



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

Venue: Meeting with physical presence in Ceremonial Hall of the Government of Republic of North Macedonia and via ZOOM link.

Date: 27.11.2025, Wednesday, 12:15 - 14:50

Meeting moderated by Ms. Slavkoska, MSPDY representative.

Meeting organized by Ministry of Education and Science (MoES), Ministry of Economy and Labour (MEL) and Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth (MSPDY), in coordination with Ministry for European Affairs (MEA)/ National IPA Coordinator (NIPAC).

Invited more than 170 representatives, 54 attendees were present (31 with physical presence and 23 with virtual presence).

Opening statement on implementation of Sector Policies and National Development Strategy 2024-2044

Ms. Slavkoska opened the meeting outlining the Agenda and referring to key contextual developments, including EC 2025 Progress Report, signing of UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2026–2030, and recent global commitments related to social rights, decent work and inclusion and invited high-relevant representatives of the MSPDY and the MES to present sectoral developments.

Ms. Ivanovska, State Secretary Minister of MoES, presented key developments since previous meeting held on 30 April. She reported high budget execution for 2025 and an increased allocation proposed for 2026. Reforms focused on new financing formulas for primary and secondary education, digitalization of schools, expansion of dual education with the involvement of around 700 companies, and the provision of textbooks for all students both in primary and secondary education. Investments of approximately EUR 64 million were made in education infrastructure, including schools, dormitories and sports facilities, alongside progress in expanding single-shift teaching with growing number of schools operating in one shift, contributing to improved learning conditions and closer alignment with European standards.

Further progress was highlighted in inclusive education, with increased engagement of educational assistants in primary and secondary education and transformation of former special schools into resource centres supporting mainstream schools. Salary increases for teaching staff, introduction of a new electronic diary system, and steps towards integrating digitalization and artificial intelligence in education were also presented. Quality assurance measures led to the closure of non-compliant private institutions, while student support measures and legislative reforms were advanced. She concluded the presentation with an overview of preparations for new Education Strategy 2026–2032, under public consultation and expressed appreciation to all partners supporting education and research reforms.

Mr. Sabriu, State Secretary of MSPDY, addressed the participants and underlined topics discussed at the meeting are not only part of the European Integration process, but represent foundations of society the country aims to build. He stressed an importance of access to education, decent work, strong social protection, sustainable demographic development and gender equality as key elements for improving living standards, supporting economic development and ensuring equal opportunities for all citizens.

Mr. Sabriu highlighted those demographic challenges should be viewed beyond statistical data, as they directly affect families, young people deciding whether to stay in the country, and citizens seeking security and long-term prospects. He informed that Ministry has initiated a comprehensive process for preparation of measures for demographic revitalisation for 2026–2046 period, with an objective of creating conditions for quality life, work and family development through strong public services, available resources and equal opportunities for children, youth and elderly persons.

He noted that rising living costs, poverty and social exclusion continue to affect most vulnerable groups, referring to data indicating that a significant share of families and children live in poverty or without adequate living conditions. He underlined that the Government has adopted National Action Plan for Children’s Rights 2025–2029, which introduces European Child Guarantee and strengthens child protection system. Priorities include strengthening social transfers, improving access to basic services for all children, and ensuring inclusive care and support for children with disabilities.

Mr. Sabriu informed that access to social services was further expanded in 2025, with more than 160 licensed service providers currently delivering services to over 5,200 beneficiaries, mainly elderly persons and persons with disabilities. He noted that draft 2026 Budget would foresee an additional increase in funding for social services, aimed at ensuring timely and sustainable financing. He also referred to introduction of an integrated information system for social protection, which is already operational in a large number of Social Work Centres and contributes to increased transparency, efficiency and quality of social services, alongside continued efforts to improve professional standards and capacities.



He further informed about finalisation of a new Law on Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities, which would introduce mandatory employment quotas in both the public and private sectors. Law would aim to promote the inclusion of persons with disabilities as active participants in labour market, with equal rights to work, development and dignity.

With regard to Roma inclusion, Mr. Sabriu reaffirmed Government’s commitment to implementation of Strategy for Roma Integration, focusing on improved access to education, health care, housing and preschool education for Roma children. Also, referred to ongoing preparation of a Law on Social Housing was developed in cooperation with relevant institutions and civil society organizations, expected to provide a systemic solution to housing needs for vulnerable groups.

