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Career Guidance in the Central and South-Eastern European Region: The case of four countries via the lenses of non-governmental organisations

Introduction

The perception of career guidance and the opportunities for career guidance practitioners to participate in shaping career guidance systems depend on the development of career guidance within each country's context and political culture. Although some countries in Europe are geopolitically connected, their different histories create specific differences in career guidance systems and their development. On the other hand, the trend to harmonise the development of career guidance across EU countries continues (Council of the European Union, 2004, 2008; ETF, 2003), with some countries deliberately joining forces to address common themes or issues (Andreassen, Einarsdóttir, Lerkkanen et al., 2019; Haug, Plant, Valdimarsdóttir et al., 2019; Borbély-Pecze, Hloušková, & Šprlák, 2022).

It is no easy task to link EU-level education policy, social policy, and employment objectives, including career guidance policy, with Member State objectives, even more so to translate those policy goals into the societal domain in which civil associations are active. The European Semester itself is a complex and regularly implemented mechanism (Fromont & Van Waeyenberge, 2025). Understanding the career guidance objectives of this mechanism is a challenge for career guidance organisations operating in civil society.

Since its inception, the EU has been wrestling with a legitimacy deficit in decision-making, a consequence of its specific functioning. Some authors even argue that civil society organisations serve as a remedy to the legitimacy crisis (Kohler-Koch, 2009:50). In this way, by essentially extending citizen participation in EU decision-making, although there is a directly elected parliament, much of the decision-making remains in the hands of national governments. From the perspective of EU policy, one or more governing ministries in each country are responsible for setting policy priorities and strategies for the development of career guidance systems at various levels, but civil society organisations remain the messengers of democratic transformation in policy decision-making processes (Keane & Merkel, 2019).

In general, civil society organisations play a pivotal role in ensuring transparency in political decision-making and in shaping national policies. The variabilities in the involvement of civil society organisations representing the voice of career guidance practitioners (professional associations) in the development of national career guidance systems inspired four Central and Eastern countries (Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania) to cooperate on a common theme – to strengthen the collaboration of the professional associations in the field of career guidance and education.

This study presents the initial results of research aimed at understanding and comparing the functioning of four professional associations of career guidance practitioners, which, as one of the stakeholders at the national level, have the potential to participate in policy decision-making on the development of career guidance in countries collaborating within the project entitled “Central and Eastern European Guidance Association Forum” (CEEGAF). The research design, based on joint work within the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN, 2012, 2015), consisted of three steps. First, an internal survey (an online questionnaire) was conducted among members of each professional association. Then, the association's management conducted an internal SWOT analysis of each professional association's functioning, and finally, interviews with stakeholders and focus groups were conducted to obtain an external perspective on the role of professional associations in each country.

Geopolitics



Until now, Central and Eastern Europe has lacked a professional platform or expert group for regularly discussing career guidance-related issues. Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic were more involved in the V4 (Visegrad Group) from 1991 until the early 2010s. Hungary was also active in the V4 and in the Balkan cooperation, where Romania is a regular participant. The former Central European Initiative (CEI) is a forum for regional cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe (including Italy and Ukraine) with 17 member states, founded in Budapest in 1989. It is currently operational; if it has an agenda, it is mainly focused on diplomatic affairs. A newer initiative, the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (2011), is a macro-regional strategy for the Danube region, a long-term EU policy to address the problems of the Danube macro-region, which encompasses the states covered in this article, but does not actually include a trajectory for career guidance in the region.

The experience of connecting Central European countries in the field of career guidance dates back to the IAEVG (International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance) conference in Bratislava in 2019. In 2024, we established cooperation with Romania, which was the starting point for the founding of the Central and Eastern European Region Career Guidance Forum. The aim of the cooperation between these four countries (namely CZ: Czech Republic, HU: Hungary, RO: Romania and SK: Slovakia) in this forum and project is to promote the role of four civil society organisations dealing with career guidance (professional associations) in the development of career guidance within their countries, in the professional representation of career guidance practitioners and, not least, in the development of regional cooperation in the field of career guidance.

To get acquainted with the contemporary career guidance systems, services, and research of Romania, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, we can revisit the national career guidance system descriptions of the Cedefop CareersNet Network (Cedefop, 2000a, 2000b, 2023), then research reports written before accession (ETF, 2003), and some recent articles (Watts & Borbély-Pecze, 2011) as well. Nevertheless, until the start of our cooperation, the flow of professional information between the otherwise neighbouring and sometimes partially overlapping countries in terms of language was very incomplete, with perhaps the sole exception of Czech–Slovak professional relations. It is often the case that a Slovak or Romanian career guidance report or scientific article is only known to the Hungarian professional public through US, Canadian, British, German, or French media, or only through large international organisations (e.g., OECD, WB, ILO, ETF, etc.) and vice versa. At the same time, we know from several conferences (IAEVG, Career Lead Network, Euroguidance regional meetings, such as the Euroguidance Cross-Border Seminars (EG, 2024)), short descriptions of national systems (Cedefop CareersNet) or other Erasmus+-related ad hoc projects, that a lot of useful career guidance practices are emerging in these neighbouring countries, while we hardly know each other's good practices, and joint professional reflection is minimal.

Mapping the situation in the four countries

All four professional associations consider the development and promotion of career guidance/counselling/education, and the strengthening of the career guidance position in society, to be their fundamental mission. Their goal is also to provide professional support to career guidance practitioners

and develop a community for those working in the field of career guidance, regardless of the type and field of their degree. In addition, they also try to raise awareness of career guidance services among the public (especially CZ, SK) and to communicate the professional interests of the members to the governing ministries and other decision-makers (especially RO, HU). Based on the expert assessment of the authors of this text, the conditions for the career guidance policy decision-making participation of professional associations vary slightly in the context of each country (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 — Regional Comparison of the four countries' career guidance landscape

Country	Status of the national Lifelong Guidance Strategy	Number of organizations associated with career guidance practitioners	National guidance forum (NGF)
Hungary	Sectoral, fragmented	Two major NGOs in the field and others partly also focusing on career guidance, additional non-profit and for-profit associations in the field of HR and coaching	Was abolished in 2012
Czech Republic	Sectoral with coordination efforts	Three active NGOs in the field and other associations deal only marginally with specific issues of career guidance	It was established in 2010, and two of the three active NGOs are involved in the NGF
Slovakia	Sectoral, fragmented	One active NGO representing the interests of careers guidance practitioners, recognized as a partner of public bodies on an ad-hoc basis	No, historically 2 attempts (2008 and 2014-2015)
Romania	Sectoral, fragmented	Romanian Counselors Association	There is no NGF

A brief introduction to the four professional associations

- *HU: Magyar Pedagógiai Társaság (MPT) / Hungarian Pedagogical Society /Division for Career Education and Guidance.*

Since its foundation, the Career Guidance Division of the MPT has had a threefold mission, which was confirmed in the Statutes adopted in 2024: a) to support the professional development of career guidance counsellors, b) to develop the institutional framework for career guidance (labour services, schools, vocational training, primary and general secondary education, higher education, social inclusion, NGOs), and c) to develop policy proposals (Hungarian Pedagogical Association, 2024). The division has had its operational manual since 2024, signed by the membership. The division elects its own leadership and delegates its electoral power at the association level. The operating model is based on grassroots democracy.

