

2022/23 ENG

Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe Certification cycle 2022-2023

Regular evaluation:

VIA REGIA

Independent expert report

Cultural route
of the Council of Europe
Itinéraire culturel
du Conseil de l'Europe



Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe

Evaluation Cycle 2022-2023

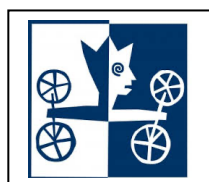
Independent expert report

Via Regia

Author's information:

Dr. Georgia Zouni

Assistant Professor of Tourism Studies Department
University of Piraeus, Greece



Cultural route
of the Council of Europe
Itinéraire culturel
du Conseil de l'Europe



**The opinions expressed in this independent expert report are those of the author, and do not engage the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe.*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Executive Summary	5
2. Introduction	6
3. Main Body Evaluation	7
3.1 Cultural Route Theme	7
3.1.1 Definition of the theme of the route.....	7
3.1.2 Historical and cultural context.....	7
3.1.3 Council of Europe values represented by the theme.....	8
3.2 Fields of Action	9
3.2.1 Co-operation in research and development	9
3.2.2 Enhancement of the memory, history and European heritage.....	10
3.2.4 Contemporary cultural and artistic practice	13
3.2.5 Cultural tourism and sustainable cultural development.....	14
3.3 Cultural Route Network.....	15
3.3.1 Overview of institutional /legal structure of the network	16
3.3.2 Overview of the financial situation of the network	16
3.3.3 Current composition of the network by country and type of member.....	17
3.3.4 Network extension since last evaluation.....	18
3.3.5 Strategy for the network extension in the three years to come.....	19
3.4 Communication tools	19
3.4.1 Current state of communication tools developed by the network (graphic charter, communication materials, logo, communication channels, signposting, maps, etc.)	19
3.4.2 Compliance with the Guidelines for the Use of the Logo “Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe”	22
4. Conclusions and Recommendations	24
5. List of references	31
6. Annex 1: Expert field visit and interviews with the network management and members	33
7. Annex 2: Expert assessment checklist.....	34
8. Annex 3: List of acronyms, figures and tables	40

1. Executive Summary

It is undeniable that the cultural and creative industries have been hit hard by the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic (UNESCO¹, 2022). Especially the venue- and visitor-based sub-sectors such as the performing arts and heritage were most severely hit, considering both the severity of the lockdown measures adopted and the pre-existing fragility of the sector (EU², 2021). Bearing in mind that this evaluation is covering this complex and unique health crisis period (2019-2022), along with the fact that one of the major countries of the route- Ukraine- is suffering from Russia's invasion since last February, we can conclude that overall Via Regia (VR) had met the requirements for this evaluation, and with good results. VR provides distinct examples of genuine creativity and effective procedures across a variety of domains.

The historical route Via Regia, or "royal route," which allowed for trade, pilgrimage, and migration and reached its zenith during the medieval period, serves as the foundation for the Cultural Route of the Via Regia (VR). It is characterized by a rich tangible and intangible heritage wealth in terms of cultural assets, stories, and folktales developed over centuries in the towns, cities, and landscapes it passes through. The VR's subject is distinctive and exemplifies European memory, history, and legacy. The VR provides a strong foundation for the growth of new youth activities, cultural tourist products, and cross-cultural and educational exchanges. The concept of this route has no geographical boundaries because it is prevalent throughout all of Europe and the rest of the world. The decision-making process for managing the route is democratic and clearly stated. While this evaluation period noted deficiencies relating to the following criteria: Cultural Tourism and Sustainable Cultural Development, Cultural Route Network and Communication Tools, recommendations from the prior evaluation (the 2018–2019 cycle) have most of them been implemented. The use of the new VR logo is recommended for all new network members. The aims and activities of the network continue to correspond with CM/Res(2013)67. Therefore, the recommendation for recertification as a "Cultural Route of the Council of Europe" should be awarded.

Expert summary conclusions		
	Yes	No
The theme complies with criteria listed in Resolution CM/Res(2013)67, I. List of eligibility criteria for themes.	X	
The Cultural Route complies with the criteria for actions listed in Resolution CM/Res(2013)67, II. List of priority fields of action.	X	
The Cultural Route complies with the criteria for networks listed in Resolution CM/Res (2013)67, III. List of criteria for networks.	X	
The Cultural Route implements the Guidelines for the Use of the Logo "Cultural Route of the Council of Europe"	X	

¹ Cultural and Creative Industries in the Face of COVID-19: An Economic Impact Outlook. Date. 2021. Publication Source. UNESCO.

