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Danube Region Report on the Demographic Environment and Resources of Career Guidance

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1. Introduction: The strategic context of human capital in the Danube macro-region

The Danube region, stretching from the innovation hubs of Central Europe to the emerging markets of South-East Europe, is a microcosm of the broader challenges facing the European Union: demographic transition, economic disparities, and an urgent need for digital and green skills. This report, produced as part of the **"Personalized Approach to Territorial Pathways and Support for Careers" (PATHS)** project, provides an analysis of the educational and career guidance situation in nine partner countries: **Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.**

The primary aim of the analysis is to map the situation in each member country, presenting the complex network of schools, vocational training institutions, public employment services, and social factors that determine how young people transition from education to the labor market. The basic hypothesis of the PATHS project is that current systems are fragmented and reactive, and are unable to retain young people in rural and peripheral regions. This "geography of dissatisfaction" threatens the territorial cohesion of the Danube region, as there is a one-way flow of talent from rural peripheries to urban centers and Western Europe.

This document synthesizes data from nine detailed country reports, desk research, and qualitative inputs (focus groups with students, parents, and teachers). Its aim is to provide an evidence-based background for a new, integrated **Life Path Support Service (LPSS)** – a model that goes beyond traditional career guidance and offers holistic, community-based support to retain and develop young people.

2. Demographic and socio-economic situation: The crisis of depopulation and regional inequalities

The demographic trajectory of the Danube region is alarming. Although the nature of the challenge varies – from Austria's "aging stability" to Bulgaria's "demographic collapse" – the trend is negative everywhere in terms of the availability of young, skilled labor.

2.1. Demographic analysis by country

- **Bulgaria:** The country is facing a serious demographic crisis. The population has declined **by 11.5%** over the past decade, characterized by negative natural growth and a net migration rate of -3.3%. The proportion of the population under the age of 14 has fallen to a critical 14%, while the average age has risen to 45.3 years. This depopulation is not just a statistic; it threatens the sustainability of educational infrastructure in rural areas, leading to school closures and further isolation of the remaining communities.
- **Croatia:** The 2021 census revealed **a 9.25% population decline** compared to 2011, with the population falling to 3.87 million. The ageing index is 156.4, which means that there are 156 elderly people for every 100 young people. This imbalance puts enormous pressure on social systems. Migration is a double-edged sword: although net migration was positive in 2024 (+31,394 people) due to the import of labor from non-EU countries (e.g., Nepal, Bosnia and Herzegovina), the emigration of young, domestic professionals continues.
- **Romania:** Despite recent slight growth due to migration adjustments, the long-term trend is downward. The young population (aged 0-14) accounts for only 14.5% of the total population. The country suffers from massive brain drain, particularly in the medical and engineering professions, which is hollowing out local service capacity. Demographic pressure is most severe in rural areas, which are being depopulated in favor of urban centers such as Cluj-Napoca and Bucharest.
- **Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH):** The demographic situation is characterized by rapid aging and significant youth emigration. With a fertility rate of only 1.25, replacing the workforce is mathematically impossible without migration. The complex administrative structure further fragments the response, as cantons and entities struggle to coordinate population policies.
- **Hungary:** The population is steadily declining and aging. In the *Central Danube Priority Area*, which is the focus of the Hungarian report, the population has declined significantly, driven by negative natural growth (the number of deaths is double the number of births). Despite industrial investments such as Paks II, this rural region is struggling to retain young people, who are attracted to Budapest or abroad.
- **Slovakia:** The population is aging, with a median age of 42. The "Alpha generation" poses a particular challenge, characterized by high demand for flexibility but lower resilience, entering a demographically shrinking labor market. The rural-urban

divide is sharp, with Bratislava acting as a powerful magnet for talent from eastern Slovakia.

- **Czech Republic:** Unlike its neighbors, the Czech population has grown **to 10.9 million** by 2024, largely due to the massive influx of Ukrainian refugees (more than 300,000). However, natural growth has remained negative. The population is aging (average age 43.1 years), and the labor force is only being sustained by migration. This creates a specific challenge for the education system: integrating large numbers of foreign students while managing domestic demographic shifts.
- **Austria:** Austria presents an image of stability that masks regional fragility. While the national population is growing due to migration, rural regions such as the *Waldviertel* (Lower Austria) and *East Tyrol* (Tyrol) are struggling with significant youth emigration. In the Waldviertel region, the 15-29 age group has declined **by 19.4%** in 20 years. This "rural exodus" is creating "ghost villages" even in a wealthy nation, proving that economic prosperity alone does not guarantee that young people will stay.
- **Slovenia:** Slovenia, with a stable population of 2.1 million, faces specific regional inequalities. The emigration of young people is a particular problem in eastern Slovenia (*Vzhodna Slovenija*), where wages and productivity lag behind those in the western part of the country. An aging workforce is causing an acute shortage in technical professions.

2.2. Socio-economic inequalities and labor market dynamics

The economic landscape is dualistic. On the one hand, there are mature, high-income economies (Austria, Czech Republic, Slovenia), and on the other, there are transitional economies struggling with structural adjustment problems.

- **The "NEET" crisis:** The proportion of young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET) is a critical indicator of systemic failure.
 - **Romania:** has a NEET rate of ~22%, which is significantly above the EU average, indicating a massive failure of the school-to-work transition.
 - **Bulgaria:** The NEET rate is 11.44%, disproportionately affecting rural and Roma populations. The low official unemployment rate (4.2%) masks the reality of a shrinking labor force.

- **Croatia:** The NEET rate is 16.1% (2024), despite a significant decrease in unemployment, youth unemployment still remains a problem and that many young people are falling out of the system.
- **Austria and the Czech Republic:** Even here, the rural NEET rate is around 8%, suggesting that geographical isolation is a barrier regardless of national wealth.
- **Labor market paradoxes:**
 - **Bulgaria and Romania:** They face the "shortage paradox." High inactivity is coupled with critical labor shortages in highly skilled sectors (IT, healthcare) because the education system does not produce people with the right skills, and those who do have them tend to emigrate.
 - **Czech Republic:** Ranked as the 9th healthiest economy in the EU, it faces such acute labor shortages that it relies heavily on foreign workers to maintain industrial production.
 - **Bosnia and Herzegovina:** It has extremely low labor market participation, especially among women (38.3% in the Republika Srpska), which indicates a huge untapped human resource potential.

3. Structure of education systems: Governance and learning pathways

The institutional structure of education in the Danube region ranges from highly centralized systems to fragmented federal models. The structure determines how quickly a country can respond to the demographic challenges outlined above.

3.1. Governance models: Centralization vs. fragmentation

- **Hyper-fragmentation (Bosnia and Herzegovina):** The system is the most complex in Europe; one state, two entities. The Federation is further divided into ten cantons. This results in **12+ different education authorities**, making uniform reform or data collection nearly impossible. A given student's educational opportunities are strictly determined by the canton in which they reside.
- **Federal coordination (Austria):** Austria strikes a balance between federal legislative control (BMBWF) and provincial-level implementation (Bildungsdirektionen). This allows for regional adaptation, which is crucial in areas such as Tyrol or Carinthia, while maintaining national standards.
- **Centralized control (Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria):**

- **Hungary:** Has moved towards extreme centralization. Schools are maintained by **School District Centers** (state agencies), depriving local governments of control. The aim was to ensure equal opportunities, but it reduced local responsiveness and the autonomy of school principals.
- **Romania and Bulgaria:** The ministries of education set rigid national curricula. Although the goal is to maintain standards, this centralization often fails to take into account the resource realities of rural schools, widening the urban-rural quality gap.
- **Decentralized implementation (Czech Republic):** The ministry sets policy, but regions and municipalities have significant autonomy in financing and school management. This allows for local responsiveness but can lead to regional funding inequalities.

3.2. Primary and secondary education: The selection debate

A key structural difference is the age at which students are 'selected' for different educational pathways.

- **Early selection (Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia):**
 - **In Austria**, selection takes place at the age of 10. Students either go to the academic *AHS (Gymnasium)* or the general *Mittelschule*. This puts enormous pressure on 9-year-olds and their parents to make career-shaping decisions.
 - **Hungary** and **the Czech Republic** also have early selection points (at ages 10, 12, or 14) for multi-year secondary schools. This system favors students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and can perpetuate social inequalities at an early age.
- **Later selection (Croatia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania, Bosnia and Herzegovina):**
 - These countries generally maintain a unified primary/lower secondary structure until the age of 14 or 15.
 - **Croatia**: Primary education lasts for 8 years (unified structure). Selection takes place upon entry into secondary school (at age 14). Nevertheless, there is intense competition for places, for the most sought-after gymnasiums and vocational programs, this can be a highly competitive process.
 - **Slovenia**: 9-year uniform structure. Selection at age 15. This allows for a longer period of joint acquisition of general knowledge.

3.3. The crisis in the teaching profession

The teaching profession is in crisis throughout the region, characterized by aging and shortages.

- **Bulgaria**: One-third of teachers are over 55 years old. The system faces a "retirement gap" in the next 5 years. There is an acute shortage in STEM subjects.
- **Hungary**: The average age of teachers is high and there is a significant shortage, especially in rural areas and in the natural sciences. The centralized employment model is criticized for low wages, budgetary resources, and heavy workloads.
- **Austria**: Despite better salaries, there are shortages, especially in rural areas and in certain subjects. The system relies on delaying the retirement of older teachers.

- **Romania:** Struggles to attract qualified teachers to rural areas, leading to reliance on unqualified staff in the most disadvantaged communities.

4. Vocational education and training (VET) and dual systems

The Danube region is the heart of European vocational education and training. In many partner countries, VET enrolment rates exceed 70%, which is well above the Western European average. However, *the quality and relevance* of training varies dramatically.

4.1. The spectrum of "dual education"

The integration of work-based learning (dual system) is the primary reform goal in all countries, following the example of the Austrian/German/Swiss systems.