- *CZ: Sdružení pro kariérové poradenství a kariérový rozvoj (SKPKR) / Association for Career Guidance and Career Development*

The vision of the Association is to provide a space for mutual learning, sharing of experience, and inspiration to support the professional development of career counsellors and thus contribute to the availability of quality career counselling in the Czech Republic. A member of the association can be a person with a professional relationship or who shows an active interest in career guidance/counselling and career development. The Association is managed by a five-member board. Each member of the board acts independently on behalf of the Association (Sdružení, 2017: Sections 3, 4, 6, 8).

- *SK: Združenie pre kariérové poradenstvo a rozvoj kariéry (ZKPKR) / Association for Career Guidance and Career Development)*

The association pursues the following objectives: bringing together, cooperating with, and networking career guidance experts; supporting professional development and training of experts; making career guidance and counselling services available; and promoting the interests of career guidance and career development. It associates legal entities and individuals. The highest body of the association is the General Assembly of all members. The Association's activities are managed by a five-member board (Združenie, 2017: Section 2, 3, 6, 7).

- *RO: Asociația Consilierilor Romani (ACROM) / Romanian Counsellors Association*

The Romanian Counsellors Association¹ promotes the counselling profession and supports the professional development of those involved in career guidance and counselling activities at the national level. ACROM provides a framework for collaboration, the exchange of best practices, and continuous training, with the aim of improving the quality of counselling services in Romania. The organisation supports national and international initiatives in the field and aims to contribute to the development of a coherent legal framework adapted to the realities of society. Its activities include cooperation with relevant institutions, the organisation of educational programmes, and the representation of professional interests in dialogue with public authorities. ACROM organises annual conferences dedicated to counsellors from both higher and pre-university education sectors, with consistent participation ranging from 100 to 200 attendees per edition. The association is managed by a five-member board, elected by vote, which provides strategic direction and oversees day-to-day operations.

These four professional associations have typically been operating for about ten years or a little bit more and have a membership of 30–60 people from very different branches of career guidance, including schools' career educators/teachers, public employment services, VET, universities, non-governmental organisations, and private career coaches, as well as university academic staff. It is important to emphasise that three of the four professional associations are relatively small in their own country and deal exclusively with the development and representation of the interests of career guidance practitioners. The fourth organisation in Hungary is also a non-governmental organisation, with 1,200 members and nearly 30 divisions across all areas of pedagogy, including career guidance and education. This career guidance division (a partner involved in the CEEGAF project) is comparable to the other three organisations in terms of its number of members (see Figure 2).

Methodology

Based on the description of professional associations in four cooperating countries, it can be assumed that the roles of professional associations in shaping and developing national guidance systems vary. Therefore, the research aimed to understand and compare the perceived roles of four professional associations in shaping the national policies and practices of career guidance. For these purposes, the research was designed to capture both the "inside" perspective of the members and management of each professional association (INTERNAL view) and the "outside" perspective of other stakeholders in each country (EXTERNAL view). In the internal view, we were interested in how professional associations meet the needs and expectations of their members and how their leadership reflects the functioning and management of these organizations. From an external perspective, we explored how different stakeholders involved in career guidance and counselling interpret the importance of career guidance in their country and the role they believe professional associations that bring together career guidance practitioners play in this context. The combination of internal and external perspectives will enable us to describe the roles of professional associations in shaping and developing national guidance systems. The research was conducted between November 2024 and April 2025, and it can be divided into three consecutive steps, each of which is described separately.

¹<https://acrom.org.ro/>

First research step – online membership questionnaire

A survey of members' opinions on the functioning of their association was conducted using the following research questions:

- What do members of the four small professional associations with nationwide coverage (CZ, HU, RO, SK) operating in the field of career guidance expect from their membership?
- How do national associations meet the expectations of their members?
- How does the leadership of these professional associations evaluate their performance in relation to their members?

We used several tools to answer these research questions. The views and opinions of association members were collected through an online questionnaire that was based on the statutes of professional associations (Sdružení, 2017; Združenie, 2017, HPA, 2024). The questionnaire specified 11 areas of activity (Tab. 3) that can be considered as general goals for fulfilling the mission of career guidance associations. Respondents rated these 11 areas on a six-point scale from two perspectives:

- Fulfilment: how their association fulfils the given activity, scale: 1: does not fulfil at all, 6: fulfils it fully.
- Importance: how important they consider the given activity to be among the association's activities; scale: 1 = not important at all, 6 = crucial importance.

To compare the ratings of individual associations, we used a weighted arithmetic mean, assigning 6 points to a score of 6, 1 point to a score of 1, etc. The answer "I don't know" receives 0 points.

Sampling

The members' questionnaire was emailed to all members (337 individuals) in the first few months of 2025, with 20.5% responding (Figure 2). The Slovak association has the largest number of members among the four associations surveyed. On the other hand, the Czech association has the fewest members and respondents.

Figure 2 — Overview of addressed members and respondents

Country ¹	Number of addressed members	Number of respondents	% of return
SK	200	27	13,5
CZ	36	10	27,8
RO	48	20	41,6
HU	53	12	22,6
Total	337	70	20,5

In the next step of the internal survey, we developed a self-assessment tool to get a better understanding of the leadership of the four associations and their roles, objectives, ways of communicating with their own membership base and external stakeholders such as relevant government agencies/ ministries, other civil society organizations, universities, and most importantly with the membership base and non-member career counsellors. The opinion of the associations' leadership was examined by the same self-assessment matrix (SWOT) created for each organisation. We were interested in what respondents saw as the main benefit of their association membership. This question was answered by 45 respondents (63.4%). The most valued benefits include professional growth, networking, access to relevant information, and a sense of community. However, there's also a clear call for more consistent communication, recognition of contributions, and enhanced visibility of the association's impact: both for members and the broader professional field.

Results of the membership questionnaire²

The highest questionnaire return rate was for the Romanian association (Figure 2). Among the respondents, there are slightly more members with a membership period (Figure 3) longer than three years (53%) than members with a membership period of up to three years (47%).

