

From certification to practice: examining the Via Romea Germanica in the context of the cultural routes of the Council of Europe

De la certificación a la práctica: análisis de la Via Romea Germánica en el contexto de las rutas culturales del Consejo de Europa

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the evaluation process within the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe, through the case of the Via Romea Germanica, assessing how certified routes navigate assessment criteria and governance challenges. The analysis assesses the Via Romea Germanica's compliance with the Council of Europe standards, focussing on the evaluation cycle's role in ensuring thematic coherence, transnational cooperation, and sustainable development. Methodologically, the study combines document analysis, field visits, and stakeholder interviews to critically evaluate the impact of certification requirements on the transnational network that spans Germany, Austria, and Italy. Findings highlight broader structural issues, including governance fragmentation, uneven institutional engagement, and the gap between evaluation objectives and local implementation capacities. These insights contribute to a broader reflection on the effectiveness of the Council of Europe's evaluation framework in fostering long-term cultural, social, and economic sustainability across diverse certified networks.

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina el proceso de evaluación de los Itinerarios Culturales del Consejo de Europa a través del caso de la Via Romea Germanica, analizando cómo las rutas certificadas enfrentan los criterios de evaluación y los desafíos de gobernanza. La investigación evalúa el grado de cumplimiento de la Via Romea Germanica con los estándares del Consejo de Europa, centrándose en el papel del ciclo de evaluación en la coherencia temática, la cooperación transnacional y el desarrollo sostenible. Metodológicamente, el estudio combina análisis documental, visitas de campo y entrevistas con actores clave para valorar críticamente el impacto de los requisitos de certificación en la red transnacional que abarca Alemania, Austria e Italia. Los resultados revelan fragmentación en la gobernanza, desigual implicación institucional y una brecha entre los objetivos de evaluación y su aplicación local, lo que plantea cuestiones sobre la efectividad del marco evaluativo para garantizar la sostenibilidad de las rutas certificadas.



1. INTRODUCTION

The Cultural Routes programme of the Council of Europe (CoE) represents an initiative in cultural heritage management and promotion. Established to foster dialogue, intercultural exchange, and sustainable development, the programme operates through certified transnational routes that traverse various landscapes, histories, and traditions across Europe. This framework positions Cultural Routes as both cultural and economic tools, emphasising the intersection of heritage preservation, tourism, and community engagement.

However, the implementation and management of such routes are complex, requiring robust governance structures and coordinated networks. To ensure alignment with its principles, the CoE has developed an evaluation process designed to assess and guide the development of certified Cultural Routes. This process, though essential for maintaining quality and coherence, raises further reflections and considerations regarding its applicability, especially for nascent or evolving projects.

This paper examines these dynamics through a case study of the Via Romea Germanica (VRG), a medieval pilgrimage route reimagined in the contemporary context as a transnational itinerary spanning Germany, Austria, and Italy. The VRG's thematic focus on pilgrimage and its historical legacy offers a valuable perspective for examining the challenges and opportunities associated with Cultural Route governance. Its recent trajectory – from initial certification rejection in 2018 to subsequent acceptance in 2020¹ and its recent regular evaluation cycle in 2023 – offers a timely opportunity to analyse the implications of the CoE evaluation framework.

The analysis unfolds in three interconnected dimensions. First, the paper explores how the VRG aligns with the thematic and operational criteria set by the CoE, looking at its capacity to integrate tangible and intangible heritage while fostering intercultural dialogue. Second, it evaluates the operational challenges faced by the VRG's governing network, the European Association Via Romea Germanica (EAVRG), in meeting the demands of transnational collaboration and local implementation. The fragmentation in governance, uneven development across member countries, and gaps in communication and infrastructure emerge as significant barriers. Finally, the study situates the VRG within the broader landscape of Cultural Routes, reflecting on the scalability and adaptability of the CoE's evaluation process. The discussion underscores a potential misalignment between the CoE's overarching goals and their on-the-ground application, largely due to limited awareness of the benefits and opportunities linked to CoE-certified Cultural Routes. This highlights the necessity for focussed training initiatives at regional and local levels to enhance understanding and engagement with the programme.

Furthermore, this discussion gains added value as it engages with an academic topic that has been largely underexplored. Indeed, as will be seen in the following section, studies and research related to the evaluation cycle process for Cultural Routes are substantially unexplored, just as the specific case of the VRG, presented as a European network, represents a relatively new field of inquiry.

Key insights drawn from the VRG case highlight the inherent difficulties of meeting certification standards during the formative stages of a Cultural Route. While the CoE evaluation process is effective in assessing progress and ensuring accountability, it may pose challenges for networks in their embryonic phase. This raises broader questions about the balance between fostering innovation and ensuring compliance within the Cultural Routes programme. Furthermore, the role of independent experts in the evaluation process, as well as the limited capacity for verifying the extensive claims made by networks, underscores the need for more nuanced and context-sensitive approaches. These insights show not only the challenges but also the opportunities embedded within the Cultural Routes programme. While the CoE evaluation process demands compliance with high certification standards, it simultaneously provides a framework for growth, fostering transnational collaboration and structured governance. This duality – between meeting stringent criteria and leveraging them as a developmental tool – frames the subsequent analysis, which delves into the interplay between operational realities and the transformative potential of the Cultural Routes programme.

1. https://www.coe.int/en/web/venice/home/-/asset_publisher/bdYTWRAADyZs/content/via-romea-germanica-becomes-euro-pean-cultural-route (last access 25.02.2025).



2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONTEXT ANALYSIS

The CoE's Cultural Routes programme was launched in 1987 with the aim of promoting cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue through transnational itineraries spanning the European continent. These routes are designed to connect historical narratives across Europe, fostering the concept of a shared European heritage and contributing to the creation of a pan-European identity. Furthermore, the CoE seeks to «Build a Greater Europe» by welcoming countries undergoing democratic transition through an inclusive membership model. This approach enables the Council to serve as a preliminary stage for EU candidates, allowing them to demonstrate progress towards meeting the high standards of democracy and human rights required of all member states (Denu, 2015, p. 8). As of 2025, the programme comprises 49 certified networks (figure 1), which collectively promote shared interests and values. The initiative is supported by the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes (EPA), established in 2010 to facilitate closer cooperation among member states (Resolution CM/Res(2013)66).

Cultural Routes are widely regarded as tools for enhancing cooperation among Mediterranean cities and fostering connections between Europe and the East, thereby promoting the exchange of ideas, values, and knowledge. According to Genovese (2016), these routes not only serve as networks for cooperation but also contribute to greater competitiveness among Mediterranean societies. A multi-stakeholder approach is essential for the success of cultural routes, involving various actors such as local governments, communities, tourists, and businesses. Severo (2017) highlights the importance of actor-based networks in managing and enhancing cultural routes, enabling a more inclusive and dynamic governance framework. However, their management remains complex due to the intricate web of stakeholders involved.