- **The benchmark: Austria**
 - Austria has a mature, well-functioning dual system. **Around 40% of** young people enter into apprenticeship contracts (*Lehre*), while another **40%** attend vocational secondary schools (*BHS/BMS*).
 - The system is enshrined in law, financed by companies (apprentices' wages) and the state (schooling), and managed by social partners (chambers). This ensures low youth unemployment.
 - *Challenge:* In rural areas such as East Tyrol, the diversity of apprenticeship places is limited by the local economy (e.g., focus on tourism), which narrows the range of choices.
- **Fast adopters: Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia**
 - **Hungary:** Aggressively reformed vocational training to reflect the dual model. The "Technikum" (5-year program) combines vocational training with a high school diploma. "Vocational Training Centers" manage schools regionally to align them with industry. Scholarship systems encourage participation. The challenge remains to involve SMEs in the dual system.
 - **Slovakia:** Introduced the Dual Education Act in 2015. Currently, ~5% of secondary school students participate in the dual system. It is growing, but faces administrative barriers from employers. The "Dual 18+" initiative targets adults.

- **Slovenia:** Strong vocational training tradition with high enrollment rates. Dual elements are integrated, but rural areas suffer from a lack of diverse employer partners.
- **Pilot program implementers: Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Czech Republic**
 - **Bulgaria:** The DOMINO project (Swiss-funded) successfully experimented with dual education. It is now national policy, but scaling up is slow. Dropout rates in vocational education remain high (>20%), indicating quality issues.
 - **Romania:** Dual education is a priority reform supported by EU funds. However, it struggles with the stigma that vocational schools are a "second choice," and the lack of modern equipment in rural schools is also a hindering factor.
 - **Croatia:** Vocational training is the dominant pathway (70% enrolment) with integrated dual elements. The rollout of dual model has been geographically uneven, with stronger adoption in industrial regions. SMEs lack capacity/finance to mentor.
 - **Czech Republic:** There is no fully institutionalized dual system, as in Austria. There are pilot projects, but the legislation is criticized by the Chamber of Commerce for placing too much burden on employers without clarifying the legal status of students.
 - **BiH:** Dual education is in a "pilot phase" and is heavily dependent on donor projects (Swiss/German). The fragmentation of laws between cantons hinders the establishment of a unified national dual system.

4.2. Innovations in vocational education

- **Hungary's "Dobbantó" program:** A key inclusion initiative. It targets young people aged 16+ who do not have a basic education. Instead of rigid theory, it focuses on basic skills development, preparing them for "workshop schools" to learn a partial profession. This is a proven practice for bringing NEET young people back into education.
- **Croatia Regional Competence Centers (RCC):** These EU-funded sectoral centers of excellence (e.g., in tourism, healthcare, engineering) serve as hubs for modern vocational training and youth career centres, bridging the gap between outdated school equipment and modern industry standards.

5. Career guidance environment: Systems, tools, and gaps

This chapter takes an in-depth look at the career guidance infrastructure, which is universally identified as the "missing link" in translating educational outcomes into labor market success.

5.1. Institutional structure: Fragmentation

- **Austria (The integrated model):** Career guidance is compulsory in the curriculum (grades 7-8). The **IBOBB** concept integrates information, counseling, and guidance. External support is strong through the **BIZ** (AMS Career Centers) and the **Chamber of Labor**. It is a well-oiled machine, although physical access to the centers is a challenge in rural areas.
- **Croatia (Hybrid model):** **CISOK** (Career Information and Counseling Centers) are one-stop shops operated by the employment service "with low coverage of students in transition phases (around 13-20% of students). They provide excellent services but are physically located in cities, inland and rural regions rely on itinerant or online services. School counseling often falls to overburdened "professional staff" (teachers/psychologists). Governance remains complex and somewhat fragmented.
- **Hungary (centralized-fragmented model):** The system involves many actors, including the **Education Office**, the **National Office for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Learning**, **chambers**, and **educational services**. Coordination is weak, characterized by both duplication and gaps. Schools are responsible for career guidance tasks, but there is a lack of dedicated career counselors. The system relies heavily on "Career Guidance Days," which are insufficient, typically organized once or twice a year.
- **Slovenia (The Digital Leader):** Strong focus on digital tools such as **Moja izbira** (My Choice) and **eSvetovanje**. The Employment Service (ESS) plays a key role. There are counselors in schools, but they often have multiple roles. Slovenia serves as a knowledge center for digital counseling tools in the region.
- **Bulgaria (project-based model):** Relies heavily on EU-funded projects and NGO initiatives (e.g., Business Foundation for Education). There is a **National Career Guidance Portal**, but coordination between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labor is weak. The system lacks a stable, state-funded backbone in rural areas.
- **Czech Republic (Teacher-centered model):** Counseling is provided by "educational counselors" – usually teachers with a few hours of training. They are

overworked. Innovative programs such as **Junior Achievement** (student enterprises) fill the gap, but they are not universal.

- **Romania (The developing model):** Counseling is formally integrated, but rural schools lack resources. County Resource and Educational Assistance Centers (CJRAE) provide support, but coverage is thin (one counselor for many students). The focus is often reactive (problem solving) rather than proactive career planning.

5.2. Tools and digitalization

- **Hungary's POM tool:** The *Career Orientation Measurement and Support Tool (POM)* is an outstanding digital innovation. It assesses students' skills in the areas of Math, Tech, and IT (MTMI) and matches them to profiles. It includes a video library about professions. It is a scalable best practice in counseling.
- **Croatia HZZ/CISOK:** mix of standardised digital self-assessment tools, information platforms, occupational databases, career management tools and in-person services.
- **Bulgaria Profesii.info:** An AI-based chatbot and platform designed to reach young people in rural areas. It democratizes access to counseling where physical centers are lacking.
- **Austria 18plus:** A structured program ("Berufs- und Studienchecker") that helps high school graduates decide between university and work. It combines psychological testing with counseling.

5.3. Research insights: The voice of stakeholders

Focus groups conducted in the region revealed common frustrations:

- **Students:** "We want practice, not theory." **In Croatia, Slovenia, and Hungary,** students unanimously requested more company visits and real-world experience. They find school counseling too abstract.
- **Parents:** "We are lost." Parents are the number one influencers, but they feel unprepared to give advice on modern careers. **In Austria and Slovenia, they** specifically asked for "parent guidance tools" to support their children. In **Croatia** parents express a desire for better collaboration with schools and professionals.
- **Teachers:** "We are not counselors." **In the Czech Republic, Croatia and Hungary,** teachers suffer from administrative burdens and lack specialized training for quality career counseling. They see this as an "extra" task.

6. Focus of the comparative study: the integration of career guidance systems, vocational education and training systems in different countries of the Danube region

The reports from the nine countries in the Danube region show a wide spectrum of integration between career guidance and vocational education and training systems, which is primarily shaped by institutional heritage, governance structure, and the density of the employer ecosystem. All nine countries – Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia, have some type of dual education or apprenticeship model that links vocational education and training with career guidance, but the degree of institutionalization ranges from Austria's mature system, where social partners jointly shape the content of vocational education and training, and where a national lifelong career guidance strategy coordinates the efforts of multiple stakeholders, to Bosnia and Herzegovina's dual program, which is currently in its experimental phase and operates without a national strategy or separate budget lines.

Three conditions consistently distinguish more integrated systems: formal coordination mechanisms linking education and labor ministries, shared digital information systems that convert labor market data into a format usable for career guidance, and sustained employer engagement mediated by chambers of commerce or similar intermediary bodies. Countries that do not have these conditions in place show weaker integration, regardless of their stated policy ambitions.

In all nine countries, the lack of advisory capacity and rural-urban disparities appear to be the most widespread obstacles to effective integration. Even in well-integrated systems such as Austria and Slovenia, employer participation in dual training is limited in rural areas, suggesting that national frameworks need to be complemented by location-specific strategies. Where outcome data are available, integrated dual training models show strong results – 82% employment among Czech vocational graduates, high permanent employment in the Bulgarian DOMINO model, and 78.5% graduate employability in Croatia – although most countries lack systematic follow-up mechanisms to comprehensively assess the effectiveness of career guidance and vocational training integration.

6.1. Results

All nine country reports prepared as part of the PATHS (Interreg Danube) project examine demographic, socio-economic, educational, and career guidance conditions. The countries represent a wide range of development levels and institutional maturity, from Austria's well-established dual training system to Bosnia and Herzegovina's initiative, which is still in its experimental phase, providing a rich basis for comparison between nations.

Country	Main context	Vocational training orientation	Career guidance structure
Austria	Strong vocational training orientation; three-quarters of young people choose vocational training; rural-urban disparities	Dual apprenticeship system and school-based VET (BMS/BHS) at upper-secondary level.	Two main pillars: school-based IBOBB model and AMS labor market services
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Demographic decline, youth emigration, fragmentation	Dual education in pilot phase; vocational training dominant in secondary education	Fragmented; concentrated in secondary vocational schools and some universities
Bulgaria	Aging and declining population; low employment rate; significant differences in the quality of education	Dual training (DOMINO project), school-based, secondary, higher and adult vocational levels	Multi-stakeholder system involving schools, employment services, universities and specialized centers with digital platforms

Country	Main context	Vocational training orientation	Career guidance structure
Slovakia	Population of 5.43 million; strong automotive industry; youth unemployment rate of 19.2%	Dual training since 2015; secondary and higher education levels	Integrated into vocational training through vocational school advisors; employment offices serve disadvantaged groups
Hungary	Declining and aging population; stable labor market with sector-specific needs;	Dual training, school programs based on a multi-center model at secondary and adult education levels	Fragmented system with multiple stakeholders; schools rely on external service providers;
Slovenia	Small population; high-income country; regional disparities between east and west	Dual training combining school and workplace; more than half of secondary school students enter vocational training	Provided at all levels of education and through public employment services; integrated into the curriculum
Romania	Medium-high income country; economic inequalities and brain drain; urban-rural divide	Dual training and school-based vocational training in secondary education (14-18 years old)	Integrated into primary, secondary, and higher education; centrally managed by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labor

Country	Main context	Vocational training orientation	Career guidance structure
Czech Republic	Central European economy with moderate growth; decentralized education management	Comprehensive vocational training system comprising three-year apprenticeships and four-year programs; dual training in a pilot phase	Primarily school-based, with the help of educational advisors; supplemented by employment offices and non-profit organizations
Croatia	Persistent population decline; volatile economic trajectory; poverty rate of 20.3%	Dual education and school programs in secondary and higher education	Decentralized model with CISOK career centers, schools, and HZZ employment services at all levels of education

6.2. Integration mechanisms

Several patterns emerge from this comparison. All nine countries have some form of dual training model in vocational education, although the degree of institutionalization varies significantly. Austria's dual training system is the most mature, where social partners jointly develop the content of vocational education and support the placement of apprenticeships. At the other end of the scale, the dual elements in Bosnia and Herzegovina are still in an experimental stage, with limited employer participation. Bulgaria occupies a middle position, where the DOMINO project presents successful dual training, but the nationwide expansion of the model faces challenges.