Figure 3 — Length of respondents membership

Membership length	CZ	HU	RO	SK	Total
less than 1 year	1	2	0	7	10
1-3 years	1	4	5	12	23
3-5 years	1	2	5	3	11
more than 5 years	8	4	10	4	26
Total	11	12	20	27	70

Most respondents consider themselves to be passive members participating in association activities (55%). Slightly more than a quarter of respondents are actively involved in association activities (27%), and slightly fewer respondents (18%) consider themselves to be members actively participating in association life.

Respondents' views on 11 activities of their member associations.

Figure 4 shows that respondents rate all the activities offered as important (average ratings ranging from 4.73 to 5.64). Among the three most important association activities, respondents mentioned “Sharing information and promoting innovation, new trends, new tools, approaches and topics in career guidance” (5.64 points), “Supporting networking and facilitating collaboration among career professionals” (5.61 points), and “Providing informal training opportunities (workshops, webinars, trainings, mobilities, study visits, job shadowing)” (5.5 points).

Of the 11 association activities (Figure 4) offered in the questionnaire, the three highest-rated activities that our respondents believe their member associations fulfilled include: “Sharing information and promoting innovations, new trends, new tools, approaches and topics in career counselling” (4.24 points), “Providing informal learning opportunities (workshops, webinars, training, motivation, study visits, job shadowing)” (4.04 points), and “Supporting networking and facilitating collaboration among career professionals” (3.94 points).

It follows from the above that all associations meet their members' expectations and fulfil one of their key goals as stated in their statutes.

²A detailed report was made on the membership questionnaire survey and this part of the article is written based on this report from Freibergová & Hloušková (2025).

Figure 4 — Gap score from comparison of respondents' opinions on the fulfilment and importance

No.	Activity	Average fulfillment	Average importance	Gap score
7	Participating in research and development projects (e.g., Erasmus+ projects, nationally funded projects ...)	3,9	4,8	0,87
2	Sharing information and promoting innovation, new trends, new tools, approaches, and topics in career guidance	4,2	5,6	1,40
8	Promoting career guidance and career guidance providers	3,8	5,2	1,44
3	Providing informal training opportunities (workshops, webinars, trainings, mobilities, study visits, job shadowing)	4,0	5,5	1,46
9	Helping practitioners implement policies into practice (information/training about new legislation, norms ...)	3,6	5,1	1,51
6	Supporting high-quality service delivery (e.g., through ethical standards, professional guidelines ...)	3,6	5,1	1,56
10	Shaping guidance provision on the regional level (communicating with regional authorities ...)	3,1	4,7	1,59
1	Supporting networking and facilitating collaboration among career professionals	3,9	5,6	1,67
5	Providing accreditation/certification of career professionals (e.g., accredited training, recognition and/or validation ...)	3,0	4,8	1,71
11	Shaping guidance system on the national level (advocacy, participating in legislative process, communicating with ministries ...)	3,2	5,1	1,89
4	Providing supervision, intervention, and mentoring	2,9	4,8	1,93

By comparing respondents' opinions on the fulfilment of the 11 activities and their importance in association life, we gain an overview of which activities respondents consider important in association life and to what extent they are fulfilled. The "Gap score" (the difference between the achieved average importance and fulfilment of activities) reaches values from 0.87 to 1.93 points (Table 4).

In our opinion, associations should pay particular attention to those activities for which respondents indicated high importance (>5), low fulfilment (<3.5), and therefore high "gap scores" (>1.3). In the next part of this text, we focus on three activities with high deficiency scores, namely:

- supporting networking and facilitating collaboration among career professionals;
- providing supervision, intervention, and mentoring;
- shaping the guidance system on the national level (advocacy, participating in the legislative process, communicating with ministries ...).

Supporting networking and facilitating collaboration among career professionals (Chart no 1) can be considered as one of the basic functions of each association. The fulfilment of this activity is evaluated as excellent by Romanian (54%), Slovak (38%), and Hungarian (8%) respondents. On average, Romanians awarded this activity 4.3 points, slightly less than Slovaks (4.1 points), Hungarians (3.9 points), and Czechs (3.2 points).

Figure 5 — Fulfilment of supporting networking and facilitating collaboration among career professionals

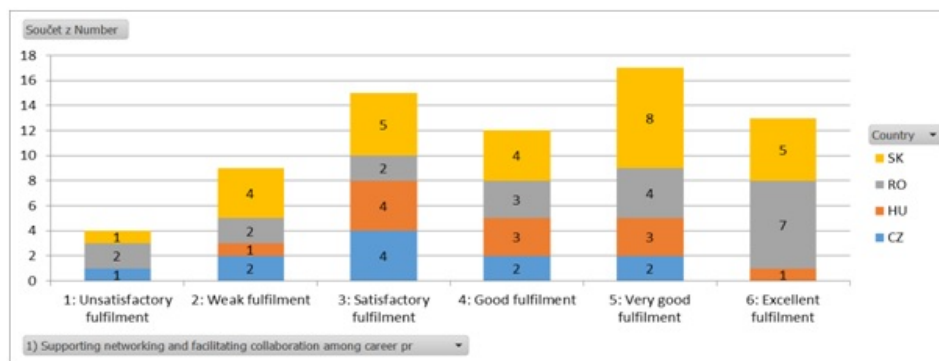
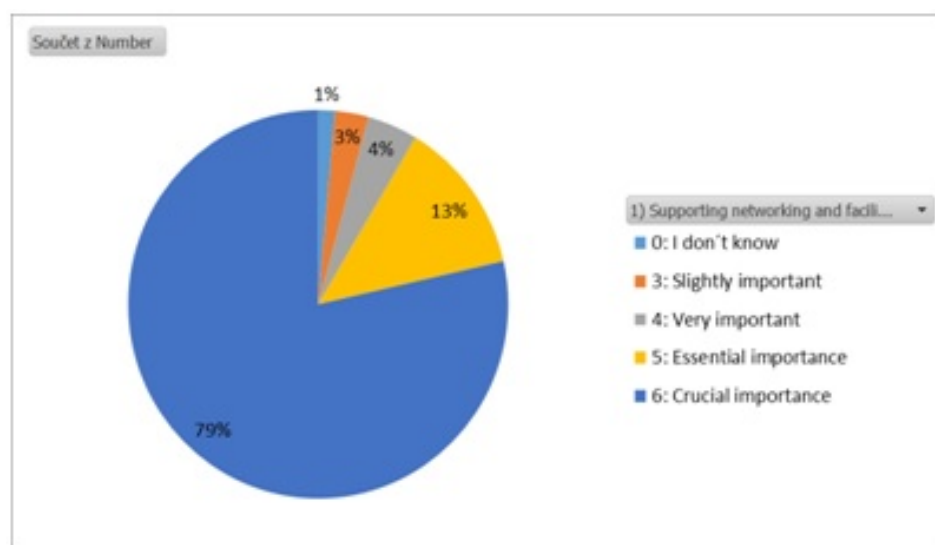


Figure 6 — Importance of supporting networking and facilitating collaboration among career professionals



Most respondents, regardless of country of origin, unanimously consider supporting networking and facilitating collaboration (Chart No. 2) to be crucial (79%) and essential (13%), underscoring the importance of networking and fostering collaboration among career guidance practitioners. The respondents' answers show that larger associations are more successful at fostering networking and collaboration. This is one of the most important activities that is performed in a less-than-satisfactory manner, according to Czech members of their association.