He highlighted measures aimed at improving the position of pensioners, recalling recent pension increases and planned additional increases in forthcoming period. He stressed that old age should be associated with dignity and security, rather than uncertainty.

Mr. Sabriu also addressed youth policies, underlining that young people represent country’s most important potential. He informed on preparation of a new action plan under National Youth Strategy with an aim of strengthening coordination between institutions, businesses and civil society organizations, and creating a system that supports education, employment and personal development of young people.

Finally, he stressed the importance of gender equality for sustainable demographic development. He referred to preparation of a second Action Plan for Gender Equality, aimed at strengthening women’s economic independence and increasing employment, as well as a new National Strategy for the Prevention of Gender-Based Violence, emphasizing that every woman must feel safe at home, at work and in public spaces. He concluded by underlining that addressing these challenges requires joint efforts of state institutions, municipalities, civil society, donors and communities, with a shared goal of creating conditions for all citizens to reach their full potential.

Ms. Kanellopoulou, Head of Operations at the EU Delegation, referred to latest European Commission Country Report for North Macedonia published in November, which includes a progress assessment achieved in areas planned for discussion at the meeting. She noted on a good opportunity to further discuss key issues and clarify open questions. Recalling on recent dissemination event related to an evaluation of EU support under IPA 2017 and IPA 2019 in sectors of education, employment and social policy, underlining continuous and intensive cooperation between national institutions and EU.

Ms. Kanellopoulou highlighted several positive developments in recent years, including an introduction of guaranteed minimum assistance, Youth Guarantee and development of a new generation of social services. She stressed that reforms have shown country’s capacity to deliver on political commitments and to reduce an impact of global challenges on citizens. In unison, she emphasized that improving quality of education and addressing labour market challenges remain key priorities. Brain drain, low labour market participation, low human capital and mismatch between skills and labour market needs were identified as major obstacles to inclusive growth.

She underlined that EU accession process, based on early integration and alignment with EU standards, represents an important opportunity for the country and its citizens. In this context, she recalled the EU social model, which is based on sustainability, inclusion, equal opportunities and the principle of leaving no one behind.

In the area of education, the EU Delegation welcomed the preparation of new Education Strategy 2026–2032, under public consultation, and confirmed EU support for its implementation through IPA III programme. Progress in vocational education and training and adult education was positively assessed, including adoption of relevant laws and strategies, as well as development of regional VET centres. EU has supported modernization of centres in Tetovo, Ohrid and Kumanovo, with additional centres planned. Importance of clear operationalization and sustainability of these centres in forthcoming period was underlined.

Adoption of new funding formulas for primary and secondary education was welcomed as a positive step. If applied consistently, these formulas can contribute to fairer distribution of resources, increased efficiency and further advancement of Reform Agenda. Regarding secondary education, Ms. Kanellopoulou noted an adoption of a new law had been postponed and that amendments were introduced to existing legislation. Aligned to conclusions of Monitoring Committee, it was emphasized an impact of these amendments should be reviewed, and that legislation on primary and secondary education must be fully aligned with Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination. No compromises can be made on the principle of non-discrimination on EU path.

EU Delegation encouraged the continuation of an inclusive education reform launched in recent years, while expressing concern about possible risks of segregation. It was underlined that children with special educational needs should learn and socialise with their peers in mainstream schools, with adequate support. EUD requested updated information on enrolment of these children in primary and secondary education. In addition, an enrolment in early childhood education and care remains below 50%, far from the EU target, with particularly low participation among Roma children. Improving access and quality in this area was highlighted as essential for long-term inclusion and learning outcomes.

Ms. Kanellopoulou also addressed youth, employment and labour issues. She noted that although a solid strategic and legal framework exists, youth policies need to be further strengthened through effective implementation of adopted strategies and action plans, including Law on Youth Work. She recalled on last SMC meeting to expedite sector reforms



to adopt several laws, as on social entrepreneurship and noted on support of efforts to improve market and employment opportunities through Operational Programme on Human Capital. Thus, she encouraged continued implementation of Youth Guarantee and recommended strengthening the capacities of Employment Service Agency (ESA), as well as establishing stronger inter-sectoral coordination. In the area of occupational safety and health, need to strengthen the capacities of State Labour Inspectorate and to adopt relevant action plans and strategies was highlighted. Proper functioning of the economic and social council remains a key aspect of fostering social dialogue between social partners. Limited progress in social dialogue was noted, particularly regarding collective agreements in private sector and implementation of Law on Peaceful Settlement of Labour Disputes.