The table below summarizes the specific mechanisms through which career guidance and vocational education and training systems are linked in each country.

Country	Official coordination bodies	Joint information systems	Joint programs	Cross-sectoral partnerships	Main integration features
Austria	National Strategy for Lifelong Guidance; National Forum for Lifelong Guidance	AMS digital career information tools (Career Compass, Berufslexikon)	Dual apprenticeship system and transition programmes between school and labour market	Social partners (WKO, AK) jointly develop vocational training content	Multi-level governance; social partners support dual practices
Bosnia and Herzegovina	No official coordination bodies; creation of inter-ministerial working groups recommended	Not identified	Pilot dual training programs in selected regions	Involvement of local employers and higher education institutions in career guidance groups operating in secondary schools	Integration is project-based and limited in scope

Country	Official coordination bodies	Joint information systems	Joint programs	Cross-sectoral partnerships	Main integration features
Bulgaria	NAVET, MES, MLSP	National portal for student career guidance	Dual training model (DOMINO project)	BFE, Chamber of Commerce and Industry	Employers participating in workplace learning; licensing ensures alignment with the labor market
Slovakia	Network of regional career guidance counselors; 2021–2030 lifelong learning strategy	Expansion of digitized portals	Dual education combining training and career counseling	Partnerships with the automotive, green technology, and digital services sectors	Certification of career advisors; code of ethics; evaluation indicators
Hungary	Education Office, NIVE, regionally Central Danube Development Council	Portals	Chambers, school further education information, PATHS project municipal-level career guidance plans	Involvement of employers through company visits and dual training	The national core curriculum includes career guidance tasks

Country	Official coordination bodies	Joint information systems	Joint programs	Cross-sectoral partnerships	Main integration features
Slovenia	Coordinated by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labor	Career portals (Moja izbira, eSvetovnje)	Dual training programs supported by chambers	Chambers of commerce, employers, non-governmental organizations	Integration of career guidance into educational programs
Romania	Ministry of Education and Ministry of Labor and Social Protection	Not explicitly mentioned	Career fairs, work placements, internship programs	Partnerships with employers, higher education institutions, non-governmental organizations, chambers of commerce	The dual training model aligns education with labor market needs
Czech Republic	National Advisory Forum	National Pedagogical Institute portal (infoabsolvent.cz)	Pilot introduction of dual training elements	Partnerships between employers and schools; Chamber of Commerce	Ministry of Education cooperates with Ministry of Labor in managing counseling

Country	Official coordination bodies	Joint information systems	Joint programs	Cross-sectoral partnerships	Main integration features
Croatia	Ministry of Science, Education and Youth (MZOM) and the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy (MRMSOSP)	CROQF; HZZ portal	Professional excellence competitions, Career fairs, group workshops, employer visits, "job-shadowing days", internship programs (jeli imamo "job-shadowing days")	Cooperation between schools, HZZ, CISOK, local employers and higher education institutions, Agency for Vocational Education and Training (ASOO), Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes (AMPEU / Euroguidance Croatia), NGO	The qualifications framework aligns qualifications with economic needs

Digital information systems represent an increasingly important channel for integration. Austria's AMS Career Compass, Bulgaria's National Career Guidance Portal, Slovenia's Moja izbira and eSvetovanje platforms, the Czech Republic's infoabsolvent.cz portal, and Croatia's CROQF and HZZ portals all form a bridge between career guidance and labor market information. However, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Hungary do not have well-developed shared information systems, which limits the ability of advisors to provide data-based advice.

Cross-sectoral partnerships between education, employment services, and social partners exist in all countries, although their depth varies. Austria and Slovenia stand out for their systematic involvement of chambers of commerce in career guidance and the

promotion of vocational training. In contrast, Bosnia and Herzegovina relies more on project-based cooperation, which lacks institutional sustainability.

6.3.Barriers to integration

Limited counseling capacity appears to be the most widespread obstacle, affecting all nine countries to varying degrees. Even in Austria, where the system is relatively well developed, teachers feel that they are not adequately prepared for the counseling role, as the emphasis is on pedagogical knowledge rather than labor market knowledge. In the Czech Republic, the challenge is that counselors perform their counseling duties alongside their teaching duties, which limits the quality and availability of services. Croatia relies on overburdened teachers and psychologists who do not have adequate career guidance training or experience.

Category of barriers	Countries affected	Main manifestations
Fragmented governance	Bosnia and Herzegovina, Hungary, Czech Republic, Croatia	Decentralized systems with weak interministerial coordination; multiple portals that are not integrated into school curricula
Insufficient advisory capacity	All nine countries	Teachers not prepared for advisory role in Austria; insufficient number of advisors in Bosnia and Herzegovina; overburdened staff in the Czech Republic; lack of trained professionals in Croatia
Regional inequalities	Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Romania, Croatia	Limited access to education, employers, and career guidance services in rural areas

Category of barriers	Countries affected	Main manifestations
Resource constraints	Bosnia and Herzegovina, Hungary, Romania, Czech Republic, Croatia	In Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is no separate budget item for career guidance; in Hungary, support is limited despite EU funding; in Romania, financial constraints hinder access; in the Czech Republic, financial support is limited, in Croatia, funding for CPD is often project-dependent and there is no separate budget item for career guidance in schools
Organizational shortcomings	Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Romania, Croatia	Bosnia and Herzegovina lacks a comprehensive national framework; Bulgaria lacks consistency between strategic visions and short-term plans; the Czech Republic lacks a systematic, lifelong approach; Romania has outdated curricula. In Croatia, there is no single permanent coordination body linking education, employment, and social partners

Category of barriers	Countries affected	Main manifestations
Limited integration of labor market information	Bosnia and Herzegovina, Hungary, Croatia	Statistical data is not presented in a user-friendly format; labor market data is not adequately adapted for educational purposes; limited content available for career guidance
Weak employer commitment	Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia (rural areas), Romania, Croatia	Limited cooperation between schools and businesses; limited employer participation in rural areas; lack of coordination between schools and employers, in Croatia SMEs lack capacity/finance to mentor.

Regional inequalities are the second general challenge, caused by the gap between rural and urban areas in terms of access to employers, educational institutions, and career guidance services. In Austria, rural regions such as Waldviertel have limited access to vocational training and experience youth migration. The eastern region of Slovenia lags behind its western counterparts in terms of economic indicators and employer participation in dual training. Rural schools in Romania lack modern equipment and digital access, which further exacerbates career guidance deficiencies.

6.4. Labor market integration

Country	Use of labor market data	Employer participation in the development of vocational training	Monitoring of employment outcomes
Austria	AMS labour market intelligence tools provide occupational profiles, qualification requirements and labour market demand forecasts.	Social partners jointly develop apprenticeship training regulations; companies finance workplace training.	AMS regularly monitors labour market trends and publishes labour market forecasts and reports.
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Limited; data is not presented in a user-friendly format	Limited cooperation; employers identify skills shortages	No comprehensive national monitoring framework
Bulgaria	Development of inter-institutional data systems recommended	SMEs participate in curriculum development through a dual model	Monitoring of graduate employment rates; high permanent employment rates from dual training
Slovakia	Emphasis on exploring opportunities for vocational training and higher education	Since 2015, dual training has included practical training with employers	Focus on supporting the transition from education to the world of work
Hungary	Training provision tailored to labor market needs	Involvement of employers through company visits and dual training	Emphasis on workforce preparation; specific monitoring not detailed

Country	Use of labor market data	Employer participation in the development of vocational training	Monitoring of employment outcomes
Slovenia	ESS provides career information and workshops based on labor market data	Chambers of commerce support vocational training and dual education	Career centers at higher education institutions offer employer networking; results monitoring is integrated
Romania	Labour market information is integrated into career guidance services	The dual model combines classroom education with workplace training	Not specifically mentioned
Czech	The labor office provides data on job requirements and employment information for graduates	Pilot introduction of dual training with structured employer cooperation	The National Pedagogical Institute portal monitors graduate employment
Croatia	The occupational catalog and labor market exchange provide real-time data	Employer associations and trade unions participation in the development of vocational curricula in Croatia	Labour market data used for career guidance; specific monitoring not detailed

Austria shows the most sophisticated integration of labor market information into career guidance, with the AMS providing comprehensive digital tools that transform labor market data into career guidance information that can be used by students and counselors. The Czech Republic and Croatia also have special information portals that link labor market outcomes to learning pathways. In contrast, Bosnia and Herzegovina finds it difficult to convert the available statistical data into a format that can be used by

counselors and students, which represents a critical bottleneck in the career guidance-vocational training-labor market chain.

6.5.Integration outcomes

Country	Key performance indicators	Significant results	Persistent challenges
Austria	The dual apprenticeship system is a key mechanism supporting the transition from education to employment.	Close links between education and the labor market through vocational training	The report provides limited quantitative indicators; systematic national outcome monitoring for career guidance is still limited.
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Improved student motivation in dual training pilot programs [	Better prepared candidates for employers at the pilot program sites	Limited scale; lack of comprehensive monitoring frameworks
Bulgaria	High permanent employment rate among participants in dual training	The dual training model effectively addresses the mismatch between skills and labor market needs	Dropout rate of more than 21% during the vocational training cycle; the model has not been adopted nationwide
Slovakia	Dual training improves employment prospects	Shift from psychometric assessments to inclusive lifelong career guidance	Expansion targets set for 2030; current implementation incomplete

Country	Key performance indicators	Significant results	Persistent challenges
Hungary	Vocational education and training is well aligned with labor market needs	The PATHS project focuses on the needs of rural and disadvantaged areas	Further development is needed in the integration of career guidance and vocational training.
Slovenia	High student participation in vocational education and training	Systematic integration of career guidance into the curriculum; multi-stakeholder approach	Limited employer participation in rural areas
Romania	Dual training aligns education with the labor market	Initiatives to reduce early school leaving	Lack of resources; outdated equipment; limited concrete results data
Czech	82% employment rate for vocational training graduates; 30-40% of participants in the entrepreneurship program start their own businesses	Low early school leaving rate; strong PISA performance	Fragmented evaluation system; no unified national framework
Croatia	78.5% employability rate for graduates (1-3 years); 16.8% youth unemployment rate	Effective labor recruitment despite demographic decline	Youth unemployment and NEET rates remain high, higher dropout risk for vulnerable groups

The Czech Republic has the most concrete results: 82% of vocational training graduates find work, and 30-40% of participants in entrepreneurial programs start their own businesses. In Croatia, 78.5% of graduates find work within one to three years of obtaining their diploma. Bulgaria's dual training model results in high steady employment rates among participants, although the dropout rate of over 21% observed throughout the entire vocational training cycle points to broader systemic challenges. Most of the countries not listed report qualitative rather than quantitative results, reflecting the lack of systematic monitoring mechanisms.