² EU, 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/652242/IPOL_STU\(2021\)652242_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/652242/IPOL_STU(2021)652242_EN.pdf)

2. Introduction

In 2005, the Council of Europe designated the Via Regia Cultural Route (hereinafter VR) as a European Cultural Route. It is based on an ancient trading route that connected Europe's West and East during the Holy Roman Empire. This route had many offshoots and connected road systems. Its name, which can be interpreted as "King's Road" or "Royal," comes from the legal protection it used to get from monarchs, especially in the medieval era. From "Galicia to Galicia," the appropriate title of an inaugural symposium that sparked the Council of Europe Cultural Route, the 4,500-kilometer Via Regia is rooted in historical trading relationships between Spain in the West and Ukraine in the East.

The VR's extensive history is well-documented and will not be discussed here. However, it is essential to first recognize a few VR characteristics. First and foremost, it is a true transcontinental route connecting Europe's western and easternmost borders. It is valid to assert that it is Europe's oldest and longest connection. The VR's geographical coverage presents numerous engagement opportunities along its length, but its management and public understanding of the Route are hindered by its dimensions. Second, in the context of the CoE Cultural Routes family, the VR's continuous linearity between the West and the East is unique. More importantly, it provides a crucial connection to the far East of Europe, which is typically a less developed region. Thirdly, prior to the articulation of changes in eligibility conditions as directed in CM/Res (2007)12, the VR was officially recognized as a Council of Europe (CoE) Cultural Route and successfully renewed its certification based on previous evaluations. Fourth, despite the numerous physical manifestations along the VR's heritage sites, the Route also evokes more contemporary networks of cultural and economic connections as well as physical transportation connections. The Via Regia gains genuine historical depth thanks to this real and symbolic continuity in history. Fifth, and continuing from the previous point, the VR has served a variety of purposes throughout its components over the past 2000 years. Pilgrimage, military communications, and migration all overlap with its primary role as a commercial route. This makes the VR appealing to a wide range of audiences, including locals, tourists, and visitors from abroad.

The phases of the evaluation were the following:

1. Preparatory phase: review of evaluation guidelines, evaluation report template and reference texts. Familiarisation with the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe programme, certification criteria and guiding principles.
2. Access to the evaluation files submitted by the VR Cultural Route network under evaluation.
3. Desk review phase: review & analysis of evaluation files, collection of additional information (mostly online content), contacts with VR representatives/ members.
4. Interview phase: interviews with key stakeholders and route's representatives
5. Survey to the members of the VR network via a self-administered online questionnaire via google forms platform³.

As with any evaluation, this one is a "snap shot" in time, but it's important to remember the Route's long-term goals and overall vision. The evaluation also acknowledges its limitations due to the extensive and diverse array of engagements with numerous stakeholders and the complexity of the entire route. Above all, the evaluation conducted with respect of the following key international standards and norms of Transparency, Independence, Ethics, Quality, and Utility.

³ Accessible here : <https://forms.gle/zV8PmufYQc3R5yfb6>

3. Main Body Evaluation

3.1 Cultural Route Theme

3.1.1 Definition of the theme of the route

The oldest and longest road connecting Eastern and Western Europe is known as VIA REGIA (VR). The VIA REGIA (Kings Road) named throughout the Holy Roman Empire because it was under the king's protection. This road connects major European cities like Paris, Frankfurt am Main, Leipzig, Wrocław, Kraków, Lviv, and Kyiv. However, enchanting, and alluring areas with a variety of small and medium-sized towns with a rich cultural heritage, many attractions, and recreational amenities are particularly alluring. The thematic definition of the VR route is characterised by all the criteria of consistency, clarity, comprehensiveness, and scientific background).

In terms of geographical delineation, the route, which connects eight European nations over 4,500 miles, has been in use for more than 2,000 years. Over time, the VR project grew geographically. Since it was referred to as the "Kings Road" (strata regia) in a charter of Margrave Heinrich in 1252, it covers more than just the journey from Wrocław to the river Rhine. The Road to Brabant, a commerce route up to the Belgian Atlantic coast, and the pilgrim route to Santiago de Compostela, which continues westward, are also included as alternatives in this section. The VR continues to Kiev as a major European thoroughfare in an easterly direction. All these tangible and intangible heritage elements included in the route explain the theme and are essential for the explanation of the theme.