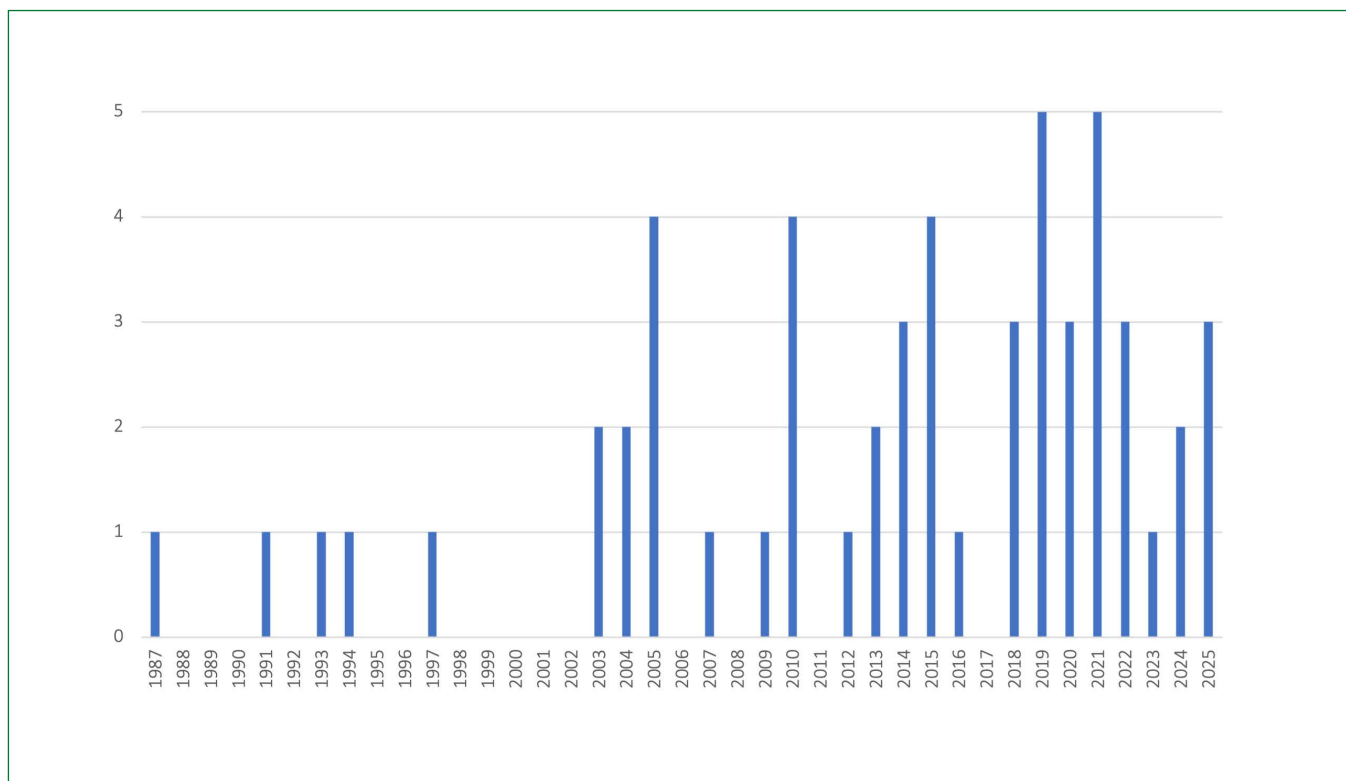


Figure 1. Number of Cultural Routes certified per year (five of these were decertified). Source: author's elaboration based on the collected data from the news published by the Council of Europe².

2. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes/newsroom> (last access 25.02.2025).



Cultural Routes are not merely physical paths; they also integrate intangible cultural heritage. Zabbini (2012) underscores the significance of pilgrimage routes, where the intangible dimension of cultural heritage plays a critical role in enhancing local identity and enriching tourist experiences. This particular type of itinerary, which depends on continuous infrastructure linking its nodes, attracts walkers and other types of tourists to often marginalised rural areas, contributing to economic development and heritage preservation. Slow mobility, together with pilgrimage and the associated tourist movement, revitalises and breathes new life into many villages located in remote areas. The encounter with others and the convergence of cultures from across the globe create a renewed cultural interest and vibrancy among local residents. This active participation fosters local cultural growth, which in turn becomes an integral component of a high-quality tourist offering (Porcelloni, 2021).

Contrarily, several Cultural Routes, while promoting the concept of a “route”, often exist more as thematic networks rather than as physical pathways. This lack of physical connection can result in a less engaging tourist experience, as exemplified by the Le Corbusier Destinations network, which lacks a tangible narrative path (Martens, 2022). Indeed, routes and networks are complementary but not identical. The distinction lies in the fact that routes represent the concrete pathways travelled, while networks are the frameworks enabling their creation. While routes pertain to the physical and spatial experience of a territory, networks constitute a connective system that transcends physical pathways, facilitating linkages between various locations.

Despite the overall success of the Council of Europe’s Cultural Routes programme, several significant challenges persist. One primary issue concerns the limited involvement of local communities in certain itineraries, which can lead to a disconnect between institutional objectives and the actual needs of host communities. Managing such itineraries demands a complex governance structure involving multiple stakeholders across various levels. However, the lack of effective coordination among these actors can hinder the efficiency of achieving the programme’s goals. Additionally, ensuring long-term financial sustainability poses significant challenges. Dependence on public funding and competition among similar projects create critical obstacles for the future of the networks participating in the programme (EICR, 2024).

2.1. The evaluation cycle

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The evaluation cycle holds particular importance as it represents the first analytical approach aimed at the Cultural Route to obtain Council of Europe certification and establishes the analytical foundations for its maintenance. Each year, in order to analyse the applications for certification and the regular 5-year evaluation of certified Cultural Routes of the CoE, independent experts are contracted to evaluate the information submitted. Those independent reports are important supporting documents that help the Enlarged Partial Agreement (EPA) Governing Board decide on the award or renewal of the Cultural Route of the CoE certification. Indeed, the EPA Governing Board and the Statutory Committee are responsible for approving the plans and budgets related to the Cultural Routes (CM/Res(2013)67E).

The official recognition of Cultural Routes as a quality label has been further strengthened by the new resolution CM/Res(2023)2, which introduces a more rigorous evaluation cycle and extends the duration of periodic evaluations from three to five years. This ensures higher standards of quality and innovation for certified Cultural Routes (EICR, 2024).

The topic remains largely unexplored from the perspective of scientific literature, making it even more intriguing due to the quantity and quality of available information and data. Since the 2017-2018 evaluation cycle, reports conducted by evaluators appointed by the European Institute of Cultural Routes (EICR) that have resulted in a positive outcome are available online³. This excludes reports involving evaluations where the Cultural Route’s performance was found unsatisfactory, leading either to the rejection of the application or, in the case of a regular evaluation, requiring an exceptional evaluation process in the subsequent certification cycle, or resulting in decertification.

3. Evaluation Reports available at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes/evaluation-reports> (last access 25.02.2025).



2.2. The Via Romea Germanica as a european network and historical route

The case of the VRG as a Cultural Route of the CoE will be examined, with particular reference to its historical and cultural background. This specific network initially submitted its application for certification as a Cultural Route in 2018. Following an initial rejection for not meeting the necessary criteria, the VRG reapplied in 2019, successfully obtaining certification in 2020 alongside two other networks, the European Route of Historic Gardens and the Aeneas Route. During the 2023-2024⁴ evaluation cycle (when the regular evaluation cycle was still conducted every three years), the VRG was deemed not to meet the criteria required for maintaining its certification⁵. Consequently, it was subjected to an exceptional evaluation cycle for 2024-2025.

Given the recent nature of these developments, the VRG, as a European Cultural Route, has not yet fully entered academic discourse. Nevertheless, there are instances where the itinerary has been considered, such as in reference to projects focussed on multifunctional thematic route networks within the system of trails in the Casentino Valley (Arezzo) (Bambi, Iacobelli, 2019). Additionally, it has been featured as the focus of pilot actions conducted in Argenta (Ferrara), a municipality traversed by the VRG, demonstrating the critical importance of stakeholder networks in advancing one of the key objectives of EU regional strategies (Bagnaresi *et al.*, 2024).

The VRG functions as an international Route traversing three countries: Germany, Austria, and Italy (map 1). It is managed by the EAVRG, established in 2018, which integrates three national associations: Romweg Abt Albert von Stade e.V. (Germany), Jerusalem Way International Peace Team, Verein für Frieden, Freiheit und Toleranz (Austria), and the Associazione Italiana della Via Romea Germanica (Italy). However, as the Austrian Association is not directly responsible for managing the route, the EAVRG formalised a protocol in 2020 with another Austrian association, Jakobsgemeinschaft Tirol.