6.6. Regulatory frameworks

All nine countries have established or are developing regulatory and governance frameworks to support the integration of career guidance and vocational education and training, although their comprehensiveness and implementation vary considerably.

Austria has the most developed framework, based on a national lifelong career guidance strategy embedded in a broader lifelong learning strategy, federal legislation, including the 1962 School Act, and the IBOBB quality label and other quality assurance mechanisms. Slovakia has adopted a national strategy for lifelong learning and career guidance for 2021-2030, which includes plans to introduce qualifications for career guidance counselors and uniform service standards. Bulgaria's strategic framework for education, training, and learning (2021-2030) is complemented by the National Action Plan for Employment and supported by significant EU funding from the European Structural and Investment Funds. Slovenia operates on the basis of a national lifelong career guidance strategy coordinated jointly by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labor.

The Czech Republic has an education policy strategy until 2030 and relevant legislation (Education Act, Employment Act), but there is no systematic, lifelong approach to career guidance and stable state budget funding is needed. Croatia's national career guidance strategy (2016-2020) expired without establishing a regulated title or mandatory qualification path for career guidance professionals. Hungary's national core curriculum includes career guidance tasks, but their practical implementation remains limited, and EU-funded projects have had little lasting impact. Romania relies on EU-compliant, ministry-led strategies and is implementing ongoing reforms to modernize vocational schools and promote dual training. Bosnia and Herzegovina's career guidance strategic guidelines have expired and there is no replacement national strategy, with recommendations calling for the creation of a light national framework to ensure coherence between organizations.

EU regulation and funding are proving to be a significant driver in all countries, particularly through alignment with European Qualifications Framework standards, participation in the Erasmus+ program, and investments in career guidance infrastructure from the Structural Funds.

6.7. Partial summary

Cross-national comparisons reveal clear degrees of integration maturity, which can be explained by three interacting factors: institutional heritage, governance structure, and the employer environment.

Austria and Slovenia represent the most integrated systems, where career guidance is embedded in the curriculum, supported by well-equipped public employment services and reinforced by the active participation of social partners in the planning of vocational education and training. Both countries have long- dual training traditions, strong chambers of commerce linking education and industry, and governance that coordinates multiple ministries. The Czech Republic and Slovakia occupy an intermediate position, with significant vocational training infrastructure and emerging coordination mechanisms, but they are hampered by fragmented assessment systems and the incomplete professionalization of the advisory workforce.

Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia form a third group, where integration mechanisms exist but their implementation suffers from significant shortcomings. Bulgaria's dual training model has proven highly effective where it has been introduced, and the steady employment rate of participants is high, but the dropout rate from vocational training of more than 21% and the dependence on project-based funding highlight the challenge of how to transform successful pilot programs into systemic reform. Hungary's career guidance system is divided among several stakeholders who lack effective coordination and leadership and view the career guidance provisions of the national core curriculum as a supplementary activity rather than a core task. Croatia has developed standardized tools through the CISOK centers and the CROQF framework, but there is a lack of clear national standards for career guidance practice, resulting in differences between schools.

Bosnia and Herzegovina stands out as the least integrated system, where deeply fragmented governance between organizations, the lack of a current national strategy, the absence of separate budget lines for career guidance, and dual training still in its experimental phase combine to create complex barriers to integration. The comparison

with Austria is instructive: both countries have decentralized governance elements, but Austria's integration is successful because strong intermediary institutions (the National Forum for Lifelong Guidance, social partners, AMS) bridge the governance levels, while Bosnia and Herzegovina lacks similar bridging structures.

The **rural-urban divide** reduces the effectiveness of integration in all nine countries. Even in well-integrated systems such as Austria and Slovenia, employer participation in dual training is limited in rural areas, access to career guidance services is limited, and the migration of young people erodes the local human capital base. This pattern suggests that national-level organizational frameworks, however well designed, require complementary, place-specific strategies—such as Hungary's PATHS project, which targets municipal-level services in disadvantaged areas—to achieve equitable integration outcomes.

The evidence consistently suggests that three conditions are necessary for effective integration, although they are not sufficient on their own: (1) a formal coordination mechanism linking the ministries of education and employment, which exists in Austria, Slovenia, Bulgaria, and Slovakia; (2) shared digital information systems that convert labor market data into a format suitable for counseling, which are most advanced in Austria, the Czech Republic, and Croatia; and (3) the continuous involvement of employers in both the design of vocational training and the provision of career guidance services, which is strongest where chambers of commerce act as institutional intermediaries. Countries that do not meet any of these three conditions – such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, which does not meet any of the three – show significantly weaker integration results despite political efforts.

7. Key challenges and recommendations

7.1. Systemic challenges

1. **The rural trap:** In all nine countries, young people in rural areas face a "double disadvantage": fewer educational choices and weaker counseling services. This drives migration to cities.
2. **Skills mismatch:** Education systems (especially in BG, RO, HR) are still too theoretical. Graduates leave with a degree but without the digital/practical skills required by employers.

3. **Governance anomalies:** The gap between Ministries of Education (supply side) and Ministries of Labor (demand side) prevents a unified strategy. This is most severe in BiH, Bulgaria, and Romania.
4. **Teacher burnout:** An aging, overburdened teaching staff cannot be the sole provider of career guidance. The role needs to be professionalized.

7.2. Strategic recommendations

- **Professionalization of counseling:** Move away from the "teacher-counselor" model towards full-time, trained career experts, or provide significant time and training for teachers/professional associate (as requested in Croatia and Hungary).
- **Scaling up dual education:** Accelerate the transition from "pilot projects" to national systems in the Balkans. Involve SMEs through tax incentives and "training alliances" (Austrian model).
- **Digital + Human:** Use digital tools (POM, Profesii.info) for mass screening, but maintain human resources for in-depth counseling of at-risk youth.
- **Localization of strategy:** Empowering local governments (as in the PATHS pilot) to coordinate local ecosystems, connecting schools and local businesses to retain talent.

8. Conclusion: Strategic roadmap for human capital in the Danube region

A comparative analysis of Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia reveals a region at a critical crossroads. The Danube region is rich in human potential, but is currently suffering from a lack of structural efficiency, demographic headwinds, and persistent regional inequalities. **The Life Path Support Service (LPSS)** envisioned by the PATHS project is not just educational development; it is a strategic imperative for the economic survival of the region.

8.1. The "geography of dissatisfaction" and the imperative of cohesion

Research confirms the "geography of discontent," where peripheral regions (e.g., Waldviertel in Austria, Eastern Slovenia, Northwestern Bulgaria, Rural Romania) have fallen into a vicious cycle of depopulation and erosion of services. Education systems, originally designed to promote equality, are inadvertently accelerating this divergence by channeling rural youth to urban centers without offering viable local pathways. The **demographic problem** – most acute in Bulgaria, Croatia, and BiH – is a ticking time bomb for these challenges. There is no longer any surplus labor to waste; every young person who falls into the NEET category or emigrates represents a permanent loss of productive capacity for the region.

8.2. The failure of fragmented solutions

The status quo of career guidance – fragmented, underfunded, and reliant on overly enthusiastic but untrained teachers – is inadequate.

- **Governance failure:** In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Bulgaria, the lack of coordination between the ministries of education and labor creates a gap where young people fall through the cracks.
- **Resource failure:** In Romania and Hungary, excellent tools (such as POM) or policies exist on paper, but implementation in rural areas is hampered by a lack of staff and infrastructure.
- **Pedagogical failure:** The persistent "theoretical bias" in Southeast Europe (as evidenced by PISA results) alienates young people who want practical, experiential learning.

8.3. The LPSS model: A paradigm shift

The Life Path Support Service (LPSS) model proposes a paradigm shift from "school-centered career counseling" to "community-centered life planning."

1. **Holistic scope:** Guidance should address not only "what job should I take," but also "how can I build a life in this region." This includes housing, social integration, and work-life balance, addressing the holistic needs of the Alpha generation identified in Slovakia.

2. Local **government leadership**: Local governments need to become active players. As seen in Czech local pilots or Austrian regional management, local actors are best placed to connect schools with local SMEs, creating a "bond" that retains talent.
3. **Interoperability**: The system must break down dead ends. The Hungarian *Technikum* and the Austrian *BRP/Lehre mit Matura* show that vocational training can be a gateway to higher education, eliminating the stigma attached to VET. This interoperability is key to parental acceptance.

8.4. Detailed policy recommendations for 2025-2030

A. For European and transnational decision-makers (EUSDR):

- **Harmonization of standards**: Promote cross-border recognition of micro-credentials and VET certificates. A welder trained in Croatia should be able to work seamlessly in Austria without a 'brain drain', through 'brain circulation' – circular migration patterns that benefit both economies.
- **Investment in "soft" infrastructure**: Shift EU funding priorities from building renovation (hardware) to human capital (software). Fund the training of a new corps of "Career Mentors" who can operate between schools and employment services.

B. For national governments:

- **Mandatory coordination**: Enactment of binding coordination mechanisms between the Ministries of Education and Labor (as in the Austrian model). Career guidance cannot be an isolated policy area.
- **Encouraging SME participation**: Small companies in BG, RO, and BiH cannot bear the costs of dual education alone. Tax incentives and state-supported mentor training are essential for scaling dual systems beyond large multinational companies.
- **Data-driven policy**: Introduction of tracking systems (graduate career tracking) to measure the long-term success of educational pathways. Currently, countries such as BiH and Romania do not have data on *where* their graduates go.