On average, respondents evaluate the fulfilment of **supervision, intervision, and mentoring** (Chart No. 3) as slightly less than satisfactory, with an average score of 2.91. Provision of these activities is rated worst by Czechs (2.27 points), slightly better by Hungarians (2.67 points) and Slovaks (2.7 points), and best by Romanians, between satisfactory and good (3.7 points).

Figure 7 — Fulfillment of providing supervision, intervention, and mentoring

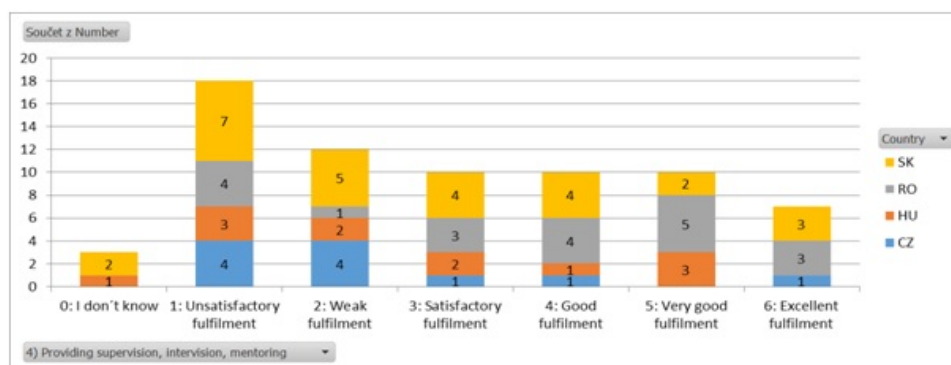
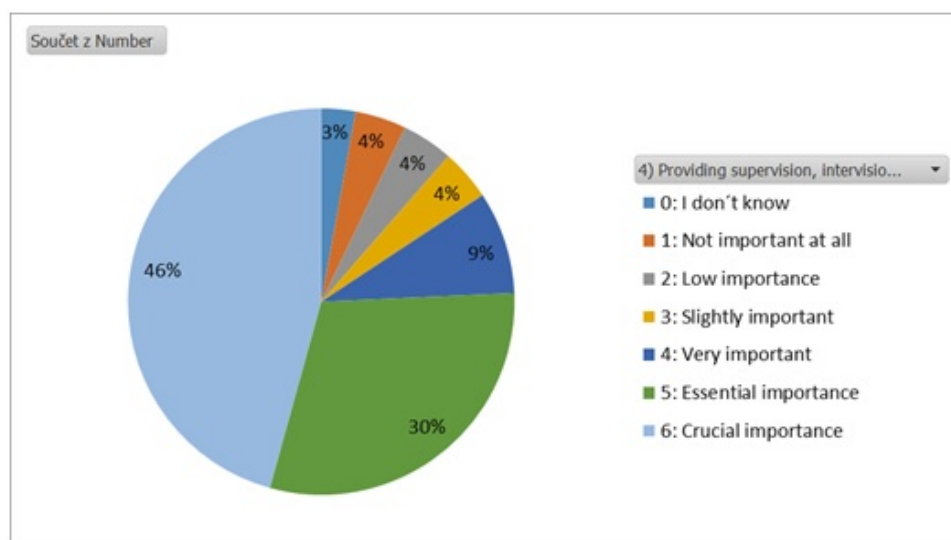


Figure 8 — Importance of providing supervision, intervention, and mentoring



The importance of providing supervision, intervention, and mentoring (Figure 8) is evaluated quite positively. Less than half of respondents consider it crucial (46%), essential (30%), or very important (9%). Slightly, low, and not important, each contribute 12%. The category "I don't know" also appears here (3%).

All associations declare their support for the professional development of their members, but the question is who should fulfil the need for supervision, intervention, and mentoring. The members of the association themselves? This activity is closely related to the presence or absence of a professional development system for career guidance practitioners in each country. If such a system does not exist (e.g., in the Czech Republic or Hungary), these activities can be carried out by experienced members of the association.

The last activity of the associations we will focus on is **shaping the guidance system on the national level** (Chart No. 5). On average, fulfilment of shaping the guidance system on the national level (advocacy, participating in the legislative process, communicating with ministries ...) is rated as good by respondents from Romania (4.16 points) and Slovakia (4 points). Hungarian respondents awarded fulfilment of this activity 3.64 points, which corresponds to a rating between 'excellent' and 'very good' on the evaluation scale, Romanians 4.3 points, Slovaks 4.2 points (both between satisfactory and good), and the Czechs 2.89 points (a bit less than satisfactory). The low rating of the fulfilment of this activity by members of the Czech association is probably reflected in the fragmentation of the association's representation by all members of the association board (see Statutes, 2017, section).

Figure 9 — Fulfillment of shaping guidance system on the national level (advocacy, participating in legislative process, communicating with ministries ...)