The VRG, often presented as the “Path of Encounters” and a European pilgrimage route, complements existing routes by bridging northern and southern Europe. Spanning over 2200 kilometres from Stade to Rome, it revives a historical medieval pilgrimage itinerary that traditionally connected the northern German town of Stade with the heart of Christianity in Rome.

From the historical point of view, the Via Romea Germanica finds its thematic foundation intricately linked to the medieval pilgrimage chronicled by the Abbot Albert of Stade (c. 1187-c. 1260) during the 13th century in the *Annales Stadenses*⁶. He was a German monk, historian and poet that, in the form of a tale (a common practice in the Middle Ages), described a conversation between two friar pilgrims. In doing so, he provided several itineraries with precise data on places and distances to be crossed and also about the road conditions, for the outward and return journey from Rome. This represented the most complete guide to Rome in the Middle Ages (Stopani, 2006) and witnessed pilgrimage as a practice already widespread (Caucci & Asolan, 2009). Nowadays, the journey finds its starting point at Albert’s statue in the courtyard of Stade’s former Franciscan monastery of St. Johannis. The intention of the EAVRG is to identify the beginning of the pilgrimage at the ancient harbour of Stade, so as to emphasise the historical connection with the Scandinavian countries to the north.

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4. It is appropriate to clarify that the author Leonardo Porcelloni was appointed by the EICR of the Council of Europe to undertake the regular evaluation cycle 2023-2024 for the Via Romea Germanica. This role involved engagement with both the EICR and the network’s stakeholders for the preparation of the evaluation report. Furthermore, sensitive and private data obtained through the evaluation process will not be disclosed here. For this reason, the network’s stakeholders and subjects of the investigation have been anonymised in this context.

5. For this reason, the corresponding report, unlike those resulting from a positive outcome, remains inaccessible to the public.

6. One of the earliest works that made this historical document accessible within the context of medieval history and monasticism is: Lappenberg, M. J. (1859). *Annales Stadenses Auctore Alberto*. In G. H. Pertz (Ed.), *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Vol. XVI* (pp. 271-379). Hannover, Impensis Bibliopolii Aulici Hahniani.



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Map 1. The Via Romea Germanica Route (1:7.500.000), spanning approximately 2.200 km and comprising 94 stages (44 in Germany, 4 in Austria, and 46 in Italy). Source: author's elaboration.

3. METHODOLOGY

At the outset, this paper examines the references and guidelines produced and disseminated by the EICR, which define the certification criteria established by the 2013 Resolutions – CM/Res(2013)66, CM/Res(2013)67 – and the most recent one adopted by the Committee of Ministers on the 5th of April 2023 (CM/Res(2023)2). These documents elucidate the framework and methodology underpinning the evaluation cycle: certification is awarded to networks that meet eligibility criteria, prioritise specific actions, and adhere



to organisational standards. Themes must represent European values across at least three countries, foster cultural memory, enable educational exchanges, and support sustainable tourism. Priority actions include research cooperation, heritage enhancement, youth exchanges, contemporary arts, and cultural tourism. Certification is granted by the EPA Governing Board, which periodically reviews networks for compliance, with the possibility of issuing recommendations or revoking certification if standards are not maintained. Tracing the evolution of relevant documentation prior to the above-mentioned resolutions, the first Statutory Resolutions observed include the 1993 resolution on Partial and Enlarged Agreements ((93)28) and the 1996 resolution establishing Criteria for Partial and Enlarged Agreements of the CoE ((96)36). These were followed by Resolution CM/Res(2007)12 on the Cultural Routes of the CoE, and later, the 2010 resolutions CM/Res(2010)52 on the rules for awarding the Cultural Route of the CoE certification, and CM/Res(2010)53 establishing an Enlarged Partial Agreement to ensure the implementation of the Cultural Routes programme.

Moreover, the *Step-by-step guide to the Council of Europe Cultural Routes* (2015) provides guidance on how to implement and manage the Cultural Routes. It includes details on how to develop a route or network project, manage scientific collaborations, and promote sustainable tourism (Council of Europe, 2015). The Vademecum for master plans in Cultural Routes emphasises a strategic, multi-tiered approach to enhance sustainability, as per Resolution CM/Res(2013)67. While not obligatory, a master plan acts as a guidance tool for route managers, covering governance at European, national, regional, and local scales. It outlines strategic objectives, funding channels, and key implementation steps to support cohesive project progression. This approach promotes collaboration across governance layers, encourages local stakeholder engagement, and aligns with European goals for responsible management and heritage preservation within the Routes. This phase is particularly useful, on one hand, for determining the objectives established by the CoE's programme and, on the other, to identify the guidelines observed by individual networks and independent experts.

To complement the documentary analysis, and as required by the regular evaluation cycle, a fieldwork phase⁷ was conducted in selected areas of Germany and Italy to directly verify, where possible, the actual implementation of activities and infrastructure interventions. These site visits focussed on elements such as trail marking, accommodation facilities, and overall infrastructure quality, with the aim of assessing their effectiveness and territorial impact. In parallel, a series of interviews and meetings were conducted with key stakeholders of the EAVRG network, including both representatives of the European Association and actors involved in national and local associations. These included both in-person and remote formats: two in-person group interviews (with 4 and 6 participants respectively), eight individual in-person interviews, six individual video interviews, and three small group video interviews involving two participants each. The interviews – carried out across the three countries involved (Germany, Austria, and Italy) – were based on a flexible, non-standardised qualitative approach (Corbetta, 2014). They were designed to assess the degree of engagement and contributions of each actor in relation to the evaluation criteria outlined in Resolution CM/Res(2013)67. Additionally, structured telephone interviews were conducted with 54 tourist offices located along the Italian section of the VRG: 15 in Trentino-Alto Adige, 7 in Veneto, 10 in Emilia-Romagna, 8 in Tuscany, 4 in Umbria, 10 in Lazio. These interviews aimed to assess the offices' level of awareness and operational involvement concerning the route, particularly in relation to the availability of tourist services and visitor engagement. The data collection followed a semi-structured format, allowing for consistency while also capturing local and regional insights (see Paragraph 4.1).

This approach significantly enhanced the analytical depth of the study, allowing for a robust cross-verification between documentary sources and empirical data. It also provided critical insights into local implementation practices and governance dynamics, offering a more grounded understanding of the route's functioning.

7. The document analysis and fieldwork were conducted between September and December 2023.



3.1. The approach to the evaluation process

Overall, the methodology addressed four main areas: the assessment of route infrastructure, institutional interactions, community engagement, and the promotion and management of tourism. Additionally, it evaluated the materials produced, communication strategies, and the dynamics of interaction and governance, both in their internal coherence and in the relationships among network members. These aspects provided a detailed and multidimensional perspective on the functioning and challenges faced by the VRG network. The analysis of evaluation reports represents a fundamental tool for tracing the evolution of Cultural Routes, as in the case of the EAVRG. A first significant reference is the public report prepared in 2020 (Kerstin). This document examines the candidature submitted by the EAVRG in 2019, which led to the network's certification in 2020. The EAVRG had previously submitted an application in 2018, which was rejected; for this reason, the corresponding report is not accessible. Starting from 2023, the first regular evaluation cycle was conducted, representing the initial formal assessment of the EAVRG after its certification. The outcome of this evaluation highlighted that the network does not fully meet the required criteria, which ultimately led the EPA Governing Board to initiate an exceptional evaluation cycle for the network⁸.

