

The future of Cultural Routes: The Council of Europe's perspective

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Dear Commissioner, Ministers, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I was recently interviewed for a study on “creative bureaucracy” which features the Council of Europe as the main subject of research. The author was exploring how the 61 year-old organisation with a pan-European membership has always managed to stay tuned to social change, anticipate challenges, venture into new fields of policy and develop an ever broader range of standards and initiatives to further its key objective – the protection of human rights and democracy.

One of the examples I used to illustrate the case of creativity was the Council of Europe’s Cultural Routes programme. Launched 22 years ago, when the ideological divide of our continent was crumbling, its purpose was to demonstrate in an accessible, tangible way, the cross-cutting connections and converging movements which have shaped a common culture in Europe over the centuries and thus help to build a common identity of the re-united continent. The Cultural Routes were a tool for pan-European cultural co-operation, citizenship education and mediation and played effectively this role under the competence guidance of our operational partner, the European Cultural Routes institute.

In the field of heritage interpretation, Cultural Routes innovated by including a wide range of themes and types of heritage – spiritual, industrial, artistic, gastronomic, architectural, linguistic, vernacular, minority – and reflecting the multiple facets of European heritage while underlining the shared values and civilisational currents which form its solid foundation.

More recently, the Cultural Routes have become also a tool for intercultural dialogue. The European Route of Jewish Heritage or the Legacy of Al-andalus which presents the contribution by the Arab world to Western Europe's philosophy, sciences, arts and literature are examples of routes which encourage mutual knowledge and recognition between different cultural components of our diverse societies. We have recently launched a Cultural Route of Roma culture and heritage, a potentially pan-European undertaking, which we hope will add another dimension to political discourse and many social programmes for Roma inclusion.

The richness and potential of Cultural Routes concept has generated an enormous enthusiasm: a long list of new routes are under development and new requests are lodged almost weekly. At the same time, with the experience the programme methodology has matured and incorporated new dimensions such as the relationship between cultural routes, sustainable quality tourism and territorial development.

Against this background, the Council of Europe cultural routes programme now has the impact, expertise and critical mass to enter a new stage in its development. It will not come as a surprise that with more ambitious, broader set of objectives and greater scale of operation,

the programme requires more resources. In order to reinforce the programme, the Council of Europe is in the process of creating a Partial agreement on cultural routes. It will not only create a new resource base for the programme and a stronger role of national authorities, but will also reinforce the tourism dimension of Cultural Routes.

The Partial Agreement will function as a laboratory for innovation and a centre of excellence for the responsible, sustainable, quality cultural tourism. Its founders will be those member states which are most committed to developing a new integrated approach to heritage, culture, tourism and the environment, and will hopefully soon count a large number of members.

The Partial Agreement will constitute a framework for a lasting partnership with the European Union – and let me here express my deep satisfaction and thank the Commissioner Tajani for the positive and fruitful relations we enjoy with the European Commission. The European Parliament has also acknowledged the importance and rich potential of Cultural Routes and granted its support.

The new Partial Agreement will be a platform for co-operation with a wide range of stakeholders such as the regions, contributing to identifying new ways of promoting the culture, landscape and heritage of regions.

In this new stage of its development, the Cultural Routes programme will contribute to the shaping of a wider vision and strategy for Europe as a key cultural and tourism destination of the future. Cultural routes are a genuinely European phenomenon – not just for being trans-national but

because they are an expression of Europe's history and values and represent European heritage in all of its diversity.

Cultural Routes are not only an important tool for promoting Europe as a destination. They provide an alternative to standardised tourism. As the March Eurobarometer Flash survey on tourism indicated, almost 30% of respondents express a preference for an "off the beaten track" destinations, and were in particular willing to explore local customs and traditions. 50% of cultural journeys are organised by the tourist themselves. What do these findings herald for cultural tourism in the future?

The democratic and intercultural essence of the Council of Europe Cultural Routes underline their potential to address some of the key challenges for tourism today. Involving people not as passive spectators but as co-creators of their journey; offering new ways of approaching and interpreting the familiar; proposing discoveries not far away from home; a new "enchantment of the world" and authentic exchanges with local populations, in particular with categories of people with whom one does not easily interact in daily life such as Roma; an engaged tourism as opposed to consumerist tourism; a contribution to local development and the preservation of local cultures and knowledge; privilege a deep, multifaceted understanding of a locality through slower and more authentic means of transport – bicycle, on foot – and opportunities to undertake a thorough interpretation of heritage.

The Council of Europe Cultural Routes focus attention on less popular destinations, thus contributing to the decongestion of block-buster tourism sites and a more equitable distribution of tourism revenues. By giving a central role to the members of cultural routes associations and networks, to heritage communities the Routes empower the people as

owners and ambassadors of their past and their heritage. Using an increasing range of new technologies, they allow users to play an active role in the construction and experience of their journey.

With the Cultural Routes, the expression “Europe is a journey” is not just a metaphor, but a reality. It is our challenge and our responsibility to offer them a future.