

INFORMAL CONTACT GROUP OF CULTURAL ROUTES OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

DRAFT COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

40 Years of Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe 1987 - 2027

This is a working document that has emerged from the 13th Training Academy of Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe and from discussions at the meetings of the Informal Contact Group (ICG). It does not represent the viewpoint of the Council of Europe or Secretariat of the European Institute of Cultural Routes.

Summary

The Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe programme marks its 40th anniversary in 2027. Despite four decades of operation and the certification of 52 routes across the continent, the programme remains significantly under-recognised among the general culturally interested and travelling public, tourism industry partners, and political bodies and actors on national and European level.

This document sets out a comprehensive communication and promotion strategy to capitalise on the anniversary as a catalytic moment — an opportunity to elevate the programme's profile through coordinated storytelling, digital outreach, and strategic partnerships.

The 52 certified routes are extraordinarily diverse — in geography, theme, scale, and capacity. Some welcome hundreds of thousands of visitors each year; others are fragile heritage landscapes where visitor numbers must remain limited to protect what makes them exceptional. This strategy seeks to connect the right travellers with the right routes: curious, engaged, respectful visitors who enrich the places they encounter, not overwhelm them.

The strategy is built around **a flagship campaign, '52 Routes - 52 Weeks', which will bring each certified Cultural Route into the spotlight throughout 2027**, supported by dedicated digital channels, an anniversary video, and collaboration with key European tourism bodies including the European Travel Commission.

Background & Context

Established in 1987, the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe is one of the longest-running cultural heritage initiatives in Europe. It currently certifies 52 routes spanning history, pilgrimage, art, music, gastronomy, and landscape across more than 50 countries. Each route is independently managed but certified under a common framework that upholds the values of democracy, human rights, and cultural diversity.

The routes vary enormously in character. Some - such as the Camino de Santiago or the Via Francigena — are among the most walked paths in the world and have well-developed visitor infrastructure. Others are defined more by scholarly, artistic, or intangible heritage, where physical travel is one dimension of engagement alongside education, research, and cultural exchange. Many routes, particularly those in less-visited regions or centred on endangered heritage, actively benefit from carefully managed attention - not volume.

Despite this richness, awareness of the programme - both at public and institutional level - remains far below its potential. The programme's institutional character, combined with limited centrally coordinated promotion, has resulted in fragmented visibility.

Why Now

Several converging factors make 2027 an exceptional window of opportunity:

- Post-pandemic travel has shifted meaningfully towards slower, more purposeful journeys. Travellers increasingly seek depth over novelty - immersive encounters with local heritage, landscape, and community that mass tourism destinations cannot offer. Cultural Routes are ideally positioned to meet this demand.

- The EU Tourism Strategy and the European Travel Commission's frameworks have elevated heritage and sustainable tourism as policy priorities, providing alignment and co-promotion opportunities.
- The 40th anniversary is a powerful communications hook - one that can attract media attention, institutional support, and public curiosity in a way that routine programming cannot.
- Digital channels now offer cost-effective, targeted reach to culturally motivated audiences — people who travel thoughtfully and engage deeply with the places they visit.

A Note on Differentiated Engagement

A central premise of this strategy is that not all Cultural Routes benefit from visitor growth in the same way, and that the campaign must respect this diversity. The goal is not to generate undifferentiated traffic - it is to **raise awareness of the programme's existence and values**, and to **match engaged, informed audiences with the routes** best suited to welcome them.

For routes with strong visitor infrastructure and capacity, increased engagement from culturally motivated travellers is straightforwardly beneficial. For heritage-sensitive or lower-capacity routes, the campaign's value lies primarily in education, advocacy, and institutional recognition - not visitor promotion. The communication toolkit and campaign framing will be designed to allow each route to participate in a way that reflects its own capacity and character.

Strategic Alignment

This campaign supports the EU Tourism Strategy's goals of promoting sustainable, competitive, and resilient European tourism — with an emphasis on quality of experience over volume of visitors, and on protecting the heritage assets that make European travel meaningful.

Strategic Objectives

The campaign is structured around four primary objectives:

- **Visibility: Increase public and institutional awareness of the Cultural Routes programme and its 40-year heritage.**

Target: Achieve measurable growth in social media reach, website traffic, and media mentions throughout the 2027 campaign period - with reach weighted towards culturally engaged audiences rather than broad reach metrics.

- **Education: Communicate the variety, depth, and thematic richness of the 52 certified routes to European and international audiences.**

Target: Ensure each of the 52 routes is featured individually with substantive, culture tourism and heritage-oriented content that reflects its unique character and appropriate level of visitor engagement.