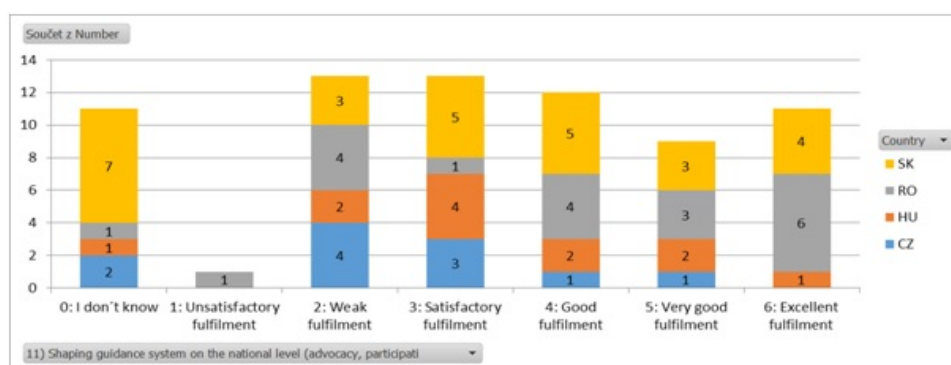
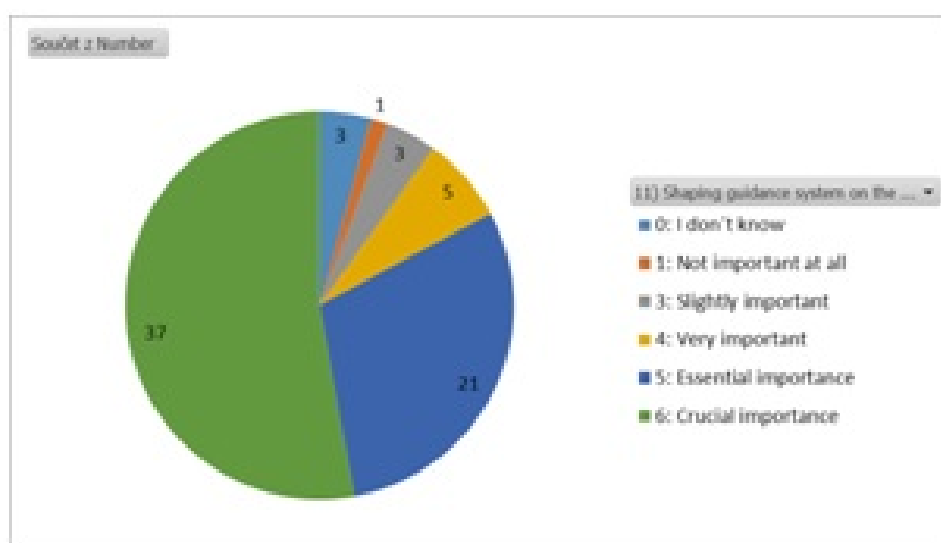


Figure 10 — Importance of shaping guidance system on the national level (advocacy, participating in legislative process, communicating with ministries ...)



The importance of this activity is rated as crucial (37%), essential (21%), and very important (5%). The rest make up only 6%, of which 3% are slightly important, 1% not important at all, and 3% did not answer or could not answer. If shaping the guidance system on the national level is not one of the key activities of the association (e.g., in the Czech Republic or in Hungary), it may not be perceived as important by the members – respondents, and, understandably, the members may not perceive it as fulfilled either.

Second research step: view of the associations' management

As the next research step, we developed a self-assessment tool to get a better understanding of the four-association management and their roles, aims, ways of communication with their own membership and external stakeholders such as the relevant government agencies/ministries, other civil organisations, universities, and, most importantly, with the membership and the non-member career counsellors. To contextualise the membership dynamics, the Figure 11 below summarises the available numerical data as of November 2024.

Figure 11 — Composition of the associations' membership

Association (country)	Type of Members	Total Members	Notes
MPT (HU)	Individuals (Section)	45 (from 1200 total)	Section embedded in a larger pedagogical body
SKPKR (CZ)	Individuals	36	14 members paid their membership fee in 2024
ZKPRK (SK)	Individuals & Institutions	230	35 members paid their membership fee in 2024, 16 members are institutions (private guidance providers)
ACROM (RO)	Individuals & Institutions	100	2 institutional members

Despite differences in size, resources, and institutional context, these associations share a commitment to raising the quality of career guidance services, supporting professionals in the field, and advocating for stronger public policies.

Most associations are structured around voluntary engagement, with limited or no permanent staff, and rely heavily on the dedication of a small group of active members. While this speaks to strong professional motivation, it also presents sustainability challenges, particularly when managing administrative tasks or scaling up activities. Membership bases vary in size and financial contribution, with several associations noting difficulties in converting passive or informal members into active, fee-paying contributors.

Service delivery typically includes events (webinars, workshops, conferences), resource sharing, and participation in national or EU-funded projects. All associations share the aim of raising the quality of career guidance, influencing public policy, and supporting professionals. There are a few elements of a culture of planning and periodic review; associations generally adopt opportunistic planning models, driven by available project funding or institutional invitations rather than long-term strategic roadmaps. Associations do not have systems in place to gather regular feedback or to adjust services based on member needs.

In terms of public visibility and policy influence, associations face varying degrees of access to decision-making spaces. Some are well-integrated in national policy processes, while others remain peripheral. International cooperation, especially through Erasmus+ projects, is valued by all but is sometimes constrained by language barriers, limited administrative capacity, or a lack of co-funding.

While each association operates in a unique context, they face similar challenges, such as limited staffing, fluctuating member engagement, absence of long-term planning, and the fragility of volunteer-based operations. A shift toward more sustainable, planned, and member-driven operations would increase their overall impact.

Third research step: interviews with decision makers and focus groups with various stakeholders

Between the autumn of 2024 and the spring of 2025, we conducted a total of 13 interviews (2 HU, 4 RO, 3 SK, 4 CZ) and 7 focus groups (1 HU/6 participants, 2 RO/14 participants, SK/14 participants, 2 CZ/16 participants) in the four countries. Scenarios for interviews and focus groups were developed to explore the social and policy space surrounding NGOs and to better understand the economic, social, and institutional expectations related to career education and guidance.

Interviews and focus groups in Hungary

Two interviews were conducted in Hungary. One was with the head of the National Educational Authority responsible for public education career guidance, and the other was with the career guidance officer of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry. (The Chamber provides career guidance services for students in vocational education and training and, to a lesser extent, for students in vocational training.) In both areas, career guidance primarily means helping with further education by providing career information, rather than providing career education. The Educational Authority supports these with further education information and self-knowledge questionnaires through the Authority's professional service advisory system. At the same time, the tools that support students' decisions are often regarded as professionally unreliable. The Chamber regrets that its activities are primarily limited to primary schools, after which secondary schools and universities are often closed, but there are examples of this cooperation in some counties. Two of our interviewees considered it as a problem of capacity.

Career guidance activities in schools are considered insufficient, often leading to erroneous decisions about further education. According to the head of the National Educational Authority, the school is not sufficiently exploiting the available opportunities, in which the workload of teachers plays a major role. There is no coordination in the area. The National Educational Authority does not require cooperation, partly because it believes there is no comparable actor in its field and partly because it sees the prospects for cooperation in public administration as difficult. The school career orientation day gives both organizations a serious task: the Chamber's task is primarily to bring together companies and interested parties and to present the professional opportunities of vocational training.

The lesson from the focus groups is that representatives of different organizations had varying levels of knowledge about the implementation of career guidance in Hungary. They were not familiar with the career guidance activities implemented in the entire vertical of the education and employment systems, while others were only aware of the services provided in their own fields. The NGO delegate representing parents had no systematic knowledge; he had only gained experience with domestic solutions through his own children, which led him to gain various experiences. Due to the composition of the group, the participants were mainly familiar with the services provided in education, but other services, such as those provided by the labour organisation and civil society organisations, as well as career counselling functions in the corporate environment, as well as the role of advocacy organisations (e.g., chambers), were also discussed.