The evaluation of the first regular evaluation cycle was based on an in-depth analysis of the documentation produced by the EAVRG, direct interaction with various members of the EAVRG network, site visits to selected locations, the collection of information from the EICR, and materials available online. The aim was to verify and demonstrate the theme, activities, and effective management of the network, in accordance with the certification criteria outlined in Resolution CM/Res(2013)67. The materials analysed, provided by the network, comprised a total of 252 documents divided into three main categories. The first category included 130 documents supplied by the network, covering assembly protocols, financial data, multi-annual programmes, descriptions of specific projects, internal communications, and statutory documents. This extensive range of documentation encompassed both institutional and project-related aspects of the network. The second category consisted of 42 additional documents provided upon the evaluator's request. These materials included meeting minutes, evidence of conducted projects, and financial documents. They allowed for a deeper exploration of specific themes related to governance and the operational activities of the network. The third category encompassed 80 additional sources consulted by the evaluator, including publications and informational materials produced by the EAVRG network. Alongside written documentation, online materials and social media were also examined. A total of 19 online resources were identified, including official websites, platforms, and social media channels (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube). These resources offered insights into community engagement and the promotional activities of the network.

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The field evaluation activities focussed on four visits conducted in Italy and Germany – following the main events organised by the Network and key sections of the itinerary – between October and November 2023. The first visit took place in Bologna on 5 October, during which the EAVRG coordinators were met to discuss the general operations of the EAVRG, its current state of affairs, and, more specifically, the Horizon 2020 project *rurAllure*⁹. The evaluation involved the EAVRG president and vice-president and included multiple field visits. The second visit covered areas in Emilia-Romagna (San Biagio, Argenta, Traghetti, San Nicolò, Ferrara, and Francolino) and Veneto (Po River area and Polesella), assessing infrastructure, signage, trail conditions, and accommodation facilities, with data gathered from local tourist offices and communities. The third visit, held in Germany from 19 to 21 October, coincided with the annual German network meeting in Gotha, providing interactions with members of German and European associations and institutional representatives, including Knut Kreuch (Lord Mayor of Gotha) and Bodo Ramelow (Prime Minister of Thuringia). Inspections included VRG-affiliated hostels and associations (Münchenlohra, Dietenborn, Nordhausen), alongside meetings with academics, politicians, and EAVRG council members. The fourth visit, on 3 November, focused on the

8. The analysis and report of this exceptional evaluation (2024-2025), drafted by the same author of the previous one, led the EPA Governing Board to decide on the withdrawal of the EAVRG's certification: <https://www.coe.int/it/web/cultural-routes/-/results-of-the-2024-2025-certification-cycle-8-routes-recertified-and-2-routes-decertified> (last access 17.07.2025).

9. <https://rurallure.eu/> (last access 25.02.2025).



Forlì province, analysing VRG infrastructure managed by municipal and religious bodies. The methodology also relied on ten formal meetings, four in person and six online, with EAVRG representatives, addressing governance, institutional relations, and operational activities.

Additionally, insights gathered from the 54 tourist offices located along the VRG in Italy – across six regions and Vatican City – provided valuable insights into the availability of tourist services and the extent of community engagement. Parallely, three accommodation facilities were analysed: San Giovanni Battista parish church in Ronco (Forlì), the hostel in Cusercoli (province of Forlì), and the hostel in Campi (Arezzo). The aim was to evaluate their management and services in relation to the VRG network.

Thus, the analysis involved comparing the collected data using the method just described, in accordance with the criteria and guidelines established by the Council of Europe, particularly with reference to Resolution CM/Res(2013)67. The analysis was structured around the following fundamental aspects, which form the main body evaluation of the report:

1. Fields of action: areas such as research and development cooperation, the enhancement of memory, history, and European heritage, cultural and educational exchanges for young Europeans, contemporary cultural and artistic practices, and sustainable cultural tourism were considered. The analysis assessed the extent to which the network meets the priority action criteria for a Cultural Route.
2. Cultural Route network: a detailed examination of the institutional and legal structure of the network, its current financial situation, the composition by country and type of members, as well as the network's expansion since the last evaluation and its strategies for the next three years, was conducted.
3. Communication tools: the investigation included an analysis of the communication tools developed by the network, such as promotional materials, communication channels, signposting, and, lastly, particular attention was given to the compliance with the guidelines for the use of the Cultural Route of the CoE Logo.

This integrated methodology enabled a comprehensive and systematic analysis of the VRG, its European association, and the partners forming its network. It assessed the operational structure, potential, and challenges of the route in relation to the European standards established for Cultural Routes. By adopting a multifaceted approach, the evaluation also shed light on the governance dynamics, the effectiveness of stakeholder collaboration, and the alignment of the network's activities with the objectives of fostering cultural memory, sustainable tourism, and cross-border cooperation, as envisioned by the CoE.

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4. RESULTS. ANALYSIS OF THE EVALUATION FINDINGS

In summary, during the 2018-2019 evaluation cycle, ten certified Cultural Routes were subject to regular evaluation, and twelve candidate networks¹⁰ applied for certification as Cultural Routes of the CoE. Among these, only five were successfully certified as Cultural Routes of the CoE, while the VRG was not included due to the rejection of its initial application. However, in 2019, the EAVRG submitted a new application, which was positively evaluated, enabling the network to obtain certification in 2020. The year 2023 marked a critical moment for the VRG, as it completed its first regular evaluation cycle since certification. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, the results of this evaluation highlighted non-compliance with certain criteria set forth by the CoE programme, leading to the initiation of an exceptional evaluation cycle. This extraordinary process, scheduled for 2024-2025, represents a decisive opportunity for the network to address identified challenges and demonstrate its alignment with the standards required by the CoE.

10. https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes/news-2018/-/asset_publisher/LCZrkQS0j8oY/content/evaluation-cycle-2018-2019-10-certified-cultural-routes-under-regular-evaluation-12-cultural-route-networks-applying-for-certification (last access 25.02.2025).



The main body assessment of the regular evaluation serves as the core of the expert's investigation, ensuring conclusions are based on verifiable evidence and reliable data. The assessment begins by examining the VRG's theme, evaluating its coherence, integration of tangible and intangible heritage, and overall narrative. Positioned within the framework of European pilgrimage routes, the VRG reinforces the values of the Council of Europe by linking medieval mobility traditions to cultural heritage. Although still consolidating, it has significant multi-scalar potential, fostering intercultural and interreligious dialogue across Germany, Austria, and Italy, with extensions to Nordic countries through connections with the St. Olav's Way and the St. James Way. These links complement established routes like the Via Francigena. However, defining the VRG geographically remains complex due to the fragmented nature of medieval road networks, requiring a governance model that balances cultural preservation and tourism development (Porcelloni *et al.*, 2023).

Historically, the VRG theme is rooted in medieval itineraria, documented in the 13th century by Albert of Stade. The study of medieval odeporic sources has garnered scholarly interest for more than a century (Rajna, 1887; Magoun, 1942). These sources, such as medieval travellers' diaries, are instrumental in retracing and identifying major routes that can inform the design of modern itineraries. This approach was applied, for instance, to the Via Francigena, which includes the stages recorded by Archbishop Sigeric (10th century) during his return journey from Rome to Canterbury, as well as the *Itinerarium Burdigalense* (4th century) for its southern stretch, which, since 2019, has connected Rome to Santa Maria di Leuca (Apulia Region). The VRG itinerary holds the potential to integrate tangible elements, such as sacred sites and other historical and artistic heritage, with intangible aspects, such as the spiritual value of pilgrimage. However, compared to more established routes like the Camino de Santiago, which has benefited from the support of the CoE since 1987, the VRG still faces significant gaps in terms of infrastructure and visitor engagement strategies (Martens, 2022).

The potential of the VRG emerges in its integration into a broader, cohesive European network of pilgrimage routes (Romee Maiores), fostering connections and synergies with other significant itineraries, such as the Via Romea Strata and the Via Francigena. Notably, the VRG shares part of its route with the Via Francigena, from Montefiascone to Rome, reinforcing its role as a complementary path within the network. Additionally, the VRG holds promising opportunities for collaboration with Scandinavian countries, North-Eastern European nations, including the Baltic states, and extending southwards towards the Holy Land. However, the governance of the EAVRG remains in an embryonic stage, which currently affects the network's ability to attract visitors and meet the expectations of a contemporary Cultural Route.