- **Invitation: Inspire travellers to discover and experience Cultural Routes as a meaningful form of European travel.**

Target: Drive referrals from campaign channels to individual route websites, emphasising quality of engagement over volume. Success is a visitor who arrives informed, respectful, and enriched - not simply a higher headcount.

- **Advocacy: Strengthen B2B and B2G recognition of the programme's value to stimulate greater institutional and financial support.**

Target: Establish or deepen collaboration with tour operators and/or DMCs (Destination Management Companies) for cross-border offers and enhance institutional partnerships (e.g., ETC/visiteurope.com, NTOs National Tourist Organisations) as by end of 2027.

Target Audiences

B2C - The Engaged Traveller

The **primary public audience is the culturally motivated traveller** - someone who chooses destinations for their heritage, meaning, and human depth rather than convenience or novelty. This audience skews towards adults aged 30–65, travels more slowly and deliberately, and actively seeks experiences off the well-worn tourist path. They are readers, listeners, and learners - equally at home in a village archive as on a mountain pilgrimage route.

A **secondary audience includes younger travellers drawn to sustainable and slow travel**, for whom Cultural Routes offer an alternative to carbon-intensive, consumption-driven tourism. These audiences are not seeking crowds or convenience — they are looking for authenticity, and will respond to honest, thoughtful storytelling about European heritage.

This campaign deliberately does not target mass-market leisure travellers. The value of Cultural Routes lies in the depth of encounter they make possible, and that value is best served by reaching audiences who will honour it.

B2B - Heritage & Cultural Tourism Partners

Specialist tour operators, cultural travel agencies, walking and cycling holiday providers, heritage accommodation networks, and travel media with a cultural or slow-travel focus are the industry partners best aligned with the programme's character. For this audience, Cultural Routes represent a credible, differentiated, and values-driven offering - distinct from mainstream package tourism and increasingly sought after by their own clientele.

The campaign does not position Cultural Routes as a mass market product. It positions them as a premium heritage experience in the fullest sense - rich in meaning, responsibly managed, and worthy of the discerning traveller's time and investment.

B2G - Policy & Institutional Stakeholders

Governments, regional authorities, EU institutions, and cultural bodies are the institutional audience. For this group, the campaign should demonstrate the programme's contribution to CoE and EU values, cultural diplomacy, regional development, and the protection of intangible heritage - making a compelling case for increased public investment, co-funding, and formal recognition within European cultural policy frameworks.

Campaign Concept: '52 Routes - 52 Weeks'

The central campaign mechanic is simple and resonant: 52 routes, 52 weeks. Starting in January 2027, one Cultural Route will be featured each week throughout the year, in the chronological order of its certification — beginning with the pioneering St. James Way (Camino de Santiago), certified in 1987.

This framework creates a year-long content calendar that is self-organising, gives every route — regardless of size or visitor capacity — its moment in the spotlight, and builds anticipation and continuity among audiences. Crucially, it treats each route on its own terms: the story told about a well-established pilgrimage route will be different in tone and emphasis from the story told about a fragile literary landscape or a cross-border music heritage trail.

Each weekly feature will encompass:

- A dedicated campaign website page presenting the route — its themes, highlights, countries, heritage significance, and, where relevant and appropriate, practical travel information.
- A curated set of social media posts across the campaign's Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube channels, tailored to the character of the individual route.
- An invitation to the route to organise an anniversary event or activity — in person, hybrid, or digital — during their featured week.
- Cross-promotion by the route from their own digital channels, using the shared campaign toolkit.

Routes will be encouraged — not required — to position themselves as visitor destinations within the campaign. Those whose primary value is educational, scholarly, or heritage-protective will be supported to tell that story with equal prominence.

Campaign Elements

Anniversary Logo

A dedicated anniversary campaign logo is essential to establish a distinct visual identity that is immediately recognisable and independent from the institutional branding of the Council of Europe. **The campaign logo should communicate celebration, European heritage, and cultural depth.**

Budget: approx. €3,000

Anniversary Video

A flagship video is the most powerful single asset of the campaign. **Emotionally engaging and visually compelling, this 2–3 minute film** should convey the breadth, beauty, and meaning of the Cultural Routes - **drawing on footage contributed by all 52 routes** to represent the full geographic and thematic scope of the programme.

- Languages: English and French (subtitled versions for broader accessibility)
- Length: 2–3 minutes (main film) + 30-second trailer cuts for social media
- Distribution: YouTube channel, campaign website homepage, press kit, Websites of Routes, CoE Website, partner channels

Budget: €3,000 – €5,000

Campaign Trailer / Social Media Teasers

From the anniversary video footage, **one or two short teaser clips (30 seconds)** should be produced for pre-launch use across social media. These teasers will build anticipation ahead of the campaign launch and can be repurposed throughout the year as evergreen content.
Budget: approx. €1,000 (post-production from existing footage)

Campaign Website

The campaign's digital home must function as a heritage and discovery platform - not an institutional reporting site (covered by the CoE website), it should be informative, inspiring, and deeply respectful of the heritage it presents.
It should be a purpose-built campaign site.