Regarding social policy, Ms. Kanellopoulou underlined the importance of continuing deinstitutionalization process, supported by EU through IPA programmes. Importance of transforming public institutions into community-based services was noted and an inclusion of the Roma community remains a high priority was stressed, calling for continued coordination and preparation of action plans for period after 2025.

Discussion

Ms. Ivana Popovska, Special Advisor in MoES, responded to remarks of EUD. She informed that comprehensive amendments to Law on Secondary Education are prepared and adopted, addressing several important aspects that were previously missing. She stressed that inclusion is a key element of these amendments, including introduction of educational assistants in secondary education, financed from the state budget.

Ms. Popovska clarified the role of resource centers, noting that they are not intended for enrolment of children, but to provide support to schools, teachers, parents and students through expert teams and mobile services. These centers will assist in preparing individual learning plans and supporting transition of children with special educational needs into mainstream schools. She emphasized that decision on enrolment remains with parents and that model aims to ensure flexibility and adequate preparation. Same approach is planned to be applied in secondary education. She proposed organizing on-site visits to resource centers in order to better understand their functioning in practice.

Regarding early childhood education, Ms. Popovska acknowledged low enrolment rates and noted that this issue is addressed in new Education Strategy. She informed that further analysis would be conducted, including consideration of mandatory enrolment in final preschool year, in close cooperation with MSPDY. She also referred to investments in regional VET centers, noting as a costly process and that continued support through IPA III would be important. Measures to ensure operationalization and sustainability of centers, including establishment of school companies, were also presented.

Ms. Kanellopoulou thanked for the clarifications provided and noted that her colleagues would take careful note of information and comments shared during discussion.

Presentation of on ongoing and planned actions based on new strategies and plans for advancing the strategic and legislative framework

Ms. Maja Papatolevska, Deputy Head of Labour Department in MEL, presented medium-term priorities related to improvement of employment conditions and further development of legal framework for labour market policies. She noted key challenges remain limited and inconsistent support from social partners, as well as insufficient public awareness, which the Ministry plans to address through targeted activities and stronger cooperation.

Ms. Papatolevska informed that in June 2023, the Government ratified the ILO Convention on the Elimination of Violence and Harassment of Work. Following ratification, a gap analysis was conducted and work has started on drafting a new Law on Prevention and Protection from Harassment at Work, aligned with Convention. She underlined that new legislation aims to protect all persons in world of work, including those without formal employment contracts, such as trainees and volunteers, and to cover all workplaces. Special attention is given to gender-based violence and harassment. Drafting process is being carried out in partnership with ILO, with an objective of developing legislation that is applicable in practice and fully aligned with international standards.

She also referred to preparation of a new Law on Employment and Insurance in Case of Unemployment, which will modernize both legislative framework and role of ESA. She noted that current law, adopted in 1997 and amended numerous times, has become complex and difficult to implement. New law aims to introduce a clearer structure, align employment programmes with national strategic documents and EU for regulation and improvement of labour market, will define active labour market measures and policies, service providers and procedures more precisely. For the first time, law will allow involvement of external service providers through a dedicated register and transparent selection procedures. Law will also revise eligibility criteria for unemployment benefits, extending reference period for contribution records, in line with recommendations from European and international institutions.

Ms. Papatolevska further informed about EU funded project implemented by ILO on promoting a safe and healthy working environment in North Macedonia. Within project, a new strategy on occupational safety and health will be prepared, along with a draft new law, a unified methodology for State Labour Inspectorate, and a centralized platform for reporting workplace injuries. Overall objective is to ensure right to safe and healthy working conditions for all workers, recognized as a fundamental right under ILO standards.



Mr. Mladen Frckovski, Head of Unit for Labour in MEL, continued presentation on employment policies, focusing on labour market trends and priorities. He noted that reducing unemployment remains a key objective, highlighting current unemployment rate stands at 11.5%, bringing country closer to levels recorded in several EU Member States. He underlined that as unemployment approaches single digit levels, policies need to become more targeted and focused on quality employment, activation of inactive persons and addressing skills mismatches.