The current tracks, which include freeways, state highways, and rural roads, primarily follow the historical itineraries highlighting the narrative that brings together the different heritage elements and that is evoked by the different components of the route. Moreover, the title of the route is simple and represents perfectly the route, so it fulfils the criteria of clarity and comprehensiveness.

The VR is a unique cultural route in terms of theme so no comparison with routes that deal with a similar theme and that have already been certified as "Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe" is applicable.

Finally, the theme offers a solid basis for the development of youth cultural and educational exchanges, innovative activities, and cultural tourism products, such as young people's cultural and educational exchanges, and to work with tourism organizations and organizations that cater to a range of audiences, including school groups, to generate tourism products. Through its members, the VR has been particularly involved in educational connections and youth exchanges. There is no doubt that the VR theme has room for more youth exchange projects, but getting funding is necessary, according to the answers of the members of VR to the survey conducted in the context of the Evaluation.

3.1.2 Historical and cultural context

The old Via Regia, also called the "Royal Road", was part of the most important road system of the Early Middle Ages. With the passing of time, this road has continually changed, adapting to new eras, while continuously preserving its crucial economic significance for interregional trade. This lengthy historical background is reflected by a rich heritage, ranging from the architectural heritage to intangible traditions that have shaped the European continent. VR is indeed a "great European road" with critical economic, cultural, political, and military significance, either as the route of Bonifacius, who established the bishopric in Hesse and Thuringia and therefore helped establish strong social, political, and religious structures under the direction of Karl Martel and Rome. VR is a transcontinental east-west / west-east passage of people and trade, whose value was indicated by its royal protection at least until the fourteenth century, is mentioned in its history as an early form of globalization. In many ways, the VR was and continues to be a communication line with multiple functions, witnessing the movement of goods, skills, knowledge, beliefs, and ideas, as well as pilgrims, armies, and migrants. Since about 2000 years ago, it has been vibrant and has carried a tremendous degree of community meaning.

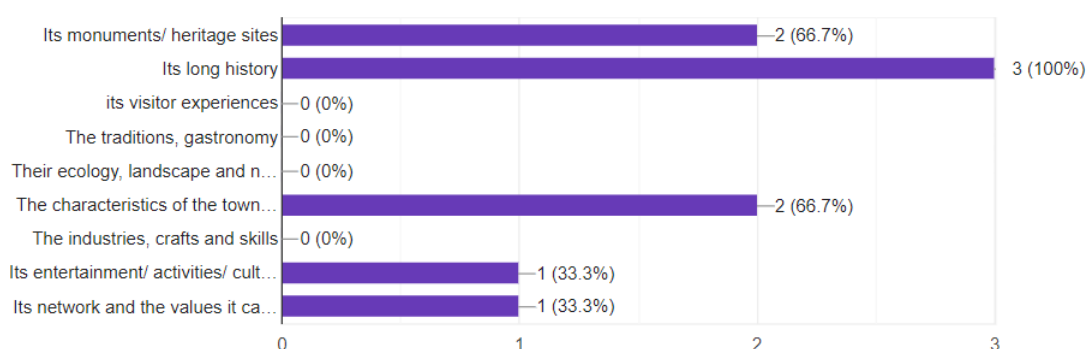
VR clearly exemplifies the larger European narrative of a shared culture based on allowing cross-border cultural and social exchange. For these reasons VR is clearly illustrative of Europe's history and heritage as a context. This broader narrative—that there is a living, long-standing line of connection connecting Europe as a whole—could be highlighted more strongly than it is currently.

The VR members reply on the survey conducted for this evaluation is indicative of the importance of the history to the VR (Table 1).

Table 1 - VR members reply on the survey about what makes VR unique.

1. What makes VR unique is...

Give up to 3 answers



3.1.3 Council of Europe values represented by the theme

The VIA REGIA corridor is a representation of "unity in diversity" because it links various ethnic groups, religious communities, cultural regions, and linguistic communities while treating them equally as project participants. The path is not constrained to a subsection of potential domains of activity, such as tourism promotion; by doing so, it becomes possible to engage on several project subjects. Values like human rights, democracy, tolerance, and peace support the individual actions. They primarily seek to increase public awareness of and adherence to these ideals. The VIA REGIA project advances the Council of Europe's values by incorporating them into the network's structure and goals, as well as its selection of research topics, projects, and publications.