C. For local and regional actors:

- **One-Stop-Shop 2.0:** Creation of physical and digital hubs (such as the developed CISOKs or BIZs) that are accessible in rural centers, not just in capital cities. Mobile advisory units could serve remote villages in Romania and Bulgaria.
- **Parent Academies:** Launching targeted campaigns to educate parents about the modern labor market. Parents are the number one influencers; if they view vocational training as a failure, the system will fail.

8.5. Final outlook

The Danube region has the institutional foundations (strong vocational training traditions, expanding digital infrastructure) to reverse the current negative trends. However, success requires a shift from a "compliance mindset" – ticking boxes on EU strategies – to a "development mindset" – actively investing in the careers of the next generation. By introducing an integrated, practical, and regionally responsive LPSS, the Danube region can transform its diversity from a management challenge into a dynamic asset, ensuring that its young people not only survive the transitions of the 21st century, but also steer them.

Appendix 9: Country report summaries by participant

9.1. Austria

Career guidance and development in Austria must be understood in close connection with the country's education system. Austria's educational environment is characterized by a strong vocational orientation: after completing nine years of compulsory schooling, approximately three-quarters of students continue their studies in vocational training or vocational preparatory courses. The dual training system, in which students spend around 80% of their time in companies and 20% in vocational schools, is internationally recognized as a strength because it ensures a close link between education and the labor market. However, this structure also requires young people to make career choices at an early age, often around 14-15, when many do not have the experience necessary to make informed decisions. including academic secondary schools (AHS) and vocational tracks such as school-based VET (BMS/BHS). This diversity provides flexibility, but regional differences are significant. Urban centers such as Vienna, Graz, and Innsbruck offer a wide

range of opportunities, while rural and peripheral areas often provide only limited access to secondary and higher education institutions. This structural imbalance contributes to the migration of young people, especially from regions such as Waldviertel, East Tyrol, Kärntner Unterland, and Murau, where students often commute long distances or relocate permanently in order to study.

Career guidance is embedded in both the education and labor market systems. Within schools, guidance is provided through the IBOBB (Information, Guidance, and Orientation for Education and Career) framework. Starting in lower secondary school, students participate in career orientation lessons, individual counseling, and real-world experiences such as internships or job fairs. In upper secondary education, digital tools such as the "Berufs- und Studienchecker" for those over 18 provide structured support for decision-making. Higher education institutions operate career centers and psychological counseling services to accompany students on their academic or professional paths. Outside the education sector, the Public Employment Service (AMS) plays a central role. Its Career Information Centers (BIZ) provide individual counseling, aptitude tests, and access to labor market data. Digital resources such as the Career Compass, the Beruflexikon and the AMS Job Barometer ensure that counseling is based on up-to-date labor market information. Social partners, including the Chamber of Commerce and the Chamber of Labor, as well as non-governmental organizations, provide additional services that are often targeted at specific groups such as migrants, women or young people at risk of exclusion. Special programs such as Jugendcoaching, AusbildungsFit, and Fit2Work support young people with special needs and ensure inclusive access to career guidance.

Despite this comprehensive structure, research points to fragmentation and uneven implementation. In schools, counseling often depends on the commitment of individual teachers and the availability of resources. Teachers often report feeling unprepared for their counseling roles, as their training focuses primarily on pedagogy rather than labor market knowledge. Parents encounter difficulties navigating the system and often feel that they must support their children's decisions on their own. Meanwhile, students believe that career guidance is too theoretical and that they would benefit from more practical experiences, such as internships, company visits, and direct encounters with the world of work.

Qualitative findings based on 25 interviews with students, parents, and teachers and two focus groups highlight these systemic weaknesses. Students appreciate the opportunities

they receive at school, but often feel pressured to make decisions too early, especially given the long-term consequences of choosing between academic and vocational paths.

Parents demand clearer communication and structured guidance offers, while teachers see a need for more time, training, and cooperation with external experts. All three groups emphasize the importance of real-life experiences and individual counseling. Regional inequalities in the region exacerbate these challenges. In the Waldviertel, the migration of young people is driven by limited educational opportunities and weak local labor markets. East Tyrol faces a steep demographic decline among young people, which reduces the number of potential pupils and students. The Kärntner Unterland, although economically diverse, struggles with youth unemployment and relatively low participation in higher education. Murau in Styria is a good example of the challenges facing rural regions: depopulation, limited transport links, and few higher education opportunities are driving young people to move away. In all these regions, career guidance services are key to retaining young people, but local provision is often limited. National strategies aim to address these weaknesses. Austria's lifelong learning strategy includes the Lifelong Guidance (LLG) framework, which prioritizes decision-making skills, the professionalization of guidance practitioners, quality assurance, and access for new target groups. The National Forum for Lifelong Guidance brings together ministries, the AMS, social partners, and research institutes to coordinate policy.

However, evaluations show that although structures are in place, consistent implementation and long-term monitoring are still limited.

In summary, Austria's career guidance and development system combines strong institutional foundations with clear challenges. The vocational orientation of the education system ensures strong links to the labor market, but early decision-making creates risks for young people who lack experience and information. Dual counseling through schools and the AMS provides broad access but often leads to fragmented implementation. The quality evidence points to a strong need for more practical experience, better communication, and better training for teachers and counselors. Regional disparities further emphasize the need for targeted support in rural areas. To strengthen career guidance, Austria should improve coordination between stakeholders, expand digital and mobile services, and ensure that all young people, regardless of region or background, have access to high-quality, practical, and personalized guidance.

9.2. Bosnia and Herzegovina

Career guidance in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains an evolving but underdeveloped area of education and employment policy. The system operates in a complex, decentralized governance environment, which limits coherence but also offers opportunities for local innovation.

Services are concentrated in vocational secondary schools and, to a lesser extent, universities, while provision at primary level is minimal.

Counseling activities are mostly carried out by school teachers and psychologists, who face capacity and training constraints and do not have a formalized qualification pathway. Coordination with employment services, chambers, and employers is sporadic, and labor market information is not sufficiently integrated into practice. Although donor-funded projects have experimented with innovative approaches, such as dual training and career corners, these remain fragmented and are not sustainable without systemic support.

Key weaknesses include limited institutional coordination, unequal access between urban and rural areas, a lack of professionalism, and a lack of quality assurance mechanisms.

Nevertheless, the system benefits from a number of supportive conditions: the existing legal framework, an expanding network of partners, and growing political attention to youth employability and skills. Strengthening career guidance therefore requires targeted institutional investment, professional training, and more consistent cooperation between the education and employment sectors. These developments are essential for the successful implementation of the Life Path Support Service (LPSS) and for creating the conditions for the establishment of Youth Career Guidance Centers, ensuring that

all young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina receive fair and informed support in shaping their career paths.

Recommendation to strengthen career guidance in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The following recommendations are derived from the analysis presented in the report and reflect the key priorities for developing a coherent, inclusive, and sustainable career guidance system in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

1. Develop a light national framework – define minimum requirements and guidelines for career guidance across entities, cantons, and the Brčko District to ensure coherence.
2. Introducing a basic service package in all secondary schools – ensuring that all students have access to at least one structured career guidance session per year.

3. Professionalization of career guidance practitioners – creation of a training module for educators, psychologists, and teachers that includes career guidance competencies, with opportunities for continuous professional development.
4. Strengthening cross-sectoral cooperation – formalizing cooperation between schools, employment services, chambers of commerce, employers, and universities through cooperation agreements.
5. Integrating labor market information (LMI) – creating simple digital dashboards or portals that link education and employment data, making it accessible to counselors, teachers, and students.
6. Support for pilot dual training and employer involvement – expanding successful pilot projects and systematically evaluating their results, focusing on sectors with high labor demand.
7. Addressing inequalities – implementing targeted measures to ensure access for rural students, low-income families and marginalized groups (e.g., transportation subsidies, scholarships, inclusive tools).
8. Establishing monitoring and quality assurance – introducing indicators to monitor the provision and effectiveness of career guidance and incorporating them into national education statistics.

9.3. Bulgaria

This report provides a detailed analysis of the Republic of Bulgaria, with a particular focus on its demographic profile, socio-economic situation, and the complex structure of its education, training, and career guidance systems. The central finding of the analysis is that Bulgaria faces a deep and fundamental demographic crisis, characterized by a rapidly declining and aging population. This crisis is not merely a statistical trend; it is a root cause that exerts enormous pressure on the education system and poses significant challenges for the labor market. Although the country has achieved a low national unemployment rate, this indicator is misleading, as it primarily reflects a shrinking labor force and widespread emigration rather than a strong, expanding labor market.

Despite these systemic challenges, the Bulgarian government has shown a strong commitment to modernization through a comprehensive and progressive strategic framework for education and training. Notable successes include a significant reduction in early school leaving rates and the successful piloting of a dual education model through

the DOMINO project. The success of the project has led to a national commitment to extend the model, with significant resources allocated for its further development. In addition, the country has established extensive career guidance centers, national portals, and university career offices, often with the support of European Union funding.

Demographic and socio-economic situation Bulgaria's demographic crisis is the most pressing problem, with its population expected to decline significantly by 2050. This decline is the result of low birth rates and high emigration rates, particularly among young, skilled workers – a phenomenon known as the "brain drain." The aging population places a huge burden on social and economic systems, including the education sector, where one-third of all teachers are aged 55 or older. This demographic shift also has a direct impact on the labor market, leading to labor shortages in key sectors despite the reported low unemployment rate. The low unemployment rate is therefore a misleading indicator, reflecting a shrinking labor force rather than a healthy labor market expanding to the age of 65. This demographic reality underscores the urgent need for a more efficient and effective education and training system that maximizes the potential of the remaining workforce.

Challenges in the education and training system

The report highlights significant quality deficiencies in the Bulgarian education system despite high literacy and enrollment rates. A significant proportion of 15-year-olds perform below the minimum proficiency level in key subjects, as measured by international PISA surveys. The system is also criticized for its strong theoretical bias, which often fails to equip students with the practical skills needed in the modern labor market. This contributes to a mismatch between skills demand and supply, with employers struggling to find qualified workers despite low unemployment rates. To address these issues, the government has focused on a series of reforms and strategic documents.