Mr. Frckovski explained that demographic trends significantly affect the labour market, noting a substantial decline in number of new-borns over the past decade, which has reduced the available workforce. He stressed need to activate registered unemployed persons, particularly long-term unemployed individuals, majority of whom have low levels of education. In this context, he presented pilot measures focusing on basic skills, including foreign languages and digital literacy, as a first step towards inclusion in more advanced training and employment measures. He underlined an importance of recognition of non-formal and informal education and faster pathways for acquiring qualifications, in close cooperation with institutions responsible for adult education and vocational training.

He also highlighted importance of vocational education and craft skills, noting growing demand from employers and positive development of dual education. He stressed a need for stronger coordination between MEL and MoES, including vocational education centres and chambers, in order to address labour shortages and skills mismatches more effectively.

Youth unemployment was identified as another key challenge. Mr. Frckovski noted that many young people seek opportunities abroad and stressed an importance of more efficient and attractive employment measures. He highlighted improvements to self-employment measure for young people, including increased financial support for start-ups and joint businesses. He also underlined an importance of promoting decent and sustainable employment, with adequate wages, job security and social protection.

Mr. Frckovski further explained that priority is given to production and high valued activities that generate sustainable jobs, as well as to measures that support direct employment. These include support for self-employment and growth of micro, small and medium sized enterprises, with incentives linked to employment of additional workers, particularly young people and persons from vulnerable groups. He referred to Annual Operational Plan for Active Employment Programs and Measures and Labour Market Services as a key policy instrument, supported by significant financial resources and aligned with National Employment Strategy 2021–2027 and its action plan for 2025–2027.

Finally, he referred to implementation of Youth Guarantee, introduced in 2018, noting that North Macedonia was first country in Western Balkans to implement this initiative. He highlighted progress in reaching NEET rate remains high (young people not in employment, education or training). He stressed that main objective of Youth Guarantee is to ensure that young people receive a quality offer for employment, education or training within four months of registration, with employment mediation services playing a key role in achieving results. He concluded by noting that further efforts are needed to improve outcomes and sustainability of youth employment policies.

Ms. Slavkoska thanked the representatives of MEL for detailed presentations. She underlined an establishment of a new legal framework for employment, reform of Employment Service Agency, as well as preparation of new legislation on occupational safety and health and on prevention of harassment at work, are of key importance for alignment with EU legislation, ratification of international conventions and implementation of European Social Charter. She also referred to youth employment and long-term unemployment, informing that these issues have already been discussed and that significant support under IPA III is planned for forthcoming period, including preparation of new projects.

Ms. Batinik Popovska, MoES representative, informed on intensive work carried out on preparation of new Education Strategy for 2026–2032 period. She noted that final draft was shared and opened for public consultation for a period of 20 days. Strategy is based on extensive data collection, assessment of previous strategy and alignment with legislative and policy developments introduced between 2024 and 2025. Among key novelties, she highlighted preparation of a new programme for preschool education, given that existing programme is outdated. While possible new legislative solutions are being considered, focus is placed on expanding coverage, strengthening capacities of kindergartens and other early childhood development services, and introducing supporting measures to enable early childhood education to be fully integrated within educational sector.

Another important novelty presented was piloting of post-secondary and short-cycle programmes at levels V-A and V-B, aimed at increasing flexibility of education system and enabling faster response to labor market needs. She stressed that these programmes address a recognized weakness of the formal education system and contribute to improved skills matching. In primary education, continued focus is placed on optimization and gradual introduction of single-shift teaching, as a long-term investment in quality learning conditions. In secondary and secondary vocational education, she noted that reforms have already delivered results, particularly through increased enrolment in vocational education and the successful implementation of dual education, which will remain a priority under new strategy.

Ms. Popovska also referred to strengthening of career guidance, which is an obligation under Reform Agenda. New financing formulas for primary and secondary education are reflected in strategy, with an emphasis on sustainability and their impact on decentralized management and increased autonomy of schools. In higher education and science, she highlighted importance of continued implementation of Smart Specialization Strategy and effective use of available financial resources. She informed about preparation of new legislation on higher education quality assurance and scientific research, noting that Law on Higher Education is a priority due to obligations related to external and internal evaluation of higher education institutions.