The goals of the VIA REGIA initiative to advance the diversity and unity of Europe align with the fundamental provisions and preamble of the Council of Europe's statute, the Warszawa Declaration, and the Cultural Routes Program's resolution. In this context VR is one of the most inclusive routes with a theme that is representative of European values and common to many European countries and contributes to a better understanding of European history and contemporary Europe! That is the reason the responsible Steering-Committee of the Council of Europe the theme has been chosen as "Major Cultural Route of the Council of Europe" because of its thematical and geographical broadness.

3.2 Fields of Action

3.2.1 Co-operation in research and development

Cooperation and collaboration among the different actors involved in a cultural route is the key to ensure the overall accessibility of an itinerary (Díez Santo 2011). VR research is long standing and important. The route's concept is based on solid research about its history.

Of course, always there is a lot of room for research and development due to the significance of the VR theme and the fact that it covers 4,500 kilometres and passes through eight European countries. But already significant and continues work is done by the VR network on the subject. The VR network works on four research axes: a) history of the route(s), b) contribution to European community and identity (communication sciences - culture and social sciences - European studies), c) methods for cultural tourism (European communication - tourism), and d) geographical information systems, touristic services (geographical information - cartography - computer science). The point of contact acts as relays station that brings projects with similar questions together and publishes the results.

There is a Scientific Committee with representatives from member states that meets the needs and requirements, as it keeps in touch with the VR manager, collaborates with him,

and moves forward with projects only after reaching a consensus on regular meetings. Members of the Committee from 3 countries (DE, FR, UA) and several areas of specialisation (e.g., cultural science, communication science, historical research, and tourism) work continuously, with a strong emphasis on projects and outcomes. There are universities in member countries conducting research on various VR aspects and already but working contacts to Lithuania and Belgium in order to expand the committee. A VR library that can be accessed through the Route website contains many of the results of VR research, including historical studies. Recent research focuses on traffic planning and tourism. A bibliography and online resources are included in the VR library. Texts about VR, beath historical and futuristic in nature, are encouraged to be submitted by scholars, artists, and writers alike. Although the online library is primarily in German, it is possible to access translated works, possibly with the assistance of universities. The online library is an extremely useful resource for VR and serves as an excellent model for other Cultural Routes to follow. VR, on the other hand, has established a valuable resource for both its members and the public by establishing an open repository where other people can deposit their work. The online library can be developed more fully with more involvement from universities and possibly sponsorship from the private sector.

Conferences and symposia provide opportunities for scholars and researchers to meet, and VR used to be present in such events (eg., International Congress in Leipzig, 2019). In the recent past, tourism has been particularly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, in this context, no significant events, conferences and symposia were held the years of the evaluation.

The VR is the subject of ongoing press coverage, primarily driven by individual member projects. The central office in Erfurt is usually informed about this coverage and is usually involved in projects. It can put it together, but it needs to talk to members, which is harder when projects are outside of Germany. Statistics about how many people use the Route and how engaged they are extremely difficult to obtain, would be expensive, and arguably of limited use. However, the network has cooperation with several universities and/ or research centers (eg, National University Iwan Franko- UA Europejskie Centrum Spotkań „Zachód – Wschód” w Lublinie - PL) and should continue the enhanced development by utilising these resources. It is important to consider the advantages of having benchmark statistical data as a resource for political (and economic) advocacy as well as for planning.

In conclusion, VR's activities show how this significant European theme is brought together by the route to bring disparate information together. Also, the theme exemplifies common European values as its activities must show that research and interdisciplinary analysis are being conducted within the scope of the route on both a theoretical and practical level.

3.2.2 Enhancement of the memory, history and European heritage

The Via Regia Cultural Route was established with the sole purpose of enhancing the memory of the significant trade and communication corridor that once connected Europe's east and west. The Route has always been active in bringing attention to the VR's values as well as its visible cultural heritage. The built environment, the landscapes the Route traverses, and the stories it has and continues to produce all reflect the VR's cultural legacy. According to the VR (2022-23 Certification Form), by interpreting "road" in this sense as "lifeline," we may say that virtually all historical processes and events that shaped Europe's East-West ties are linked to the VIA REGIA. The road's lengthy history makes it ideal for communicating and creating tangible prenational historical experiences of Europe.