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4.1. Assessing the VRG's performance across the «fields of action»

This section evaluates the EAVRG with respect to the five priority fields of action in Resolution CM/Res(2013)67, using materials from the current evaluation cycle, field visits, and meetings. The analysis focuses on activities directly aligned with the route's theme, excluding unrelated or out-of-period initiatives unless essential for the assessment. Both network-wide and individual member activities have been considered, with exhibitions and similar events required to follow the Route's branding and official communication channels. The evaluation also examines the geographical distribution of activities across Germany, Austria, and Italy, identifying imbalances in engagement. Additionally, it assesses whether the network fosters true transnational collaboration or consists of isolated efforts. Quantitative data on activity scope, transnational reach, and member involvement have been reviewed, with supporting documentation cross-verified through comparative analyses and visual representations.

The evaluation of the VRG's co-operation in research and development highlights its role in consolidating dispersed knowledge, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, and engaging with European universities and research centres. The VRG Scientific Committee, established during the 2019-2020 certification cycle, includes 31 members – mainly academics – and 20 additional contacts across nine countries, offering an international research perspective. However, all listed members were contacted as part of the investigation, but responses were scarce, with only one member providing feedback directly relevant to their work, revealing a loose structure and minimal engagement.



Existing publications contribute to broader cultural route themes, but few focus specifically on the VRG, and much of the research is non-academic or produced outside the Scientific Committee. Key medieval sources like the *Annales Stadenses* remain underutilised in shaping the VRG's historical and geographical framework. Strengthening research efforts could align the route with themes such as slow mobility and cultural tourism while addressing governance challenges. Improved monitoring systems and enhanced cooperation between the Scientific Committee and the EAVRG Board could support the VRG's sustainability and reinforce its role in the European cultural landscape.

The EAVRG highlights the VRG's role in preserving and enhancing tangible and intangible heritage, emphasising its historical significance and the cultural diversity of the landscapes it traverses. This is supported by adherence to international standards, including CoE, UNESCO, and ICOMOS guidelines for heritage restoration and enrichment. Collaborative efforts, such as agreements with San Marino and partnerships with municipalities, demonstrate a focus on less-explored sites beyond conventional tourist routes. However, activities listed in the 2023-24 report, while relevant, show a predominantly German-centric approach, with 25 out of 41 initiatives led by the same president. This indicates limited collaboration across the network and an underutilisation of the Scientific Committee's international potential. Strengthening research and engaging with broader associative entities could help contextualise the VRG's medieval passage and extend heritage interest to surrounding regions, enriching the route's contribution to European cultural memory.

The EAVRG has initiated projects fostering cultural and educational exchanges for young Europeans, emphasising the values of European citizenship and diversity. These initiatives, if further developed both practically and theoretically, have the potential to serve as reference models. The VRG offers young hikers opportunities for personal and meaningful experiences, enabling them to engage directly with diverse cultures along the route. Notable examples include the partnership between Ochsenfurt (Würzburg) and Bibbiena (Arezzo), which has facilitated reciprocal visits by young Italians and Germans, promoting intercultural dialogue. Additionally, projects like "Piccoli Romei in Cammino" under the "Reconnecting With Your Culture" initiative, aim to reconnect youth with their cultural and spiritual heritage. These efforts demonstrate the VRG's potential to engage educational institutions and create impactful, transnational exchanges aligned with CoE values.

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The EAVRG has demonstrated engagement with contemporary cultural and artistic practices, enriching the itinerary by introducing dynamic artistic elements and fostering cultural innovation. Initiatives like Feuchtwangen's 75-year-old Kreuzgangspiele open-air theatre festivals and the EAVRG's "Sacred Music on Roman Pilgrimages and Soundscapes" project explore the links between heritage and contemporary culture. The DONwud festival highlights global traditions, while the bilingual Organ Tour complements the cultural pilgrimage experience. Iconic events like the Oberammergau Passion Play, rooted in historical narratives, and the "International Organ Vespers Festival of San Martino", align the route with creative and musical heritage. While these initiatives underscore a strong commitment to cultural enrichment, they predominantly reflect German traditions. To further internationalise and diversify the route's appeal, EAVRG should foster collaborations with other countries along the VRG, establish unique artistic events, and act as a hub for new cultural synergies.

The analysis of cultural tourism and sustainable development within the EAVRG highlights both achievements and areas for improvement. While the itinerary has potential for cultural and rural development, its implementation remains uneven across different regions and municipalities. Field visits and interviews revealed governance inconsistencies, infrastructure gaps, and accessibility challenges, reflecting the project's early stage. The 2023 EAVRG report suggests that the VRG supports rural development in areas like South Tyrol, yet the lack of a systematic monitoring system weakens these claims. Estimates indicate between a few dozen and 200 pilgrims per stage annually, but no reliable tracking exists. For example, at the Dietenborn facility, records show only one pilgrim between January and October 2023. Infrastructure also varies: in Germany, signposting is largely absent, with completion planned by 2025 through GAL LEADER funding. Volunteer initiatives, such as the "Route Angels," and new accommodations in Münchenlohra, Dietenborn, and Nordhausen show progress but require further consolidation.



In Austria, infrastructure remains limited, primarily relying on traditional facilities despite agreements like the one with Jakobsgemeinschaft Tirol for route maintenance. In Italy, while signposting is more developed, hospitality infrastructure is still in an early phase, with persistent issues. Surveys in Veneto and Emilia-Romagna revealed the use of informal signposting, such as stickers, which lack standardization and pose safety concerns. Pilgrim-specific accommodations include the San Giovanni Battista Parish in Forlì, a hostel in Cusercoli managed by the local pro loco, and a recently opened facility in Campi, Bibbiena. While these additions signal a growing network, they also underscore the need for uniformity and safety. The survey of 54 tourist offices across the Italian regions along the VRG – Trentino-Alto Adige, Veneto, Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Umbria, and Lazio – found that 67% were aware of the route, but only 24% could provide practical information. Veneto and Lazio stood out for their lack of awareness and resources. In Lazio, where the VRG overlaps with the Via Francigena, interventions are minimal, likely due to the dominance of the latter's established infrastructure. Awareness levels vary significantly (figure 2), with higher recognition in Umbria, Tuscany, and Trentino-Alto Adige, while other areas require stronger local engagement. This disparity is even more pronounced in tourist offices that can actively assist visitors (figure 3). Additionally, many segments in Emilia-Romagna and Veneto overlap with pre-existing trails, but where such paths are absent, informal stickers are used on roads without pedestrian pathways, raising safety concerns.

The absence of structured monitoring extends to tourism data, where only some stage points collect visitor signatures. This gap was acknowledged during field visits, with a consensus on the importance of early documentation to track and enhance utilisation. EAVRG's collaborations with public and private stakeholders, including tour operators and media outlets, are promising steps towards integrating VRG into broader tourism offerings. The VRG holds considerable potential for fostering dialogue between urban and rural areas, enriching local heritage, and diversifying tourism. However, systematic monitoring, standardised infrastructure, and expanded partnerships are essential to realise its full impact.

The Cultural Route network, the third point of the evaluation report, was evaluated focussing firstly by focussing on the overview of the institutional and legal framework of the EAVRG network. These standards mandate that such networks must involve members from at least three CoE member states, be legally registered in one of these states, and ensure democratic governance, including transparent decision-making processes and member participation. The network's operational capabilities, including fund management, partnership building, and the coordination of common activities, are also critical factors for assessment. The EAVRG was officially registered in Bolzano, Italy, on 19th December 2018. It incorporates three member countries – Germany, Austria, and Italy – thereby fulfilling the CoE's geographical scope requirement. Its statutes provide a framework for transparent governance, including a Board of Directors with a three-year mandate responsible for implementing General Assembly resolutions and overseeing the association's administration.