She also referred to ongoing preparations of additional legislation, including a new law related to State Matura, with new modalities planned for implementation from 2026, as well as updated concepts for gymnasium and art education. Ms. Popovska noted that MoES is among institutions making solid progress in implementing Reform Agenda, with key milestones already achieved, including an introduction of new financing formulas and expansion of digital infrastructure in schools, covering 168 schools or 44% of all schools in current phase.

Further progress was reported in career guidance, with formal appointment of career counsellors, development of manuals and registers, and initial training activities. She stressed that continued investment in training is needed to strengthen this function, particularly given differences between primary, general secondary and vocational schools. Dual education and learning through work were highlighted as strong elements of reform agenda, although challenges remain in reporting and monitoring results.

Following the presentation, Ms. Slavkoska invited for questions. **Mr. Frckovski** asked for clarification regarding implementation of career counsellors in primary and secondary education. **Ms. Popovska** clarified that professional orientation has existed in primary education as part of school professional teams, while career counsellors in secondary education represent a new function introduced in September. She explained that annual planning, training and clear definition of responsibilities are required to ensure effective implementation. She also underlined importance of tracking graduates as a new obligation for career counsellors, which will, for first time, allow systematic data collection on student outcomes after graduation. She concluded by noting that career guidance should function in close cooperation with ESA and that additional coordination is planned, including in the context of new Law on the National Agency for European Educational Programmes and Mobility.

Ms. Ana Mihajlov, Director of National Agency for European Educational Programmes and Mobility, informed participants that intensive work is underway on amendments to Law on the National Agency, noting that since its establishment in 2007 only minor changes had been introduced. An objective of new legal framework is to strengthen internal processes, clarify role of National Agency and ensure full transparency and accountability in line with rules for implementation of Erasmus+ Programme and European Solidarity Corps.

Ms. Mihajlov referred to challenging period faced by Agency in recent months and underlined that all measures taken were aimed at restoring full compliance with EC procedures. She informed that following the implementation of corrective actions, Agency received approval and funding from EC to continue implementation of Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps. She stressed that all internal changes were carried out in accordance with EC requirements and that cooperation with beneficiaries has been significantly intensified to restore confidence in the Agency's work.

She highlighted very good cooperation MoES, noting that support received has been instrumental in stabilizing and improving the functioning of Agency. She informed that in September, 143 grant agreements were signed with beneficiary institutions, of which 111 have already been contracted, while remaining contracts are expected to be finalized by end of December. She underlined those funded projects follow European and national priorities, with strong focus on digitalization, climate change, innovative learning methods and inclusion, noting that a significant share of funded projects include persons with disabilities or special educational needs.

Ms. Mihajlov also referred to planned activities in cooperation with other ministries, including reactivation of National Youth Card and preparation of a memorandum of cooperation with MSPDY in 2026. This would enable better recognition and recording of youth participation in European programmes. She also referred to relevance of IPA III support for further strengthening of the sector.

Ms Popovska, MoES representative, added that the Ministry fully supports reform process related to National Agency. She informed that changes are planned both within Ministry and Agency, including establishment of a dedicated unit within Ministry responsible for monitoring Erasmus+ programmes, strengthening role of National Authority. She also referred to ongoing work of a working group on the new law, planned relaunch of call for appointment of Agency's Director, and intention to introduce external evaluation and assessment, as requested by EC.

Ms. Slavkoska welcomed positive developments and underlined importance of Erasmus+ and related programmes for young people and educational staff. She proposed to continue with the agenda related to social policy, demography and youth.

Mr. Dejan Ivkovski, Head of Unit for Migration, Integration and Status of Foreigners in MSPDY, presented an overview of demographic and migration challenges facing the country. He underlined, while unemployment rate is around 11%, labour market situation cannot be analyzed without taking into account broader demographic trends. He noted a significant population decline, accelerated ageing, low birth rates and increased emigration of young people. According to census data, population decreased by around 10% between 2002 and 2021, reaching approximately 1.8 million, while projections indicate a further decline to around 1.2 million by 2070. He stressed that fertility remains low at around 1.4 children per woman, well below replacement level of 2.1, and an average age of women at first birth is 29 years. He also highlighted that more than 18% of persons born in country currently live abroad, with recent migration trends increasingly involving highly educated young people, leading to labour shortages and long-term demographic risks.