Each of the 52 route pages should reflect the route's own character and appropriate level of visitor engagement. For routes that welcome and are equipped for visitors, practical travel information is appropriate. For routes where heritage protection is paramount, the emphasis should be on the significance, the story, and the ways to engage - digitally, educationally, or through carefully managed visits. Key features:

- A landing page with campaign introduction, the anniversary video, and a route discovery tool (map!)
- 52 individual route pages
- An events calendar featuring anniversary events — in-person, hybrid, and digital
- A news and press section for media
- Multilingual capability (at minimum English and French)

Social Media Channels

Dedicated campaign channels **on Instagram and Facebook** should be created and managed throughout

A **YouTube channel** is recommended to host the anniversary video and any additional video content.

Possible content strategy per channel:

- Instagram: Visual storytelling — heritage photography, landscape, detail, human encounter. Short Reels drawn from route video footage. The aesthetic should feel considered and authentic, not glossy or aspirational.
- Facebook: Community-oriented content — longer posts, heritage context, event promotion, engagement with route organisations, cultural institutions, and heritage communities. A space for dialogue, not broadcast.
- YouTube: Anniversary video, trailer, and supplementary route videos. A growing archive of European cultural heritage storytelling.

Partnership with visiteurope.com / European Travel Commission

Following a first collaboration with the European Travel Commission in 2024 a broader feature of the Cultural Routes on the visiteurope.com platform needs to follow and the partnership enhanced.

Further elements could include:

- Cross-promotion through ETC's social media channels, targeting culturally motivated traveller segments
- Inclusion of Cultural Routes content in ETC's newsletter and press communications

Route Communication Toolkit

To enable all 52 routes to participate actively in the campaign - regardless of their communications capacity - a ready-to-use toolkit should be developed and distributed. The toolkit is designed to reduce the workload on individual route teams while ensuring a coherent campaign identity across all channels.

Routes will be encouraged to adapt the toolkit to their own voice and character. The campaign identity should be a shared frame, not a uniform — each route's individuality is an asset, not a problem to be resolved. Toolkit contents:

- Anniversary logo files and usage guidelines
- Template social media posts (adaptable text and image) for their featured week
- Campaign hashtags and tagging guidance
- A brief guide to linking from their website to the campaign page
- Anniversary event branding templates (for in-person, hybrid, and digital events)

Estimated Budget

The following table outlines the primary cost items identified. Items marked TBC require further scoping and quotation.

Item	Estimated Cost (€)	Notes
Anniversary Logo Design	€ 3,000	Graphic designer fee
Anniversary Video Production	€ 3,000 – 5,000	Editing from route-supplied footage
Social Media Trailer (×2)	€ 1,000	Short-form cuts from video
Campaign Website Development	TBC	Microsite build + CMS setup
Website Hosting & Management	TBC	Annual cost, 2027–2028 In-kind EICR?
Social Media Management	TBC	In-kind EICR?
Partnership Development	15.000 contribution (campaign volume 30K)	ETC / visiteurope collaboration with co-financing 50 %

In order to cover all essential elements a minimum of **25,000 € - 40,000 €** should be modelled with additional funding sought through EU co-financing mechanisms, partner contributions from EPA Member States and potential support from aligned other institutions or public bodies.

Governance & Management

The success of this campaign depends on clear ownership of responsibilities and sustainable management structures beyond the 2027 anniversary year. **The following questions require formal resolution before the campaign can proceed to execution:**

1. Content & Material Collection

It needs a clear coordination and assignment of a person or team collecting video footage, photography, and route information from all 52 certified routes. Given the scale and diversity of the routes (52 routes across more than 50 countries, with very different communications capacities), this coordination will be substantial.

2. Social Media Management

The '52 Routes – 52 Weeks' format requires consistent, high-quality social media output every week for 52 consecutive weeks. This needs to be planned!

3. Long-Term Stewardship (Post-2027)

A clearly defined exit strategy for the campaign assets must be agreed before launch. Key considerations:

What happens to the campaign website after 2027? Is it archived, redirected, or maintained as an ongoing heritage resource?

The campaign should be designed from the outset with legacy in mind. The website and social channels, if well managed, have enduring value as a platform for European cultural heritage storytelling — independent of any tourism promotion function. A minimal maintenance budget should be allocated for 2028 and agreed in advance.