The "Bulgaria 2030" framework and the "National Program for the Modernization of Vocational Education and Training" aim to improve the quality and relevance of education. However, the report notes that bridging the gap between policy and practical implementation remains a significant challenge.

The role of career guidance Bulgaria's career guidance system is a complex network of public, non-governmental, and private actors.

Digital platforms and artificial intelligence-based tools are used to overcome geographical inequalities and improve access to information. However, the system is hampered by a

lack of explicit coordination between different government ministries and a persistent gap between policy and practical implementation. This fragmentation and lack of a unified strategy makes it difficult to provide comprehensive and consistent guidance to young people. The report recommends that, in order to improve the quality of career guidance, concerted efforts should be made to professionalize the career guidance workforce through continuous training and capacity building for career guidance practitioners and educational counselors.

The way forward and recommendations

The report concludes that Bulgaria is at a critical juncture in human capital development. While the country has a strong legal and political basis for modernization and has secured significant national and European funding, the future success of its education, training, and career guidance systems depends on its ability to bridge the gap between policy and practice.

The report recommends a number of key measures to address these challenges:

Strengthening governance and data systems: Improving coordination between different ministries and collecting more reliable data to inform policy decisions.

Strengthening public-private partnerships: Encourage greater cooperation between educational institutions and the private sector to ensure that curricula are aligned with labor market needs.

Modernizing pedagogy: Shifting from a theory-based education model to one that emphasizes critical thinking, problem solving, and practical skills.

Professionalizing the career guidance workforce: Investing in sustainable training and capacity-building programs for career guidance counselors and advisors.

By focusing on these areas, Bulgaria can better address its fundamental demographic crisis and ensure that its human capital development keeps pace with the demands of a modern economy.

9.4. Croatia

All stakeholder groups share a common aspiration: career guidance should evolve from scattered initiatives into a systematic, participatory and lifelong process embedded in education. Effective reform is based on early intervention, coordinated partnerships, practical experience, and professional career guidance services.

Common conclusions across all groups:

- Career guidance is considered essential for informed decision-making and personal development.
- There is a common view that it is not available in schools, and there is a strong demand for it to start earlier (already in primary school).
- Experience-based learning and mentoring are considered the most effective forms of counseling.
- Communication and coordination between schools, families, and outside experts is repeatedly mentioned as lacking but necessary.
- All groups emphasize that career guidance should be continuous, personalized, and supported by trained professionals, rather than a one-time or optional activity.

With regard to the availability and use of various tools, the common conclusions in all groups can be summarized as follows:

- A number of tools are in use, but they are applied inconsistently and lack a systemic framework.
- Practical, experience-based tools (professional practices, workshops, real workplace visits) are considered most valuable.
- Testing and information sessions alone are not sufficient without interpretation, guidance, and follow-up.
- School cooperation with external partners (HZZ, CISOK, employers) is considered important but still underdeveloped.
- All groups agree that tools should be accessible to all students, integrated into the school, and accompanied by guidance, rather than left to personal initiative.

Although there are numerous career guidance tools and activities, they are often fragmented, unevenly distributed, and lack continuity. The common message from all groups is that Croatia's education system needs a coherent, structured, and student-centered approach to using these tools—one that ensures early awareness, consistent mentoring, and meaningful engagement for both students and families.

The gaps identified in all groups clearly point to the need for a more structured, earlier, and better-supported career guidance approach.

The following recommendations reflect the priorities and suggestions expressed by stakeholders in response to these challenges.

1. Institutionalizing career guidance in primary and secondary schools

Career guidance should no longer rely on individual teacher initiatives or sporadic activities, but should be formalized through the establishment of permanent Career Guidance Centers in every school. These centers should be staffed by trained professionals with clearly defined roles and responsibilities and should be fully integrated into the school's operations. They should receive specialized training, not only to provide accurate information, but also to facilitate meaningful discussions with students about their interests, values, and labor market realities.

Professional development should include practical counseling methods and tools, not just theoretical frameworks. Teachers should receive specialized career guidance training to ensure that their contribution is informed, consistent, and in line with best practices. Without this, guidance often remains subjective, fragmented, or overly theoretical. Career guidance professionals should develop personalized career plans for each student, which should be developed through consistent individual counseling sessions, interest and aptitude assessments, and systematic monitoring of student progress. Starting no later than the 7th grade of elementary school, career guidance should be embedded longitudinally in the curriculum—it should not be treated as an extracurricular or one-off project. Early and regular career interviews should be mandatory, allowing students to adjust their educational paths to changes in their interests and circumstances. These centers should coordinate workshops, organize discussions, and serve as a hub for connecting students with external partners such as employers and career institutions. This institutionalized approach helps reduce student passivity, alleviate anxiety about making the "wrong" choice, and promote greater autonomy and self-awareness.

2. Expanding experiential learning opportunities

Students consistently report that they need more practical experience that brings them closer to the realities of working life. Career education should therefore prioritize structured opportunities such as internships, job shadowing, workplace visits, and guest lectures by professionals. These activities provide invaluable insight into the daily demands and rewards of different professions, helping students make more informed decisions based on experience rather than abstract ideas. Teachers emphasize that such

authentic experiences are much more motivating and effective than theoretical instruction, lessons, or isolated events. This is particularly important at transitional points between educational levels, where students often face uncertainty. Expanding and systematizing these opportunities in school curricula and through partnerships with local employers significantly improves career readiness and student engagement.

3. Improving access to reliable and local information

One of the main shortcomings identified by students and parents is the lack of accessible, reliable, and comparable information on learning pathways, school programs, employment opportunities, and labor market trends. To address this shortcoming, a centralized digital platform should be created at the national level. This platform would provide regularly updated data tailored to local labor market conditions, including detailed descriptions of study programs, employment prospects, and working conditions. Such a resource would enable students and families to make decisions based on transparent, objective criteria rather than incomplete or informal sources. In addition, schools should incorporate this information into their career guidance activities, ensuring that students and parents have easy and continuous access to reliable data when exploring options and making decisions.

4. Formalizing cooperation between schools, families, and external stakeholders

Career guidance cannot be effective without strong partnerships between schools, families, and relevant external bodies. Schools should formalize cooperation with institutions such as the Croatian Employment Service (HZZ), CISOK career centers, local employers, and higher education institutions. These partnerships should include joint programs, regular information sharing, and opportunities for students to connect with real professionals. At the same time, parents should be actively and systematically involved in the counseling process from the earliest stages. This can be achieved through structured communication channels, regular workshops, parent-teacher-counselor meetings, and joint planning of career education activities. Providing parents with professional tools such as interest and aptitude tests and verified information portals enables them to support their children more effectively without putting undue pressure on them or relying solely on academic results.

Transparent and continuous parental involvement is essential to maintaining a balance between guidance and autonomy, and to helping young people develop responsibility and confidence in their career choices.

5. Promoting equality and recognizing diverse strengths

Finally, the system must move beyond an excessive focus on academic results and adopt a more inclusive approach to recognizing diverse talents and abilities. Career guidance must ensure equal access and quality across all schools and student backgrounds. This includes recognizing non-academic strengths and potential in vocational training and alternative educational pathways, as well as reducing inequalities between schools with different resources and standards. High-quality, personalized guidance should be available to all learners, regardless of their academic level or socioeconomic status, and should support realistic and meaningful aspirations. By addressing these structural inequalities, the education system can better prepare young people for a labor market that increasingly values a wide range of skills and competencies.

9.5. Czech Republic

Career guidance in the Czech Republic is integrated into pedagogical-psychological counseling, operates at both the school and school counseling institution levels, and its content is reflected in the Framework Educational Programs at all levels of education, including practical training and the dual cooperation system between schools and companies. Career guidance is supported not only through the national strategy, but also through cooperation with employers, the Chamber of Commerce, the non-profit sector, and counseling centers. Higher education institutions and employment offices provide specialized counseling services and help students navigate the labor market. Competitions, awards, and the sharing of best practices also play an important role.

Career guidance in the Czech Republic is managed and methodologically guided by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports in cooperation with the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs.

The most important advisory body is the National Advisory Forum, which brings together a number of actors from public administration, local government, schools, the non-profit and commercial sectors, and influences the development of career guidance through working groups and partnerships. The National Pedagogical Institute plays an important role in linking educational innovations with practice and providing methodological support to schools.

Career guidance in schools can take many forms, ranging from individual consultations and motivational interviews to group activities, workshops, and the integration of career topics into the curriculum, as well as the use of digital tools and online platforms that facilitate navigation between training and employment opportunities. It also involves

cooperation with employment services, employers, and other institutions, enabling work placements and field trips, and linking the education sector with the labor market. Counselors help students identify their strengths and weaknesses, interests, and abilities; They use personality tests, questionnaires, projective methods, and group activities that promote interaction and peer learning. They support the development of career choice skills, media awareness, and critical thinking. In higher education institutions, counseling centers provide academic, psychological, legal, social, and career services, organize open days and fairs, and collaborate with employers to support students' labor market orientation. The career guidance system is accessible to all pupils and students, including those with special educational needs.

You can become a career counselor by obtaining the appropriate academic qualifications, completing long-term courses or retraining programs, or passing a professional exam. The most important prerequisites for the profession include advanced communication skills, empathy, impartiality, problem-solving skills with responsibility left to the client, and knowledge of the labor market, the education system, and the ethical standards of counseling. Counselors further develop their skills through courses, seminars, training programs, internship programs, conferences, and informal learning, which enable them to expand their competencies, for example in crisis intervention or coaching, and to improve their practice.

Surveys show that only a small proportion of students in Czech schools use career guidance services. Although career education is a priority in the continuous professional development of teachers (DVPP), participation by principals and teachers is very low. Another serious problem is that the position of career guidance counselor is not legally defined, and in practice this function is often performed by educational counselors, school psychologists, or other teachers who are already overburdened. Combining multiple roles into a single position reduces the quality of the services provided, a situation that has previously been criticized by the OECD.

Research confirms that although the financial and technical background of career guidance has improved, problems such as insufficient involvement of counselors in education, poor cooperation with parents, overburdened counseling staff, and limited time and financial support remain. As a result, career guidance often fails to fully meet current needs in relation to study and career choices.