Mr. Ivkovski further explained that population ageing represents an additional challenge, noting increased life expectancy and a growing share of persons aged over 65, which rose from around 10.6% in 2002 to 17.2% in 2021. At the same time, number of children under age of 15 has declined, and average age of population has increased to over 40



years. He stressed that these trends require a shift from viewing demographic change as a threat to treating it as a policy priority and an opportunity for sustainable development, based on evidence, quality data and a human rights-based approach.

He informed that preparations are underway for a new Strategy for Demographic Resilience for 2026–2036 period, developed with support from international partners. Strategy aims to create better conditions for family life and childbirth, reduce a gap between desired and actual fertility, manage migration in line with labor market needs, and strengthen cooperation with diaspora. He referred to recent presentation of Strategy for Cooperation with Diaspora, attended at high political level, as evidence of increased commitment to structured and institutionalized engagement with citizens abroad. He also announced preparation of a Law on Migration, Reintegration and Returnees from the Diaspora, intended to establish a comprehensive and functional migration management system and provide a clear legal basis for return and reintegration measures.

Mr. Ivkovski also highlighted importance of reducing regional disparities in social and economic development, in order to limit internal migration and revitalize depopulated areas. He referred to planned measures aimed at improving human capital through investments in education, health and culture, strengthening social protection for elderly, increasing effectiveness of social transfers, and further digitalization of social services, including childcare services, as part of efforts to support young families.

In addition, he presented key elements of the forthcoming Strategy for the Integration of Refugees and Foreigners. Planned measures include simplified access to services through a one-stop system, language learning, recognition of qualifications, support for access to education and employment, provision of stable and affordable housing, legal assistance, and targeted support for vulnerable groups, including single mothers and persons with disabilities. He underlined that all planned strategies and legal solutions are aligned with National Development Strategy 2024–2044 and relevant EU and UN priorities, and that stronger monitoring and evaluation mechanisms will be essential to ensure effective implementation.

Following presentation, **Mr. Frckovski** underlined the need for a systemic and inter-sectoral approach, linking demographic policy with education and employment policies. He stressed that quality education, followed by effective labour market integration through ESA, is essential for addressing demographic decline and labour shortages.

Mr. Ivkovski agreed, noting that while migration policy documents already exist, including a parliamentary resolution, evaluation and monitoring of implemented measures remain weak. He stressed importance of introducing clear mechanisms for assessment and adjustment of policies within new strategic and legal framework, with continued support from international partners such as UNFPA, UNHCR and IOM.

Ms. Valentina Pavlovska, State Counselor for coordination and development of demographic policies in MSPDY, added that National Development Strategy 2024–2044 provides overarching framework for all sectoral strategies. She underlined those future policies in education, employment and social protection should be aligned with demographic realities, including population decline, ageing and youth migration. She stressed importance of synergy between sectoral strategies and consistent prioritization of demographic aspects across all policy areas.

Ms. Svetlana Cvetkovska, Head of Department for Equal Opportunities in MSPDY, informed participants that, in line with Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, the Ministry has initiated preparation of a new Strategy for Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence for 2026–2033 period, accompanied by an Action Plan for 2026–2029. She noted that preparation of strategy coincides with ‘16 Days of Activism against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence’, underlining continued need to demonstrate commitment to addressing violence as a serious violation of human rights. A dedicated working group has been established, with expert support provided by UN Women, UNFPA, UNDP and the IPA project in area of Rule of Law. A broad consultative process is underway, including regional consultations, aimed at identifying key challenges faced by women and girls and defining effective policy responses.

She explained that strategy is structured around three priority areas. First focuses on prevention, including promotion of a culture of equality and zero tolerance to violence, integration of gender equality in formal and informal education, development of non-violent communication, and implementation of national and local awareness-raising campaigns. Particular emphasis is placed on promoting positive role models, active involvement of men and boys, and addressing emerging forms of violence, such as digital violence. Capacity-building of institutions responsible for prevention, identification and response to violence is a key element, including standardized and continuous specialized training for professionals across sectors. Sustainability of training will be ensured through the Ministry’s Resource Centre, as well as through training systems of Ministry of Interior, Academy for Judges and Public Prosecutors and social services. Strategy also foresees establishment of mechanisms for monitoring, supervision and evaluation of institutional effectiveness.