In Hungary, NGOs have limited opportunities to collaborate with educational institutions at different levels in the field of career guidance due to the legal framework. NGOs can support the acquisition of work experience through volunteer activities or internship programs. The bigger problem, however, is that there are not enough professionals in NGOs (and in education) either; they are often absorbed by multinational companies with better existential opportunities, so the capacity of NGOs in this regard is also very limited.

NGOs can play a major role in preparing and motivating students, as they can attract young people's attention with non-traditional methods and tools and make the information needed for career decisions available to them.

Interviews and focus groups in Czechia

Four experts representing a wide range of stakeholder groups participated in the interviews: an academic teaching on the bachelor's degree programme "Career Guidance and Education", a senior member of staff from the Confederation of Industry and Transport, a private career counsellor, and a member of staff from the Regional Authority of the Pilsner Region, Department of Education, Youth and Sport (the regional directly managed organisation providing career guidance and career education).

Respondents perceive career guidance as an important tool for lifelong learning and adaptation to labour market changes. They state that, although its importance is growing, its systemic support

remains incomplete and uncoordinated. There is a lack of a legislative framework, stable funding, and anchoring in education and employment policy. Respondents believe that a sustainable way of financing career guidance must also be found for the future, as it is mainly dependent on project-based resources (e.g., ESF), which prevents its long-term planning and development. Career guidance is often neglected or given a marginal role in strategic documents. In addition to the absence of a legal framework, respondents point to the dysfunctionality of the National Guidance Forum (NPF), which lacks real influence on decision-making and policy coordination. Respondents state that the positive impacts of career guidance are mostly the result of local initiatives and individual efforts rather than systematic state support. The system lacks strategic unity, central management, and linkage to government policies. Respondents call for stronger formal support and better coordination between ministries, regions, and professional platforms. NGOs are perceived as important but complementary partners, especially in working with vulnerable groups and in areas where the state is failing. Their effective involvement in strategic structures (e.g., NPF) is conditional on their expertise, non-political nature, and a functional framework for cooperation.

Three main external factors hindering cooperation emerged from the final discussion: (1) lack of systemic anchoring, (2) low institutional capacity for partnerships, and (3) lack of legislative and financial support for the counselling profession.

Two focus groups were conducted in the Czech Republic, one face-to-face (20.11.2024) and one online (28.3.2025), with a total participation of 16 stakeholder representatives including 6 people from regional educational and counselling centres, 4 from schools (1 primary school, 2 secondary schools, 1 vocational school), 1 Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 1 Czech-Moravian Confederation of Trade Unions, 1 self-employed person, 1 company, 1 sports club, and 1 charity organization.

The focus group participants agreed that current career guidance in the Czech Republic suffers from significant fragmentation and the absence of a clear legislative framework. Career guidance is provided across various sectors and institutions, lacking a unified definition, consistent quality standards, and systemic interconnection. This means that individual providers and clients often do not know what to expect from career guidance, what its goals are, or who is responsible for it. A strong need to create a unified framework was communicated that would clearly define the profession and unify expectations and practices across sectors.

Participants were very critical of the issue of qualifications in career guidance. Although there is a possibility to obtain a professional qualification in career counselling through the National Register of Qualifications (2025), in practice, it is not required by employers and is not supported by legislation. This leads to confusion about the profession's very concept, professional activities, and differences in the quality of career guidance and counselling services. Similarly, methodological support for career guidance professionals is haphazard and dependent on ongoing projects.

Some initiatives of regional groups were positively assessed as showing potential for development from below, but their impact at the national level is not yet evident. The discussion also revealed that without a strong professional association that would be able to promote the interests of most career counsellors and influence national policies, including legislation, no significant improvement in the situation can be expected. The ideal form of a professional association, according to participants, is a representative and professional stakeholder that sets standards, ensures service quality, promotes further education, and engages in dialogue with the government and the public.

Interviews and focus groups in Slovakia

Three interviews were conducted, with representatives from the employers' association, public employment services (UPSVar), and the Ministry of Education. They all shared the view that career guidance is increasingly central to meeting the challenges of a changing labour market. The employer representative emphasized a more pragmatic vision, focusing on practical outcomes of guidance in terms of

placement/alignment with the needs of the labour market, and criticized the efficiency of the current provision in this regard. Public employment services echoed this need for relevance, highlighting their focus on developing career management skills (CMS), especially among disadvantaged and long-term unemployed groups. From the Ministry's perspective, career guidance is essential for lifelong learning and for supporting people during career transitions.

While the association is widely recognized and respected, it is seen as a club of enthusiasts, but could have a more systematic approach to develop a systemic influence. Stakeholders expected the association to act as a competence centre and a professional voice. The Ministry of Education appreciated the association's ability to combine theoretical knowledge and practical experience. Some see ZKPRK as a potential "translator" of international best practices into national implementation and policy or "innovator" in terms of bringing new currents in guidance to Slovakia (e.g., "green guidance").

Stakeholders suggested that ZKPRK increase its visibility and influence through evidence-based advocacy, structured communication with ministries, and stronger ties to labour market actors. Having more established mechanisms for rapid consultation would be helpful... currently, collaboration is too "ad hoc."

Participants in the Slovak focus groups—primarily practitioners, educators, and those new to the field—described career guidance as a deeply human and empowering process. They viewed it as helping individuals embrace change, rediscover strengths, and move toward meaningful futures. Guidance was often framed as both a personal anchor and a tool for transformation.

There was a clear expectation for the national association to serve as a professional hub: offering practical resources, training tailored to diverse client groups, and ongoing support, especially for newcomers. Participants highlighted the need for access to supervision, legal clarity, and guidance on navigating the early stages of a career in guidance. The idea of a well-defined "member zone" with curated materials, case studies, and peer learning was frequently mentioned. At the same time, several participants were unsure of the current benefits of membership, underscoring the need for a clearer value proposition.

The association was also seen as having an important voice in shaping policy and standards. Participants emphasized the need for stronger advocacy—ensuring that guidance professionals are included in working groups and policy consultations, and that the field is better connected across education and employment sectors. There was consensus that the association should take the lead in defining professional standards and communicating the value of the guidance profession to the wider public.