Professional debates are therefore increasingly emphasizing the need to create a separate, specialized career guidance position in both primary and secondary schools,

which would allow for individual work with students and more systematic support for their career development.

Comprehensive career guidance also plays a key role in preventing early school leaving. An individualized approach, the provision of realistic information, assistance with labor market orientation, and support for personal development are key to ensuring that educational decisions lead to the realization of students' potential. Without such support, the risk of academic failure increases, as students are often confronted with a distorted image of their chosen field, unrealistic self-assessment, or insufficient family support. Systematic career guidance in schools is therefore not only a matter of individual development, but also a key element in reducing educational inequalities and strengthening the stability of the entire education system.

Career guidance in the Czech Republic still lacks clear legislative and systemic regulation. Although there are successful activities at the level of individual schools, there is a lack of political consensus and prioritization. An analysis conducted as part of the 2024 Czech education policy review includes the following recommendations for improvement (Šrámková, 2025):

- The influence of political preferences should be reduced and decisions should be based on data.
- The position of career guidance counselor should be enshrined in the law on teaching staff and in line with the National Qualifications Framework.
- Define quality standards, qualification requirements, professional development, and methodological support for career counselors.
- Introduction of quality indicators for evaluation by the Czech School Inspectorate.
- Treating career guidance as a lifelong process linked to education and the labor market.
- Creation of a new strategic document in this area (building on previous concepts and strategies).
- Integration of career guidance into all types of secondary schools.
- Ensuring stable funding from the state budget.
- Better use and linking of data available between ministries.

- Strengthening coordination between MEYS, MLSA, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Industry and Trade, and other sectors, either through the National Advisory Forum or a new coordinating body.
- Examples of a multi-stakeholder ecosystem supporting youth entrepreneurship and career guidance. These initiatives are in line with the Danube Region Strategy's objectives for smart skills development, inclusive growth, and territorial cohesion.

9.6. Hungary

The summary of the research results is divided into two main parts.

In the first part, we review and summarize the characteristics of the career guidance system and related activities, and we review the main findings, thus providing an overview of the situation in Hungary. On the other hand, we review and summarize the results of empirical research, comparing them with national characteristics, what they have confirmed, and how the circumstances in the region under study can be characterized.

In the second part, we formulate development ideas that can serve as a basis for the development phase of the project. In connection with these development ideas, we formulate the need for a regional career guidance system and its most important methodological activities, as well as the broader content elements that are related not only to the services to be developed, but also, in a broader sense, to the national career guidance system as a whole.

6.1 Summary of the characteristics of the Hungarian career guidance system based on research results

One of the most important findings of the research, which has already been confirmed by previous studies, is that career guidance activities are carried out by several actors at the same time, but there is no coordination between them, and we can mostly only talk about ad hoc solutions. It is also important to note that career guidance activities are primarily aimed at the enrollment of 8th graders in secondary education and deal with the scope of training, the professional structure, and training opportunities. There is little time and opportunity for individual sessions, as there is neither the time nor the resources nor sufficient specialists available.

Almost everyone expects teachers and homeroom teachers to provide career counseling sessions, or at least considers this task to be their goal. If we examine the set of competencies to be developed in the teacher training process, we can see that there is a lack of knowledge and development elements specifically related to career guidance and

preparation for decisions related to individual career development. In other words, we expect them to perform this task without providing them with meaningful preparation and without allocating meaningful resources and time to the activity. Teachers know a lot about their students and can see their characteristics to a large extent, but their approach is primarily subject-centered, meaning that they see and recommend further education in the subject in which the student performs better. There is no time or opportunity for an in-depth examination of the individual's motivation, interests, and abilities. This is particularly problematic in the case of low achievers, as they do not have such a path in mind, and due to their academic difficulties, they are recommended to pursue a physical profession, i.e., classical vocational training.

As mentioned above, the current system of career guidance services involves multiple actors, which is not a problem in itself, but it is a problem if there is no meaningful cooperation between them. The development of career guidance services has been raised several times in the context of the use of EU funds, but little meaningful and, more importantly, lasting content has been produced. Currently, the Career Guidance Portal managed by the NSZFH is the authoritative source of somewhat useful content, and the focus has now shifted to the activities and solutions of the Innovative Training Support Center (IKK). Many more developments have taken place, but these have been forgotten due to the fragmentation of resources and maintainers.

The Chamber of Commerce has become a central player nationwide in recent years, but during our research, we also noticed significant differences between the activities of the county chambers. While in Baranya County the chamber continuously organizes study competitions, company visits, summer camps, school-level self-awareness sessions, counseling, etc., in Tolna County, for example, we saw no trace of this. Career counseling activities necessarily involve several stakeholders, including:

- the school itself, with its network of corporate contacts and mediated values,
- the family, primarily parental role models, the "leeway" provided for decision-making, values, expectations, information,
- teachers, who spend a lot of time with students but have limited insight into the world of work and schools (whether secondary or higher education),
- employers, companies/entrepreneurs looking for skilled workers, and some organizations involved in presenting the world of work, communicating employer expectations, and even participating in dual training,

- The Chamber, which represents the interests of entrepreneurs and is an integral part of labor management and human resource development. As part of this
- the educational service, which has been officially delegated to provide career guidance, but the organization itself often suffers from a lack of resources,
- and, of course, the students themselves, with their interests, motivations, skills, abilities, competencies, limitations, opportunities, expectations, plans, dreams, and much more...

Everyone has their own role to play, and this will only work if all stakeholders step up their activities and find their own role in this process. The survey clearly showed that if schools are open and organized, many students can be reached with services, and this does not require too many resources. However, this primarily requires activity and organization at the local level. The service elements that have already been tested can be further expanded with competence development elements, cooperation with universities (e.g., presentation of laboratories, presentation of practical training, presentation of used and taught technology, which would be particularly important in steering students toward STEM fields), and the involvement of employers, where the program would no longer be a "simple" company visit, but would present the planned content with more effective information transfer.

One of the key professional results of our research is that we gained insight into students' self-image and its main general characteristics, and we can confirm the lack of self-knowledge in the field of career counseling.

Self-awareness is the formation of a "self-image." In order to achieve individual happiness, satisfaction, and success in the labor market at the same time, it is essential that young people be aware of themselves, their own abilities, and their goals—within the framework of their age-specific characteristics. This is the best and most fundamental starting point when considering opportunities, and social (primarily institutional) support is needed to help them achieve this. All young people should be helped to discover and understand their own competencies (abilities and skills) during the career and profession selection period (before completing their primary and secondary education), motivation, develop a realistic self-image, and, building on this, develop their own goals, ideas, aspirations, and vision for the future. Once this becomes known and gains momentum, it will be the strongest "spontaneous" tool for breaking down gender segregation and orienting young people toward STEM fields.

However, this requires individual counseling, contacting each person individually, and clarifying the above, or at least outlining the options for decision-making. It is essential

that career guidance institutions not only provide information on career choices, but also help to shape self-image and, on this basis, present personalized opportunities and paths (tailored to individual talents, competencies, and interests) and present well-founded career choice strategies to students and parents so that they can make informed and appropriate career choices.

Another area confirmed by the research results is the key role of teachers in career choice activities.

Without teachers and school practices, it is impossible to develop students' career-building skills, maintain their position in the labor market, and manage change. The interpretation of career guidance as an educational task has undergone numerous changes in content over the past three decades. The transformation of the concept's content can be clearly traced through changes in the concepts of career choice and career orientation, followed by the acquisition and application of career-building competencies (career guidance education). The transformation of the content has also brought about a change in the tasks of teachers. It is extremely interesting that while the conceptual content has changed several times in Hungary over the past 25-30 years, the practical application of career choice and career orientation, as well as the expectations of users (teachers, counselors, psychologists, mentors, etc.) users (parents, children, families, employers), and clients (regulators) have mostly remained consistent with the previous interpretation of the concept. This is partly due to the fact that teachers' career choice and career guidance tasks remain unclear, their professional preparedness is inadequate, and school practices are fragmented (Borbély-Pecze, 2016; Borbély-Pecze, 2018). There are few signs that support for students' career choice preparation has been replaced by the continuous development of students' career development skills (PJK). The National Core Curriculum defines the tasks of teachers in career guidance, but in practice, teaching is limited to grades 7 and 8, and career guidance is part of homeroom classes and related activities. It is based on the principle of 'leftover' (e.g., factory visits, school fairs, parents' reports on their own professions, etc.), while no professionally structured career guidance system has been developed that takes full account of the specific characteristics of the students' age group. Essentially, educational science and pedagogy treat the teacher as a decade-old paradigm, according to which the teacher is the main actor in career choice, while saying little about its didactic possibilities.

In career guidance and counseling, teaching, like any other activity, also requires special knowledge, which is particularly necessary if, under current Hungarian regulations, career guidance counseling tasks are included in the remit of all teachers. In terms of the content

of teachers' knowledge, this means that teachers must have high-quality career choice knowledge (Völgyesy, 1995), career psychology knowledge (Csirszka, 1966), and up-to-date knowledge to support learning path planning. This includes job search and self-assertion techniques, as well as the application of the necessary civil and labor law knowledge in the course of a professional career (Vámosi, 2022).

The level of knowledge and preparedness of teachers in relation to career guidance varies greatly in Hungary. In recent years, a number of targeted programs have been set up in Hungary to support the expansion of teachers' knowledge in this area. These programs include the two phases of the Vocational School Development Program (2003-2006, and 2006-2009) and the TÁMOP 2.2.2 program (2008-2011, then 2012-2015), as well as the New Generation Elementary School Program (2013-2015). Thanks to these programs, thousands of teachers were able to participate in free career counseling training courses, but trends show that after completing the programs, there was no adequate framework (e.g., time frame, financial conditions, support for teaching staff) for teachers to integrate the knowledge they had acquired into the public education system and vocational training in the long term.

The Hungarian teaching profession and the teaching community itself are in need of significant renewal and replenishment based on age. One key area of this renewal could be linking the world of school and work. The roles of teachers and career guidance counselors are still partly separate. The role of the counselor is not the same as that of the (school) psychologist. In the process of renewing teacher training, the preparation of teachers for career counseling needs to be rethought in light of the knowledge and skills required for teachers to perform this activity. A prerequisite for this is consideration of the working relationship between teachers and specially trained career guidance counselors.