Second priority area concerns establishment of an effective system for protection and support of victims, aimed at ensuring right to a life free from violence. Priorities include expanding and strengthening networks of coordinated support services, ensuring their availability in both urban and rural areas, and developing a functional coordination system for case management. She underlined importance of transparent, victim-centered and non-judgmental procedures, including effective issuance and implementation of temporary protection measures and criminal proceedings against perpetrators. Strategy also addresses economic empowerment and long-term reintegration of victims through access to employment and economic measures, in close cooperation with other institutions.



Third priority area relates to integrated policies for data collection and coordination. Ms. Cvetkovska noted that data on violence are currently fragmented across institutions, including police, centers for social work, courts and prosecution services. Strategy aims to establish an integrated and effective data system that will enable evidence-based policymaking, monitoring of cases, and tracking of support provided to victims across institutions. She stressed that improved coordination and data integration are essential for effective prevention and protection and contribute to broader demographic and social policy objectives.

Ms. Cvetkovska further referred to Action Plan for Gender Equality 2025–2027, currently in government procedure, which supports implementation of Gender Equality Strategy. Action Plan focuses on strengthening institutional mechanisms for gender equality at central and local level, improving position of women in all areas of public and private life, addressing gender stereotypes, and promoting a culture of non-discrimination. It includes clearly defined activities, indicators, timelines and budget allocations, as well as reporting mechanisms in line with government methodology.

She also informed about Action Plan for Implementation of National Strategy for Equality and Non-Discrimination for 2025–2026 period, which is aligned with National Development Strategy 2024–2044. Action Plan aims to strengthen legal framework, institutional capacities and coordination mechanisms for prevention and protection from discrimination, as well as to raise public awareness of equality and non-discrimination across key sectors, including employment, education, health, social protection and access to goods and services.

In conclusion, Ms. Cvetkovska stressed that effective implementation of these strategies and action plans requires adequate financial resources and strong inter-sectoral cooperation. She underlined that successful implementation will contribute to improved quality of life, stronger social cohesion and respect for human rights.

Discussion

Mr. Mauro Mascioli, Programme Manager in EUD, thanked representatives of the Ministries and other institutions for updates provided, noting that regular communication allows the Delegation to remain informed of ongoing developments. He also referred to recent dissemination event presenting evaluation of IPA 2017 and IPA 2019 programmes, which covered 26 projects in areas of education, employment and social policy. He expressed appreciation for active involvement of members of the reference group in evaluation process and noted that findings are expected to support improved design and implementation of future programmes. He further highlighted importance of a systemic approach and continued use of expertise from international partners, including ETF and ILO, in addressing sectoral challenges.

Ms. Slavkoska welcomed the comments, noting that evaluation findings are important for future programming and improvement of both EU-funded and other donor-supported programmes, as well as national strategies. As no further comments were raised, she proposed to proceed with next agenda item related to new strategic framework for cooperation with United Nations (UN).

Presentation of development support implemented by multi-lateral and bilateral donors and other development partners

Meeting continued with a presentation by **Ms. Joana Babusku, representative of UN Resident Coordinator’s Office**, who delivered presentation on behalf of Ms. Rita Columbia and extended apologies for her absence. Ms. Babusku presented new United Nations–North Macedonia Strategic Cooperation Framework 2026–2030, as a key program document consolidating interventions of all UN agencies operating in country. She informed that 20 UN agencies have signed new framework, of which 13 have offices in North Macedonia. She welcomed strong alignment observed between international partners, global standards and national priorities, noting that these standards apply not only to UN, but to all partners.

Ms. Babusku explained that UN Cooperation Framework was developed during previous 2024 year, based on extensive consultations with national institutions, international partners and development stakeholders, as well as a comprehensive context analysis. She underlined that framework is fully aligned with National Development Strategy 2024–2044 and EU Reform Agenda and IPA funding, in line with UN’s mandate to support national priorities. Based on consultations and analyses, several strategic priorities were identified, two of which are directly relevant to work of this Sector Working Group: inclusive and human social development, and a sustainable economy. Additional cross-cutting priorities include building a resilient society, green transformation, good governance and rule of law.

She informed that overall financial envelope of UN Cooperation Framework amounts to approximately USD 230 million for a five-year period. To date, around 35% of resources have been mobilized, which she noted is expected at this stage, as mobilization continues gradually in cooperation with UN donors, Member States and bilateral development partners operating at country level. She stressed that coordination with bilateral donors is particularly important, as it enhances complementarity of interventions and improves development results for country.