Interviews and focus groups in Romania

The qualitative research in Romania involved 4 career counsellors in individual interviews and 14 in 2 focus groups organised. Participants include professionals active in the secondary educational system (CJRAE), university education (COCC), research and policy makers (ISE), non-formal education and personal development private services (NGOs), private companies providing career counselling services, recruiters working in private companies, and university students. Career counsellors prioritize ideas related to this professional field of career counselling, as follows:

- The need for a learning community among counsellors is present in all counsellors who participated in the study, either in this form or as a proposal for training, learning, monitoring, and coaching programs; it is found in several forms of presentation, such as: cross-functional academic community, employers, parents, counsellors, counselling network; professional community, learning community.
- The second idea, in terms of frequency, is a longitudinal approach to career counselling and education, whether it is presented in this form or in forms such as integrating counselling into the academic path, orientation towards the labour market, or a career management process throughout life. The

third most frequently nominated idea is the need for an interactive, collaborative platform where career counsellors can exchange experiences and access tools and models of good practice.

- Similar in frequency is the idea that promotes/requests the need to standardize the career counselling process at various stages of personal development, from the early stages of children's participation in the educational process, to specialization for each stage of development, and the imposition of an optimal intervention under the umbrella of educational institutions in partnership with the private organizations involved. In the context of standardization, the following are also mentioned: the creation of an intervention standard, the certification of counsellors based primarily on long-term training, standardized work tools, and requirements for continuous professional training.
- The other ideas presented by career counsellors are around proposing concrete activities that could bring career counsellors together: national and international conferences – organization and promotion; complementary training courses – marketing, personal branding, planning, time management, etc.

Summary and discussion

A combination of internal (members and association management) and external perspectives (other stakeholders) showed that all four professional associations meet the professional development needs of their members, thereby seeking to strengthen the professional identity of career guidance practitioners and the professionalization of career guidance in their respective countries. However, members of these associations and other stakeholders expect professional associations to be centres of shared expertise that enable their representatives to participate in political decision-making. To this end, however, the members of these four professional associations lack professional certainty and a shared professionalism culture (Evans, 2008).

Professional associations play an irreplaceable role in supporting the professional development of career guidance practitioners, but “helping practitioners implement policies into practice” and “shaping the career guidance system on the national level” are weak points in their functioning. The questionnaire and other research tools indicate that, across all four countries, our respondents' main benefit of association membership is **supporting their professional development**. This support takes the form of informal learning, sharing, networking, collaboration, and intervision, as well as more formalised activities such as promoting high-quality service delivery (e.g., ethical standards, professional guidelines), providing accreditation or certification (e.g., accredited training, recognition, and/or validation), and offering supervision, intervision, and mentoring. However, these more formalised activities **face external barriers** specific to each country that associations are not always able to influence. In countries (e.g., the Czech Republic), there is no system for the education and training of career counsellors or for the professional development of career guidance practitioners that reflects the required level of professionalism. The continuous professional development of career guidance practitioners is a matter of individual responsibility of each practitioner, while members of professional associations can partially transfer this responsibility to “their” association (Hloušková, 2019).

Although professional associations play an irreplaceable role in supporting the professional development of career guidance practitioners, there is also a clear call for professional associations as a **professional but non-governmental community** that has an impact on members and other professionals from the wider professional perspectives. Supporting professional development in more formalised ways, such as promoting high-quality service delivery (e.g., through ethical standards, professional guidelines), providing accreditation/certification of career practitioners (e.g. accredited training, recognition and/or validation), or providing supervision, intervision, and mentoring, **faces external barriers** specific to each country that associations are not always able to influence.

Hungary used to be a forerunner in the region, and since the 2010s, it has lost its comparative advantage. The national career guidance system and practice have become even more segmented than

ever before; therefore, the role of small non-profit associations has become even more important to keep the concept of career/lifelong guidance alive and to support the daily professional activities of its members. Based on the knowledge of the different assessments we used in this research, the Hungarian association is on the right track, and its work has been appreciated by its members as well as different stakeholders.

The partial conclusions of this research show that there is still a need for reform of career guidance in public services (at the national level) in the **Czech Republic**, not only among the members of the professional association but also among other stakeholders. At the same time, these findings signal hope for progress in career guidance through cooperation within the professional community. But only a robust, well-established professional association representing the interests of career guidance practitioners can become a respected partner in transforming its fragmented career guidance landscape into a coherent, sustainable system.

Slovakia finds itself at a crossroads: career guidance is increasingly recognized as a crucial response to labour-market transformation, yet its system remains fragmented and reliant on ad hoc initiatives. Stakeholders highlighted the national association's credibility and potential as a competence centre, capable of bridging theory and practice, and translating international innovations into local policy and practice. It is moving from being perceived as a "club of enthusiasts" to a systemic actor shaping the national professional standard, but it needs to strengthen its advocacy role, develop structured channels of communication with ministries and employers, and expand its support for practitioners.

The diversity of activities performed by career guidance professionals, the diversity of their education and training, and the sectoral organization of employers of career guidance professionals reinforce the fragmentation of the professional community in all four countries.

The **Romanian** professional association seems to be succeeding in overcoming this fragmentation thanks to the concept of 'new professionalism' (Evetts, 2011), which is based on a shared form of expertise as a professional value. However, this is the limitation of this research, as its methodology does not allow for a more detailed explanation.

A combination of internal (members and association management) and external perspectives (other stakeholders) showed that all four professional associations meet the professional development needs of their members, thereby seeking to strengthen the professional identity of career guidance practitioners and the professionalization of career guidance in their respective countries. However, members of these associations and other stakeholders expect professional associations to be centres of shared expertise that enable their representatives to participate in political decision-making. To this end, however, the members of these four professional associations lack professional certainty and a shared professionalism culture (Evetts, 2011).

Added value of the associations

Many members highly value their associations, particularly for the support they provide in professional development through training sessions, conferences, and webinars. Associations also offer valuable opportunities to network with other career counsellors and field experts. Additionally, associations serve as essential sources of up-to-date, relevant information on trends, methodologies, and principles of career guidance. Another important aspect is the sense of belonging to a community of career counsellors and the shared values that membership fosters. These factors underscore the crucial role of associations as platforms for building professional communities, exchanging best practices, sharing information, and representing members' interests externally. However, the successful operation of associations depends on the active involvement of both their leadership and members.

Respondents frequently recommended organizing professional events more frequently, making them accessible not only at the national level but also within individual regions, beyond the scope of traditional annual conferences. They emphasized the need to create opportunities for peer-to-peer

exchanges and the sharing of best practices, such as through workshops, thematic discussions, and storytelling from practical experiences. Additionally, respondents suggested reviving successful event formats, such as summer and winter schools, as well as informal gatherings like "Coffee with a career counsellor," which encourage more relaxed and open discussions.