9.7. Romania

Romania, a southeastern European country with an upper-middle income, is known for its rich cultural heritage and strategic location in the Danube region. Despite its potential, Romania faces challenges such as economic inequalities, brain drain, and infrastructure deficiencies. The country is actively involved in regional initiatives such as the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) to find solutions to these problems.

Romania's education system is based on preschool, primary school, secondary school, vocational training, and higher education levels, with additional special education and lifelong learning opportunities.

The system, which is overseen by the Ministry of Education and Research, is supported by regional and local authorities. However, disparities between urban and rural areas remain, with rural schools often lacking modern facilities and digital access.

Key levels of education include kindergarten (ages 3-6), primary school (ages 6-10), lower secondary school (ages 10-14), and upper secondary school (ages 14-18), which is divided into academic and vocational tracks. Vocational training plays a critical role in preparing students for specific occupations and meeting labor market needs. Higher education includes universities and colleges, while special education provides personalized support for students with disabilities. Adult education offers lifelong learning opportunities.

The education system is primarily funded by the state budget, with contributions from local authorities and the EU. Private education relies on tuition fees and private investment. While urban schools are generally well equipped, rural areas face significant challenges, including outdated infrastructure and limited digital access. Government and EU initiatives aim to bridge this gap by improving school facilities and digital connectivity.

Although education is compulsory from kindergarten to upper secondary school, regional disparities affect access to quality education, particularly in rural areas.

Scholarships and financial support are available to reduce barriers to education. Romania participates in international benchmarks such as PISA and TIMSS, but high dropout rates, particularly among rural and disadvantaged groups, remain a concern.

Career guidance is integrated at different levels of education, with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection playing a key role. Partnerships with employers, higher education institutions, and non-governmental organizations are key to effective guidance. However, students, parents, and teachers highlight the need for more practical presentations, emotional resilience, and better training for career guidance professionals.

To improve the education system, Romania should prioritize infrastructure development in rural schools, strengthen vocational training programs, improve career guidance, and implement targeted interventions to reduce dropout rates. In addition, promoting public-private partnerships can help improve students' resources and career opportunities. Addressing these challenges will require sustained efforts by both the government and

external partners to unlock the full potential of Romania's education system to promote economic and social development.

9.8. Slovakia

Slovakia has a long tradition of career guidance, dating back to the interwar period in the 1930s. At that time, the first form of career orientation for young people was linked to vocational training and vocational guidance. In 1957, the formal development of a counseling system further developed during the post-war socialist period began, based primarily on psychometric methods and the assessment of personality prerequisites in relation to work tasks. However, over the decades, this approach was replaced by a more modern concept of education and lifelong counseling.

Since the 1990s, following the fall of socialism and accession to the EU, Slovakia has gradually integrated into European standards in the field of career guidance. Act No. 245/2008 on education introduced the obligation to provide pedagogical, psychological, and career guidance in schools. In 2019, a piece of legislation (an amendment to the Education Act) created the category of "career counselor" as a voluntary function in schools, taking into account the need for direct access to and reinforcement of professional counseling in the academic environment. In the following years, this system was further developed and supplemented with new standards and domestic and European experience.

The objectives and priorities of the career education and counseling system are as follows:

- Supporting the transition between education and the world of work – helping pupils, students, unemployed people, and adults to overcome transitions through counseling, guidance, and work experience.
- Lifelong guidance – according to the National Lifelong Learning and Guidance Strategy for 2021–2030, guidance should be available from primary school to retirement age.
- Standardizing service quality – introducing competency standards, methodological procedures, and codes of ethics for counselors, in line with the European recommendations of the ELGPN.
- Linking to labor market needs – regular use of skills forecast data in the development of guidance and decision-making related to the educational pathways of learners and adults.

The system provides services across multiple sectors:

- School sector – primary and secondary schools

Every primary school has a school counselor, but since 2019 it has also been possible to set up independent career counselors. Kindergartens and schools cooperate with regional Counseling and Prevention Centers (formerly pedagogical and psychological centers), which provide diagnostics and professional interventions. Since 2023, these centers have been transformed into multidisciplinary and inclusive counseling centers (), including special units for students with special needs.

- Secondary vocational education

Career guidance is integrated into vocational education through professional school counselors. The introduction of dual training since 2015 has enabled a better connection with practice – students alternate between classroom lessons and practical training at the employer's premises, often accompanied by career guidance through the State Institute for Vocational Education and regional talent centers.

- Higher education counseling

Act 131/2002 on higher education explicitly requires the provision of information and counseling services to students. Most universities have established career centers that focus on individual counseling, study and employment information, regular job fairs, and online databases of internships and job offers. The level of service varies depending on the capacity of each institution.

- Labor, Social and Family Affairs Offices

It employs a network of approximately 300 career advisors in 46 regional offices who provide guidance to the long-term unemployed, disadvantaged groups, and young people. This includes ESF projects such as skills development and lifelong learning support. Around one-third of registered jobseekers use these services. The counseling includes internal monitoring of the client's progress in terms of measurable results.

- Non-governmental and private organizations

Organizations such as ZKPRK (Career Guidance and Career Development Association) bring together professionals in the sector. They organize national forums, awards, conferences (e.g., IAEVG Conference 2019, Career Week), distribute methodological manuals, and participate in legislative debates. Non-profit projects target Roma youth or foreigners integrating into the labor market.

Current status

The 2019, 2023, and 2024, as well as national strategies (Lifelong Learning 2021–2030), the Slovak Republic is gradually building a career guidance system that focuses on accessibility, quality, and monitoring. Since 2022, the network of regional counseling centers has been expanded, which is also funded by ESF projects.

A key tool is the lifelong learning strategy, which includes an operational action plan starting in 2022 that sets out specific steps: developing counseling for all age groups, creating digital portals, building capacity for counselor training, and measuring the quality of services provided.

According to analyses by CEDEFOP and the OECD, Slovakia lags behind in terms of adult participation in lifelong learning (only ~3.8%) and the flexibility of the education system in responding to labor market changes. There are disparities between regions and socio-economic groups, which reduces the effectiveness of counseling. Career guidance in schools is also often inadequate – limited in time (only 2-5 hours of consultation per week) and undervalued.

Expected developments

By 2030, career guidance services are expected to expand significantly thanks to the following measures:

- Introduction of a uniform quality standard for services, including certification of career counselors, a code of ethics, and evaluation indicators.
- Establishment of a national regional advisor network coordinated by SIOVs and regional centers, working in communities, schools, employment offices, and with employers.
- Digitization and development of online tools, e-learning courses related to career planning, self-service tools, and job offer databases.
- Intensifying partnerships with companies and regional sectors, particularly in the field of dual training and continuing education, with the support of sectors such as the automotive industry, green technologies, and digital services.
- Increasing adult participation in lifelong learning, including disadvantaged groups, in support of ambitious EU targets – at least 60% of adults in retraining or vocational training by 2030, through initiatives such as the Skills Pact.

In summary, Slovak career guidance is in a transitional phase – from the tradition of psychometric assessment of young people to the concept of an inclusive, lifelong,

methodologically high-quality system. The reforms currently being implemented, national strategies, and international support (CEDEFOP, Euroguidance, OECD) aim to make the system transparent, accessible in all regions, focused on the labor market, and capable of responding flexibly to future challenges.

9.9. Slovenia

Strengths

- Systemic awareness of the importance of career guidance
- Motivated teachers who link subjects to real life
- Presence of counselors in most schools (especially secondary schools)
- Active parental interest and willingness to support
- Students appreciate real-world experiences and mentoring
- Existing activities: information days, projects, competitions
- Some school-business cooperation already exists
- Talent recognition begins in primary school
- Openness to cross-school lectures/roundtable discussions
- Wide acceptance that decisions should remain in the hands of the child
- Recognition of the need for a "Plan B/C"
- Widely understood positive role models (e.g., the archetype of "Adam")
- Shared language regarding competencies (perseverance, initiative)
- Parental networks provide informal information

Weaknesses

- Schools often provide late, episodic, and uneven counseling
- Limited practical experience (observation/work experience too rare)
- Overemphasis on grades/scores over interests and fit

- Poor integration of counseling into everyday teaching
- Inadequate individualization; counseling may appear generic
- Tracking of student outcomes after graduation is inconsistent
- Limited teacher training in career guidance pedagogy
- Stigma associated with vocational education and training persists
- Information overload for families; weak curatorial work
- Counseling capacity/time constraints
- Parents are unsure how much advice to give or whether to take a step back
- Uneven cooperation between teachers, counselors, and parents
- Few structured pathways between hobbies → qualifications → work
- Late recognition of students struggling/undecided
- Reliance on occasional external speakers

Opportunities

- Systematization of internships: micro-professional internships, job shadowing, summer jobs
- Creation of a national information center (pathways, admissions, labor market data)
- Embedding a career choice spiral from early elementary school onwards
- Expansion of employer partnerships and alumni mentoring
- Mapping "areas of interest → subjects → schools → careers" with examples
- Use portfolios to track strengths and experiences over time
- Further training for teachers in career choice pedagogy
- Student peer ambassadors and stories from close peers
- Integrating life skills (finance, teamwork, conflict management)
- Normalizing multiple paths/second chances (vocational training↔high school, higher education↔work)

- Data management platforms for schools to monitor the quality of career guidance
- Use of digital tools for interest tests and roadmaps
- Stronger role for class teachers in early identification

Threats

- Social media myths and influencers' narratives of "quick success"
- Rapidly changing occupations; skills becoming obsolete
- Admission bottlenecks and quota pressure distort choice
- Economic uncertainty reduces the predictability of "safe" paths
- Overloaded curricula crowd out counseling time
- Unequal access to experiences between schools/regions
- Over- or under-involvement of parents, leading to disparities
- Persistent stigma attached to vocational pathways
- Labor market disparities cause frustration/dropouts
- Apathy/rebellious phases among students during adolescence
- Varying quality of lecturers; risk of biased/marketing messages
- Limited counseling capacity and burnout
- Data protection/consent barriers to tracking results
- Rural transportation/logistics limits workplace visits
- The "one-off event" mentality persists despite best intentions.