Despite a solid institutional framework, the evaluation highlighted major governance challenges, particularly regarding coordination among the Associations within the network. Although the statutes ensure representation for each association on the Board, the Italian Association is currently absent, leading to governance fragmentation and limiting effective planning. During the evaluation cycle, the Italian Association reported critical issues, including its exclusion from drafting the 2023-24 certification dossier. Additionally, management of the itinerary remains fragmented at the national level, with the Italian Association independently overseeing the route from the Brenner Pass to Rome without coordination with Austrian and German counterparts. This lack of integration weakens the goal of a unified Cultural Route aligned with CoE transnational cooperation principles. Collaboration issues also extend to membership dynamics. The Italian Association has 44 public bodies and municipalities as members, yet the European Association includes some of these entities in its expansion plans, as seen with the Municipality of Meldola. An interview on 21st November 2023 confirmed that Meldola remains engaged with the Italian Association, participating in initiatives like "Cammini Religiosi Italiani". These inconsistencies raise concerns about membership structure clarity and alignment within the network.

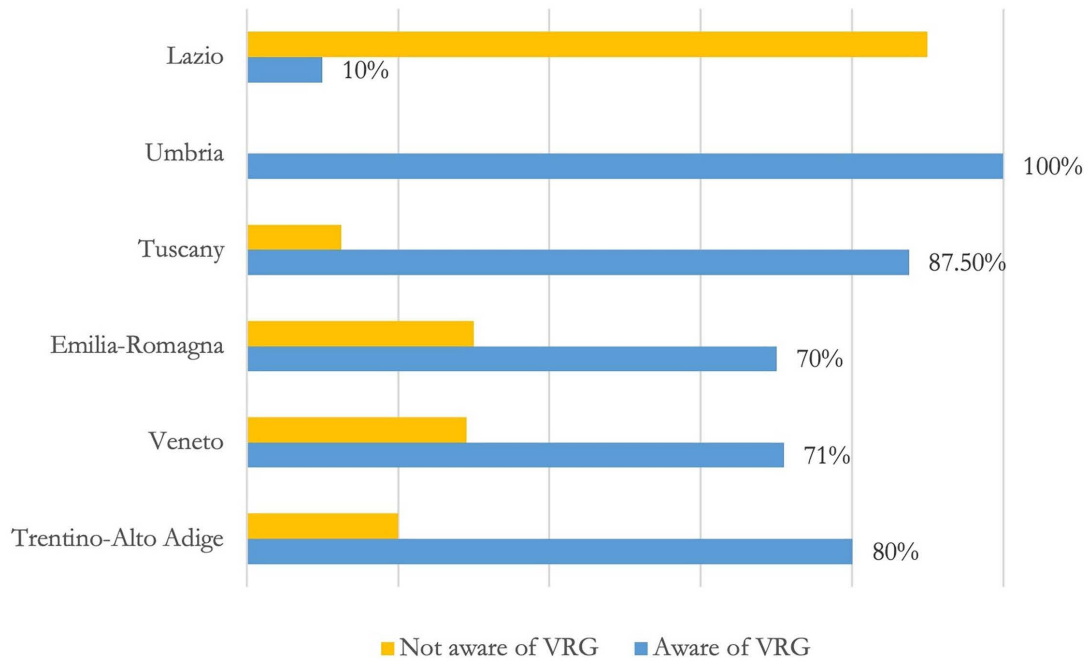


Figure 2. Tourist authorities on Italian municipalities crossed by VRG and clustered by Regions categorised according to whether or not they are aware of the VRG. Source: author's elaboration.

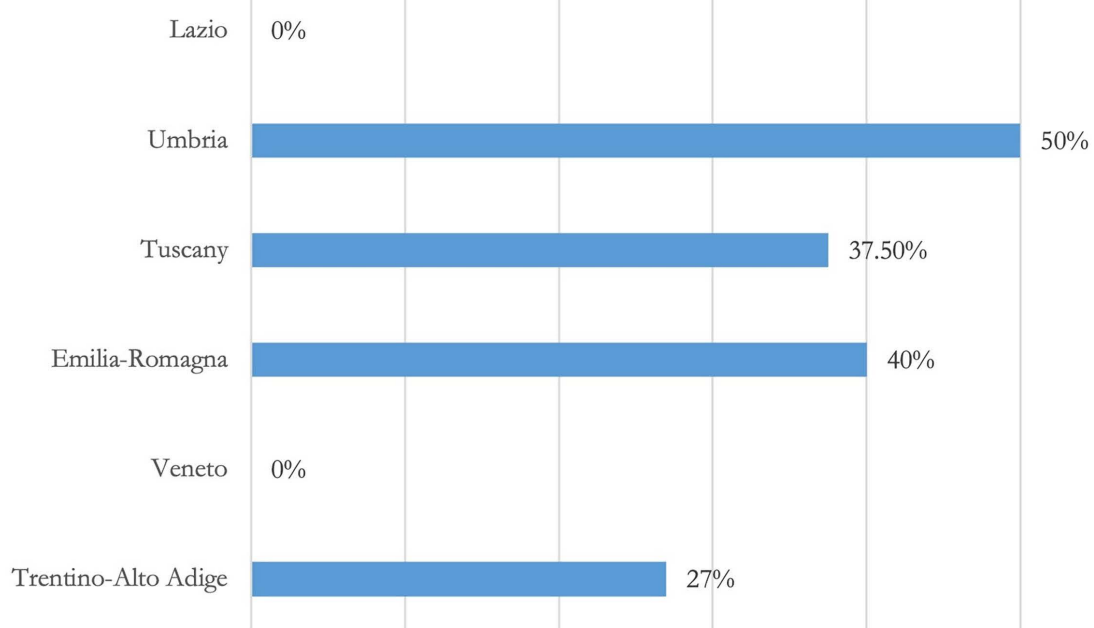


Figure 3. Tourist authorities on Italian municipalities crossed by VRG and clustered by Regions equipped to provide specific information related the fruition of the VRG. Source: author's elaboration.



The economic sustainability of the EAVRG is directly affected by governance fragmentation. The network relies primarily on contributions from the German and Italian Associations, yet their lack of joint financial planning weakens the overall financial coherence of the European Association. The Scientific Committee also suffers from fragmentation, limiting its ability to provide unified academic and operational guidance. Additionally, decentralised and inconsistent communication further complicates coordination. The financial sustainability assessment considered budget documents, membership fee structures, and financial forecasts, focusing on the network's capacity to sustain operations and long-term viability. As a non-profit entity, EAVRG aligns with tax-privileged purposes, ensuring that funds serve its mission rather than individual interests. Over the past three years, it has participated in six projects, including "rurALLURE" (2021-2023) and "Open Horizons of Pilgrims" (2022) at the European level, alongside national and local initiatives. However, weak collaboration with the Italian Association limits joint projects and financial growth. The 2023 budget reveals that 82% of funds come from marketing fees, 17% from member contributions, and 0.5% from private funding. Financial sustainability depends on the individual budgets of the German, Austrian, and Italian Associations, which require coordinated planning for shared projects. The German Association has 100 members, including 22 municipalities, with fees structured according to municipal overnight stay capacity. The Italian Association, with 44 members, also contributes but remains financially independent due to governance disputes. This lack of coordination significantly limits the network's economic potential, making stronger inter-association collaboration essential for financial stability and long-term growth.

The evaluation of the current composition of the EAVRG network reveals a structure guided by well-defined criteria, including national and regional coordinators, authorities at various levels, cultural institutions, museums, natural parks, tourism stakeholders, SMEs, universities, and individual members. Membership categories reflect an intention to integrate diverse stakeholders relevant to the VRG's theme.