Other crucial topics include the accreditation of career counsellors, the establishment of clear ethical standards for the profession, and the strengthening of political and advocacy efforts at both national and regional levels. Ensuring quality regulation, recognition of the profession, and its influence on education and employment policy development are vital for the sustainable operation of career guidance.

To remain relevant and future-oriented, associations should strategically map membership and social needs, keep up with new social and technological trends, incorporate them into their operational plans and strategies, and ensure their effective implementation. This includes systematic engagement with their members and career guidance experts, organizing thematic conferences and workshops, developing specialized materials, and active collaboration with governmental and non-governmental organizations.

According to participants in the focus groups, organizations primarily play a role in providing professional information. Forums are important where representatives of different professions and organizations can share their experiences, and there is an opportunity to "learn from each other". Occasions and events can also be useful for getting to know who does what and which methods they use to "get into the picture" with the activities, opportunities, and available services. It is also important to provide an interface and a forum where professionals can learn from one another about best practices and tools. Organizations can play a potential role in exploring and publishing fundraising opportunities, as well as advocacy in the field.

Interviewees, as well as members of the career guidance NGOs, raised several urgent issues related to career guidance. Most of them indicated the lack of resources as the primary problem. The general experience is that career guidance is treated as an important area in the region, but not enough funds are allocated to it, and those funds are incidental and campaign-like. ***Due to the multi-stakeholder institutional system of career guidance, the systemic approach is lost.*** The focus is not on the citizen, but on the individual student, employee, or university student.

The interviewees considered it equally important to support the ***deeper integration of career guidance across different fields of education***, to encourage the acceptance of career guidance as a discipline and an independent profession, and to establish institutionalized forums for the sharing of best practices.

Fragmented institutional and policy systems, along with a lack of available, well-prepared professionals, are also a challenge. For all these reasons, it would be of paramount importance to increase the area's advocacy effect. The ***lack of clear regulation*** at the professional level, with developed and monitored quality standards, leads to the emergence of "opportunists" who seek to compensate for the shortage of specialists and offer career counselling services under various names.

Clearly, the ***EU concept*** (CoEU 2004, 2008 & ELGPN, 2015) of ***lifelong guidance (LLG) is well understood in the region among career guidance practitioners***. Most association members and external stakeholders understand this ***concept as umbrella terminology*** (e.g., Institute for Educational Sciences – individual interview in Romania). It was created to bring together the segmented elements of career guidance across different levels of the school system with labour-market-supporting services (e.g., career and employment counselling). Most professionals found that decision-makers, and often even teachers, social workers, and psychologists, do not understand the same concept of LLG as career counselling professionals do.

In some cases, even actors in related professions speak out in the face of professional contempt: "anyone can give advice" or "every teacher/social worker is a counsellor". Some psychologists, also

starting from strong market protection fears, directly initiate the exclusion of non-psychological counsellors from services. In other cases (e.g., in Hungary), the profession is "demoted" in connection with social integration/outreach of vulnerable inactive groups, and people with secondary education are called "counsellors" after ultra-short courses.

Conclusions and recommendations

This research was designed to describe the functioning (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) of four professional associations in relation to their members and national stakeholders, to support and improve dialogue in shaping national guidance systems across four European countries. We started this research with an exploratory research series, which included several steps. The first strand of analysis concentrated on the internal issues of professional associations. This internal perspective aimed to assess how effectively these organizations respond to the needs and expectations of their members, and how their leadership structures reflect principles of sound governance, strategic direction, and organizational transparency. The most effective response to members of professional associations from all four countries is **to support their professional development**.

The second analytical strand adopted an external lens, focusing on the perceptions of key stakeholders operating within the broader career guidance framework in each country. This component explored how various stakeholders – such as policymakers, educators, and labour market representatives – conceptualize the significance of career guidance in their national contexts. All stakeholders surveyed emphasize the importance of career guidance in “their” country, which requires a **strong professional community** that can be developed through active professional associations.

Together, these complementary views offer a nuanced understanding of both the functioning and external positioning of these professional associations, contributing to a more comprehensive view of their current impact and potential as policy makers within the European landscape. The variability in perspectives on the current status quo and in our respondents' expectations for the development of career guidance in each country inspired us to formulate common points for further steps, in the form of several recommendations.

1. **Maintaining the professional interest and motivation of career counsellors** working in non-governmental organisations, and providing them with opportunities for professional further training and self-development, is of paramount importance—especially in a regional context where career counselling/guidance as a profession is still not widely known or recognised. It is often difficult to distinguish the role of a career counsellor from that of other professions.
2. The informational nature of career counselling (providing career information to end-users) is well recognised by all the external actors and decision-makers, **but it is still not seen as a lifelong cross-policy support to personal development tasks** (e.g., development of career management skills through the different policy sectors and institutions (ELGPN, 2015; Sultana, 2011). Here, the NGOs have an important and difficult role in the region: to be the "ambassadors" of a change in attitude, even if it is not always a rewarding one.
3. **Strong professional advocacy and comprehensive, coordinated communication campaigns** would be needed to help the associated professions and end-users understand and absorb the overall significance of the LLG concept. Just as the professional advocacy and policy role of the sector must be further strengthened in all four countries.
4. **Professional standards formulated on clear, consistent professional principles** and their acceptance are necessary for the field to continue to develop and to guarantee adequate safety for users of career guidance and development services.
5. **Making career counselling services accessible to all citizens** is a very important role of a professional career counselling organisation. Accessibility refers both to promoting career counselling services

so that potential beneficiaries and end-users can easily access them, and to identifying resources that allow people from vulnerable groups who cannot afford private services to receive support.

6. All four associations work on an interdisciplinary basis, as career guidance requires integrating psychology, pedagogy, economics, law, and many other academic fields. Members of the associations also represent different disciplines; therefore, **further cooperation across disciplines** is an important direction for future development. Recent webinars on green guidance already illustrate how such interdisciplinary collaboration can work in practice.
7. Recent OECD (2024) studies also show that people with **low SES** (socio-economic status) **have extremely poor access to career guidance services**. We see this as another challenge that the four civil society organizations need to address.
8. Cross-sectoral co-operation is an essential element of career guidance. The membership of the associations provides a solid foundation for further boosting **field-level co-operation across sectors**. This is even more relevant as there are no national/regional systems in place to handle individual cases through the different sectors.

Our research has made it clear that there is a **strong professional need to strengthen the professional framework and guidelines for career guidance across all four countries, so that career guidance services can meet the expectations of their clients and society**. In the next phase of a joint project, we will undertake this.

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Declarations

We hereby confirm that this manuscript is original, has not been published elsewhere, and is not under consideration by any other journal. All authors have contributed to the work, reviewed the final manuscript, and approved its submission. The research was conducted in accordance with ethical standards, and any conflicts of interest have been disclosed.

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