

Brief Report
on the ESRP Conference: “Consultations and Way Forward”,
held in Skopje (H. Marriott), February 21, 2017

The main objective of the ESRP Conference that was organised and took place in Skopje on the 21st of February 2017, was to roundup and to finalise the process of consultation on the prepared draft-text of **the Employment and Social Reform Programme (ESRP)** of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

The Employment and Social Reform Programme, important comprehensive sectoral strategic document in the fields of labour market and employment, education, social protection and social inclusion, was being developed in the past two years by the national authorities, in close cooperation with the European Commission (DG EMPL). The process of developing the ESRP was coordinated by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MoLSP).

In various stages of the document development, the process of communication and consultation with the relevant stakeholders, including the European Commission, Delegation of the European Union in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, representatives of social partners and civil society organisation, as well as the international development partners, was initiated and carried. This was done with the purpose to include and take into consideration the perspectives, opinions, inputs and specific needs of the various and relevant stakeholders in properly identifying the key challenges in the covered areas and the most relevant policy reforms, objectives and specific measures aimed at tackling the challenges and improving the situation.

The ESRP Conference was organised by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy with the assistance and support provided within the **Employment and Social Affairs Platform (ESAP) Regional Project** financed by the European Commission and jointly implemented by RCC and ILO.

The organisation of the conference followed the open public consultation process on the draft programme that lasted more than a month. The intention of the MoLSP, as the leading and coordinating partner in the ESRP development, was through this conference, to ensure additional presentation of the latest version of this strategic document in front of the wider audience, and to provide forum for additional discussion and exchange of views with the intention to further improve the content and the relevance of the document.

An added value of this conference was its regional component, i.e. the possibility to exchange experience with the delegations from other two economies in the WB Region that have already prepared and adopted their ESRP programmes and are currently in the implementation stage (Montenegro and the Republic of Serbia).

The conference was attended by approximately 80 participants, representing various stakeholders, such as the public administration institutions, international organisations and donor partners (DEU, UNDP, ILO, GIZ), employers' and workers' organisations, civil society organisations, professors

and experts from the covered fields, expert teams from the several currently implementing technical assistance projects, etc.

The agenda of the Conference and the attendance list are attached to this Report.

The conference was opened with the welcoming/opening remarks of the representatives from the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Delegation of the European Union in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and the Team Leader of the ESAP Regional Project (RCC).

The first working session of the conference was dedicated to the presentation of prepared ESRP document, with 4 speakers from the MoLSP and the Ministry of Education and Science (MES). The first speaker at this session has presented to the audience the process of preparation of the ESRP of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the consultations with the EC, the results of the preceding public consultations, the received comments and feedback and the current state of play. In addition, the content of the latest ESRP version was briefly presented to the participants in respect to all three priority areas covered within the document, i.e. 1.Labour Market & Employment; 2.Human Capital & Skills; and 3.Social Inclusion & Social Protection.

The speakers have presented the main identified challenges, planned reforms, policies and specific measures within each of the priority areas. The presentations were followed by the first round of discussion with expressed constructive comments, views, ideas and recommendations.

The main summary of this one and the discussions that followed, are presented later in this report.

The second session was devoted to the presentation of the ESRP experience within the region. The delegations from the Republic of Serbia and Montenegro have introduced the participants with their practical experience in preparations and past implementation of their respective ESRP documents, the challenges that they have experienced in these processes, consultation with and involvement of other stakeholders, the lessons learnt, etc.

The conference has continued with the third session, during which, the audience had the opportunity to be informed about the latest developments in respect to the EU financial support through the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA). The process of IPA II programming was presented and discussed, the development of the related programming documents – the Sector Planning Document (SPD) and the Action Program 2017 for the Sector: Education, Employment and Social Policy. The speakers (2) from the IPA units within the MoLSP and MES has presented the current developments in this respect, the content of the programming documents, the specific actions that are planned to be supported through IPA II and the linkages and complementarities with the ESRP.

There were useful and constructive discussions at the conference, and the received inputs, comments, opinions will certainly help in improving the current version of the Employment and Social Reform Programme and its finalisation, after which, the document will be submitted to the Government for its adoption.

* * *

The following section represents the summary of the key issues that were raised and discussed by participants at the conference. The discussion indicated that great number of the raised issues have already been addressed to certain extent within the ESRP document, but also there are issues that would need some additional consideration and discussion if, how, or to which extent they should be further dealt with and addressed :

- thinking about designing and introducing measures, including macro-economic measures for preventing migration of young people;

- the need to further simplify regulations for micro-enterprises (for example for accounting, fines, etc.);
- strengthen the career guidance of young people in elementary and secondary education, so that they make the right choice of their future occupation;
- increase funding of active labour market measures;
- support employment of persons with hearing impairments;
- train sign-language interpreters to meet the increased demand for them;
- there should be thinking about redefining the social assistance benefits system, especially combining different benefits and additional income with the social financial assistance (for example: combining the social financial assistance with the child allowance or with the income from work; proportionally increase the amount of the social financial assistance with the size of the household);
- the need to improve statistics in the field of social protection, especially by adopting the ESSPROS methodology;
- implement measures for the so called passive job seekers;
- set more optimistic targets for some of the social protection indicators, especially in respect to the poverty rate;
- aligning the ESRP and other strategic documents in the field with the EU social rights pillar initiative;
- keeping persons with disabilities high on the agenda, especially their access to education and the process of deinstitutionalisation;
- further address the issue of persons (Roma) without documents, prevent segregation of Roma in elementary and secondary schools, the issue of inclusion of Roma children in special schools;
- ensure support, such as rehabilitation or employment to other vulnerable groups in addition to persons with disability and Roma: homeless, victims of family violence, individuals aged 40+ with university degree living in urban areas, persons with rare diseases, single parents, former prisoners, etc.;
- provide rehabilitation to vulnerable people according to their needs;
- strengthen the capacities of biological family and persons who take care of persons with disability;
- as the unemployment decreases, focus more on the job quality rather than on job quantity;
- ensure education and training for children with disabilities in day-care centers. A link should be established with education institutions and children should be able to obtain certificate and skills for integration in the labour market;
- the need to prepare and adopt a strategy for development of social entrepreneurship, define the criteria for social enterprises according to the local context; ensure access to start-up capital as a grant for social enterprises; encourage young people to become social entrepreneurs; enable CSO to have access to the special fund for social entrepreneurship in case one is opened in the future;
- provide a reference to the Gender Equality Strategy in addition to the sub-sector strategies.