While the EAVRG statute outlines the procedure for selecting and mapping members, its current application appears limited to the collaboration between the three national associations (German, Austrian, and Italian). This process, though formally inclusive, shows notable discrepancies in execution, particularly regarding Austrian participation, which requires reinforcement. Significant advancements have been made in Germany and Italy, where municipalities, tourist boards, businesses, and academic institutions have been actively incorporated. However, a balanced geographical expansion remains an unfulfilled objective.

The EAVRG has pursued partnerships beyond its immediate membership, collaborating with other European pilgrimage routes such as the Via Francigena and St Olav's Way. Notably, the agreement signed with the EAVF on 27th July 2023¹¹ represents a pivotal step towards joint promotion and shared activities. Such collaborations enhance the VRG's visibility while promoting its overarching theme of cultural and historical connection. Despite these achievements, gaps persist in inter-scalar coordination, particularly between national and local levels. Effective communication strategies remain underdeveloped, limiting the network's potential to unify diverse identities along the route.

The network extension since the previous evaluation highlights an increase in members, particularly among municipalities in Germany and Italy, managed by their respective Associations. The EAVRG has sought to expand its academic-scientific network and form partnerships with local entities. A potentially strategic initiative includes the memorandum of understanding with the Republic of San Marino¹², aimed at creating a VRG link road to promote slow mobility and local communities. However, no significant progress or outcomes from this agreement are currently observable. The network's strategy to attract new members and maintain relations with stakeholders is evident but requires further development to ensure tangible contributions and enhance its value in alignment with the VRG's objectives.

The EAVRG's three-year network expansion strategy aims to broaden its geographical reach while maintaining alignment with its overarching mission. Its adaptable statute facilitates the inclusion of new

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11. <https://www.viefrancigene.org/en/agreement-between-the-via-francigena-and-the-via-romea-germanica-to-promote-the-paths-to-rome/> (last access 25.02.2025).

12. <https://www.vallimarecchiaeconca.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Scheda-progetto.pdf> (last access 25.02.2025).



members whose objectives align with the association's purpose. Expansion efforts build on pre-existing mapping, ensuring that new municipalities – two from Austria, four from Germany, and three from Italy – enhance both the thematic and geographical coherence of the network. A key component of this strategy is the planned LEADER cooperation project¹³, involving nine LEADER regions and three cities in a collaborative tourism initiative, marking the first large-scale coordinated effort for VRG and reinforcing long-term marketing objectives. Efforts to enhance communication and outreach remain uneven across the network. While promotional materials highlight the route's socio-cultural values and activities, a cohesive communication strategy is lacking, leading to inconsistencies across platforms and languages. The official EAVRG website¹⁴ redirects to a secondary site¹⁵ managed by the German Association, which, despite correctly displaying the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe Logo, focusses exclusively on the German itinerary, with no Austrian representation. The Italian Association operates separate websites: one¹⁶ for the Italian route and a second one¹⁷, a bilingual platform (Italian and English), for guidebook sales. Meanwhile, the previously reported joint site¹⁸ is no longer accessible, highlighting a critical issue in domain management. On social media, the German and Italian Associations independently manage their respective channels, further illustrating the fragmented communication approach. The German Facebook page¹⁹, shared with the European Association, often alternates between English and German, while the Italian Association operates its own Facebook page²⁰ in Italian. Both Associations have corresponding Facebook groups for community interaction. Similar fragmentation is seen on Instagram: the German-European page²¹ is available in German and English, while the Italian page²² remains exclusively in Italian. Additionally, the Italian Association manages a YouTube channel²³ with video content focused on its segment of the route.

Printed materials, including brochures produced by the German Association, provide stage-specific details and maps but cover only the German section of the VRG, leaving gaps in the overall route representation. Signposting also varies widely depending on the managing Association and local administrative conditions, highlighting broader coordination challenges. In Italy, signage is inconsistent, failing to meet the Logo usage guidelines outlined in this evaluation and safety regulations for both roads and pathways. In the Forlì area, for example, informal signage and the absence of pedestrian pathways pose significant safety risks. While efforts have been made to improve communication tools, the fragmented and uneven implementation undermines the EAVRG's ability to present a cohesive and unified narrative for the VRG.

The evaluation of EAVRG's adherence to Logo guidelines shows partial compliance, with inconsistencies across printed materials, websites, and social media. While some publications and event materials follow the guidelines, compliant applications remain sporadic, and the CoE Logo is largely absent from social media. Deviations are more common when external organisers are involved. These findings highlight the need for a more systematic and centralised approach to ensure uniform Logo use across all communication tools. Strengthening coordination and enforcing clear visibility standards would improve compliance and reinforce the network's connection to the CoE.

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13. <https://www.europa-foerdert-kultur.eu/en/foerderprogramme/leader/> (last access 25.02.2025).

14. www.viaromeagermanica.info (last access 25.02.2025).

15. <https://www.viaromea.de/> (last access 25.02.2025).

16. <https://viaromeagermanica.com/> (last access 25.02.2025).

17. www.guidaromea.eu (last access 25.02.2025).

18. www.viaromeagermanica.eu (last access 25.02.2025).

19. <https://www.facebook.com/ViaRomeaPilgerweg/> (last access 25.02.2025).

20. <https://www.facebook.com/viaromeagermanica> (last access 25.02.2025).

21. https://www.instagram.com/via_romea_germanica/ (last access 25.02.2025).

22. https://www.instagram.com/_viaromeagermanica_/ (last access 25.02.2025).

23. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCOB6lrCmIR9YIEop8rM5nwg/videos> (last access 25.02.2025).



5. DISCUSSION

The analysis of the VRG as a Cultural Route and the EAVRG highlights both significant progress and persistent challenges identified during the regular evaluation cycle. This discussion synthesises the findings, contextualising them within the broader framework of Cultural Routes and their governance, while proposing areas and opportunities for improvement.

The VRG's thematic coherence is a key strength, integrating tangible and intangible heritage within a broader European framework. Its links to the Via Francigena and the Camino de Santiago reinforce its cultural significance, yet unlike these established routes, it faces infrastructure and visitor engagement challenges that limit its accessibility and international appeal. Challenges that are especially true if considering that Cultural Routes are not solely geographic pathways but complex systems encompassing cultural consumption and experiential engagement, bridging tangible and intangible heritage (Majdoub, 2011).

The governance structure of the EAVRG remains underdeveloped, with weak coordination between the German, Austrian, and Italian associations leading to fragmented management. Given the multidimensional nature of cultural routes, they should be seen as dynamic actor-networks, where human and non-human elements interact (Severo, 2017). However, while Germany has progressed in signposting and infrastructure, Austria remains underrepresented in strategic planning, and Italy continues to manage its section independently. This lack of transnational cohesion reduces operational efficiency and weakens the VRG's alignment with the CoE's principles of cross-border cooperation. At regional level, a similar challenge is observed in the governance of the Via Francigena in Southern Italy, where fragmented efforts among regions and local stakeholders have hindered the development of a cohesive strategy (Ronza, 2020).

Cultural Routes not only enhance regional identity but also promote inclusive tourism by integrating lesser-known sites into unified thematic experiences, fostering sustainable development through multi-stakeholder collaboration (Ward-Perkins, Tüdes, 2016). However, the financial sustainability of the EAVRG remains heavily dependent on German and Italian contributions, with governance disputes preventing effective financial planning and joint project development. An issue that, more broadly, reflects concerns raised in research on Cultural Routes, which often highlights the fragility of financial models reliant on fluctuating public and private funding (Öztürk & Aktuğlu Aktan, 2024; Council of Europe, 2016).

The VRG demonstrates potential for cultural and educational exchanges, but these remain geographically uneven. Expanding partnerships with universities and leveraging the expertise of the Scientific Committee could enhance their impact. Infrastructure analysis reveals major disparities in signposting, safety measures, and accommodation facilities. Additionally, the absence of a systematic monitoring system for visitor flows and overnight stays weakens the network's ability to assess its reach and implement targeted interventions. In this context, standardising infrastructure and introducing robust monitoring mechanisms become essential not only for enhancing the route's functionality and safety, but also for providing a structured pathway to address gaps in governance, stakeholder collaboration, and financial sustainability while aligning with the CoE's overarching objectives (Božić & Tomić, 2015).

