changes, which have resulted in only 10% of students to attend the regional schools. That is why each municipality must develop a network optimisation strategy to improve the quality of the educational process. 9 working groups have been formed in 9 municipalities for the development of an optimisation plan; a draft optimisation plan has been prepared for all ten model municipalities, which is quite detailed and includes comments from the local self-government and schools. Such optimisation plans have been prepared for 70 other municipalities, which have yet to be discussed.

**Ahmed Qazimi, MoES:** Expressed gratitude for the provided support to HE so far. I'd like to emphasise that the process of ongoing quality improvement in higher education has an unbreakable connection to the resources and methods of funding higher education. And there is a pledge to enhance the 2% of GDP devoted to science and research to a level comparable to European countries. That is why modernising the formula is critical for improving the quality of higher education.

**Vera K. Mitkovska UNICEF** followed up on the topic of mental health. UNICEF has recognised the importance of this topic and its impact on educational quality and student progress. In collaboration with BRO, a Psychosocial Support programme was developed. At the moment a GAP analysis is being conducted in three sectors: education, social, and health, in order to determine the needs and identified the services required to support the mental health of children and young people. All findings will be used to create the new National Action Plan for Children and Youth. All findings will be used to create the National Action Plan for Children and Adolescents. Which will be reviewed and updated by all relevant institutions and parties. In the coming period, UNICEF will collaborate with the Ministry of Education and Science to develop the Adolescent Mental Health Programme, with a emphasis on strengthening the resources of the professional collaborators (pedagogues, psychologists, special educators, and rehabilitators) in primary and secondary education. This is an especially critical problem that requires a long-term plan.

In conclusion, **Nadica Kostoska, MoES** stated that the network of primary and secondary schools should enable preventive actions and the development of systems to assist the well-being of children and adolescents. Because the student's most natural habitat is the school community, where he should feel most protected.

She informed that with EU assistance, a new EMIS is being developed, which is a new method of enhancing evidence-based policy.



She also discussed the development of a novel Concept for postsecondary education. It will facilitate the processes of requalification and upqualification of students and adults, as support of the Ministry of Economy's Just Transition Programme. In that environment, it is critical to create a method for validating non-formal and informal learning, i.e. previously acquired knowledge. The mechanism for validating non-formal and informal education for six qualifications will be opened as part of the EU for Youth project. She also stressed that secondary education, vocational education and training, and higher education should all be considered together rather than separately, the new EU practices are putting effort for applied researchers as collaboration between HE, VET and business community.

## ➤ Conclusions

**Ms. Kostoska (MES) and Ms. Trenkoska (MLSP)**, summarized jointly the conclusions related to:

- SWG reviewed the mid-term strategic priorities in EESP sector, as well addressed the challenges for their implementation.
- Update of indicators as part of Performance Assessment Framework (PAF) for EESP sector and to have a summary on the progress.
- Recommendations noted by EUD due to those stipulated in EU Progress Report for 2023 for EESP sectors further to be addressed through implementation of sector coherent and complementary policies and reforms.
- Separate thematic meeting for education sector would be additionally organized by SWG, especially in regard to identifying strategic priorities for further preparation of programming document within New EC Initiative “Europe for Growth of Western Balkan”, whereas support for education measures and development of human capital would be foreseen within ‘Human Capital Pillar’.

## Annexes:

Annex 1	Agenda
Annex 2	MLSP and MES presentation from I and II session on Presentation of the main priorities and targets of reforms of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the Ministry of Education and Science in EU integration perspectives and challenges