Ms. Babusku further elaborated on first strategic priority of framework, which focuses on strengthening capacities of national institutions, systems and services, as well as key state functions. In context of this Sector Working Group, this priority is closely linked to quality education, social protection and care services, and prevention of and response to gender-based violence. Second priority relevant to Group relates to a sustainable economy, with activities aimed at improving enabling environment through stronger legal and regulatory frameworks, institutional capacities and services



of employment-related agencies. This includes skills development for employment, support to women’s economic empowerment and promotion of gender equality as a cross-cutting priority embedded across all areas of work.

Turning to planned activities for 2026, Ms. Babusku noted that UN works in close consultation with national institutions and that joint work plans are currently being developed. She informed that consultations on social and human development were held recently and that joint work plans are expected to be finalised by early next year. These plans will be published on UN website and shared with members of SWG, providing detailed information on activities, budgets, partners and donors.

She outlined key areas of planned UN support. In education, support will focus on early childhood education, curriculum development and strengthening teachers’ capacities, as well as school organisation, resource centres, greening of curricula and inclusion of persons with disabilities. In area of social protection, planned support includes addressing child poverty, development of first national coordination plan for European Child Guarantee, support for vulnerable groups including migrants, Roma and persons with disabilities, and further development of deinstitutionalisation and prevention services.

In area of gender-based violence, UN support will focus on strengthening coordination mechanisms and institutional capacities to support victims, in line with Istanbul Convention. In employment, planned activities include support to employment-related legislation, assistance in design and implementation of new action plans for Youth Guarantee, strengthening operational and digital capacities of ESA, cooperation with private sector on green investments, promotion of family-friendly workplace practices to support women’s labour market participation, and implementation of active labour market measures. She underlined those activities will be implemented at central, local and rural level, noting that some employment-related interventions also target rural areas.

Ms. Babusku concluded by noting that detailed information will be shared once joint work plans are finalised and published, and expressed readiness to respond to questions, either during the meeting or at a later stage, if needed.

Ms. Slavkoska noted that new UN Cooperation Framework provides strong support to reforms discussed during meeting. She stressed importance of effective mobilisation of resources, as well as strong coordination with other donors and alignment with national programmes and funding mechanisms. She invited comments or questions from participants and representatives of UN agencies.

Ms. Anita Damjanovska, on behalf of Swiss Development Cooperation, raised a question regarding planned Strategy for Integration of Foreigners and Law of Employment and Work of Foreigners and its implementation timeline, noting Switzerland’s interest in supporting migration-related policies. Switzerland remains active in area of dual education and vocational education and training, and announced that an evaluation of “Education for Employment” project will take place in December. She noted that meetings with relevant stakeholders will be requested to discuss preliminary findings and future support.

In response, **Mr. Ivkovski** clarified that an initiative presented relates to a new Law on migration management, reintegration of returnees from diaspora and integration of foreigners, which is separate from Law of Employment and Work of Foreigners. He explained that while this Law, under responsibility of MEL, regulates access to labour market, proposed new law aims to establish a comprehensive framework for integration of foreigners and their families into society. This includes measures to support family reunification, access to education, language learning, skills recognition and employment of family members, with an objective of preventing segregation and promoting social cohesion. He stressed that fast and inclusive integration of entire families is essential to ensure that foreign workers and their families become active and contributing members of society. Mr. Ivkovski further explained that challenges identified by foreign investors related to implementation and liberalisation of employment regulations will be addressed through working groups established within responsible ministries. Feedback and proposals from stakeholders will be reviewed and, where appropriate, reflected in future legislative amendments.

Conclusions

Ms. Slavkoska thanked all participants for their active engagement at the meeting. She summarized key messages of the meeting, highlighting>

- need to accelerate reforms in line with EU recommendations and national strategic documents,
- opportunities offered by new UN Strategic Cooperation Framework for youth, children, social inclusion and human capital development,
- importance of timely adoption and implementation of presented strategies and laws through participatory processes and strong coordination with donors and partners.

Annexes:

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| Annex 1 | Agenda |
| Annex 2 | Presentation of MEL, MoES, MSPDY and UN RCC |