The Scientific Committee, with its diverse expertise, is a significant asset, yet remains underutilised. Strengthening its role in historical research, governance support, and public outreach could enrich the VRG's narrative while aligning it with broader themes of slow mobility and cultural tourism. Expanding research into medieval itineraries and their contemporary reinterpretations would further consolidate the VRG's identity. Strengthening such a system would provide structured and centralised support for the entire Cultural Route, benefiting the associations that make up the network – many of which are locally based and often the primary caretakers of cultural heritage – that may perceive the evaluation processes as disproportionately burdensome, particularly when the focus lies on compliance with top-down standards (Öztürk & Aktuğlu Aktan, 2024). A more integrated approach could thus enhance governance also at the local scale.

The EAVRG's communication strategy suffers from fragmentation, with national associations managing websites and social media independently, often in different languages. This lack of coordination limits the promotion of the route as a unified entity. Furthermore, inconsistencies in the use of the Cultural Routes of the CoE Logo across materials undermine the network's visibility and branding. Addressing these issues



requires a centralised communication approach that harmonises linguistic and thematic representations while ensuring compliance with visibility guidelines.

In summary, the EAVRG reached a decisive turning point. Although the network had previously made progress in consolidating its structure and implementing several of the priorities set by the CoE, it continued to face unresolved challenges requiring substantial corrective action. In response to the outcomes of the 2023-2024 regular evaluation, the EAVRG submitted an application for an exceptional evaluation. However, the network failed to demonstrate sufficient progress in addressing the critical issues previously identified. As a result, the EPA Governing Board ultimately decided to withdraw the Cultural Route certification. This outcome underscores the importance of sustained efforts in governance, coordination, and strategic development to meet the standards expected of European Cultural Routes.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The regular evaluation cycle for the VRG has brought to light both the achievements and the challenges faced by the EAVR in meeting the standards of the CoE's Cultural Routes programme. The assessment underscores the critical importance of adhering to certification criteria while simultaneously navigating the operational realities of maintaining a transnational Cultural Route. The exceptional evaluation scheduled for 2024-25 represents not only a decisive opportunity for the VRG to reaffirm its certification but also a moment for introspection and strategic realignment to address existing shortcomings and position itself for sustainable growth.

The evaluation highlights the VRG's significant potential to connect tangible and intangible heritage across borders, leveraging its medieval roots and complementing other established routes. As noted, Cultural Routes are more than linear paths; they function as complex cultural systems that integrate tangible and intangible heritage through experiential and participatory practices. This perspective underscores the necessity for Cultural Routes like the VRG to transcend their historical mobility roots and develop into comprehensive frameworks that align with modern tourist expectations and foster community involvement. However, this potential remains unrealised in several key areas. The VRG continues to face challenges in governance, infrastructure, financial sustainability, and stakeholder engagement. For instance, the governance structure of the EAVRG is characterised by fragmentation, with limited coordination among its national associations (Germany, Austria, and Italy). This has resulted in uneven development, where the German association has advanced in areas such as signposting and local partnerships, while the Austrian and Italian segments remain less cohesive. This lack of integration undermines the transnational cohesion expected of Cultural Routes and highlights the need for stronger collaborative frameworks.

Economic sustainability further compounds these challenges. While the financial structure of the EAVRG relies on contributions from its member associations, the absence of a unified economic strategy has limited the network's ability to fund joint projects and ensure long-term viability. Research on Cultural Routes has often highlighted the fragility of financial models that rely heavily on variable public and private funding sources. Without consistent resources, the VRG risks falling short of the high standards set by the CoE, particularly in terms of infrastructure maintenance, marketing, and accessibility. Without consistent resources, the VRG risks falling short of the high standards set by the CoE, particularly in terms of infrastructure maintenance, marketing, and accessibility. However, route tourism has the potential to unite lesser-known attractions under a cohesive theme, thereby improving their marketability while fostering the conservation and management of heritage assets.

This paper also provides insights into the broader Cultural Routes programme and its associated evaluation framework. While the regular evaluation process effectively documents progress and identifies areas for improvement, it also exposes systemic issues that merit attention. The rigorous nature of the evaluation criteria, while essential for maintaining high standards, can prove challenging and burdensome for networks still in their early stages of development. Local associations, key stewards of cultural heritage, may find these processes overly demanding when evaluations prioritise top-down compliance over local operational contexts.



To some extent, the discussion also highlights a potential gap between the overarching objectives set by the CoE's programme and their practical implementation at the local level. This disconnect stems primarily from limited awareness of the value and opportunities associated with being part of a certified Cultural Route. This analysis underscores the pressing need for targeted training at regional and local levels to foster a deeper understanding of the programme.

Certainly, this highlights a further consideration that is particularly relevant in the case of the VRG. Its path, which failed to meet certification standards during its initial candidacy (2018), underscores a broader issue: achieving and maintaining the status of a Cultural Route of the CoE is an ambitious goal that is often unattainable for a network in its embryonic or early stages. The certification process, with its rigorous evaluation criteria, demands a level of maturity, stability, and operational cohesion that emerging projects or newly established networks are rarely equipped to deliver. However, this challenge also reframes the evaluation process as more than a procedural hurdle; it becomes a developmental milestone. For established and well-functioning networks, the demands of the Cultural Routes programme are not only manageable but provide a valuable framework for refining governance, enhancing visibility, and fostering transnational collaboration. In contrast, for networks still grappling with foundational issues – whether in governance, funding, or thematic coherence – the certification process can result demanding. This is not merely a reflection of the network's shortcomings but also of the inherent complexities of scaling an idea from concept to functional reality within the framework of transnational cultural heritage.

For networks like the EAVRG, the challenge is to use the evaluation process not as a deterrent but as a guidepost for growth. By strengthening internal structures, fostering collaboration among members, and strategically addressing weaknesses, even an embryonic project can evolve into a certified Cultural Route that not only meets but exceeds the standards of the CoE. For those networks willing to commit to the process, the rewards extend far beyond certification, offering a meaningful role in shaping and sharing Europe's cultural heritage.

Moreover, the role of independent experts in the evaluation process warrants reflection, particularly on their inherent limitations. While they are tasked with ensuring objectivity and rigor, their ability to verify is inevitably constrained by the nature of the process itself. Evaluators can only conduct fieldwork on specific, limited elements, offering spot checks within the vast landscape of countries, networks, and local realities that a Cultural Route encompasses. This raises important questions about the scalability and adaptability of the evaluation framework, which must balance its ambition with the practical challenges of such extensive assessments.

To conclude, the evaluation process underscores the transformative potential of the Cultural Routes programme as a mechanism for fostering cross-border heritage preservation, enhancing cultural tourism, and promoting European values. At the same time, the process reveals the delicate balance required between ambitious certification standards and the operational realities faced by nascent networks. While the challenges faced by networks like the VRG highlight the complexities of meeting certification standards, they also provide a clear framework for identifying areas requiring development. The experience of the VRG reinforces the importance of structured governance, financial sustainability, and cohesive collaboration within transnational networks. These are not merely procedural demands but fundamental components of long-term success and relevance. Furthermore, for future research and a deeper understanding of the evolutionary context of the Cultural Routes of the CoE programme, it would be particularly strategic to conduct analyses on additional cases of the evaluation process, especially through a comparative assessment of networks that have successfully consolidated over time. This approach would help to further highlight a range of presumably successful trajectories, which could enhance the understanding of the dynamics, developments, and overarching patterns characterising the cultural networks.

Responsibilities and conflicts of interest

The author undertakes to disclose any existing or potential conflict of interest in relation to the publication of his article.



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