As far as can be determined, the VR's heritage material, including actual road sections and historic buildings, appears to be well protected by statutory policies for heritage preservation, even though it is difficult for this evaluation context to assess the overall picture regarding the conservation of historic properties associated with the VR.

On-the-ground interpretation, publications, and associated touristic communication materials, as well as the various activities and events that take place along the Route, enhance and promote the VR's memory, history, and heritage. For example, Jubilee „Bauhaus 100“ event in Weimar recorded a record number of 257.000 participants is a remarkable event that showcases the promotion abilities of the VR. It is essential to keep in mind that many of the events and initiatives held to draw attention to the VR are either initiated on their own by municipalities, businesses, and communities or are part of smaller networks of these stakeholders. Although this makes it difficult for the Route Manager to keep track of what's going on and necessitates receiving data from a large network, it does convey a genuine sense of ownership over the Route. The Via Regia would certainly not be where it is today if it weren't for the work of the VR Cultural Route over the past years. However, it would appear that the Route should have a greater place in the collective memory of European civil society due to its extraordinary length across the continent, its rich history, and, most importantly, its ongoing contemporary resonance. As a means of securing the VR's place in the collective memory of Europe, cross-narratives with either other attractions, events or even destinations across the route can be used.

Due to COVID-19 many activities in 2020 and 2021 have been cancelled according the VR secretarial. The last 3 years the network has focused on strategic development in the Ukraine (<https://via-regia.org.ua>) and on raising awareness about the Cultural Routes programme in Germany. Due to the current situation in the Ukraine detailed information cannot be provided (01_2022-2023_CERTIFICATION_FORM_EN_VIA_REGIA).

The website of <https://via-regia.org.ua> is an indicative example of digital transformation of routes in response to covid restrictions. Figure 1 and 2 present Virtual tours and 360 virtual tours on major cities/ places of the Ukrainian VR network available for online visitors (Figure 1):

Figure 1 – Virtual Tours types

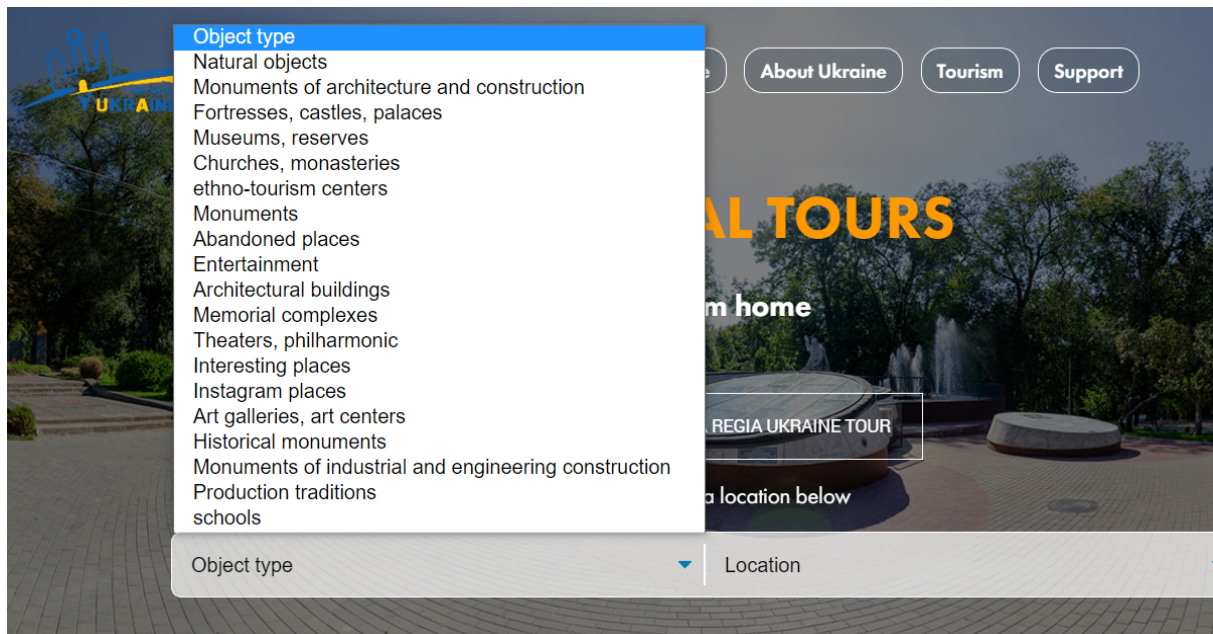
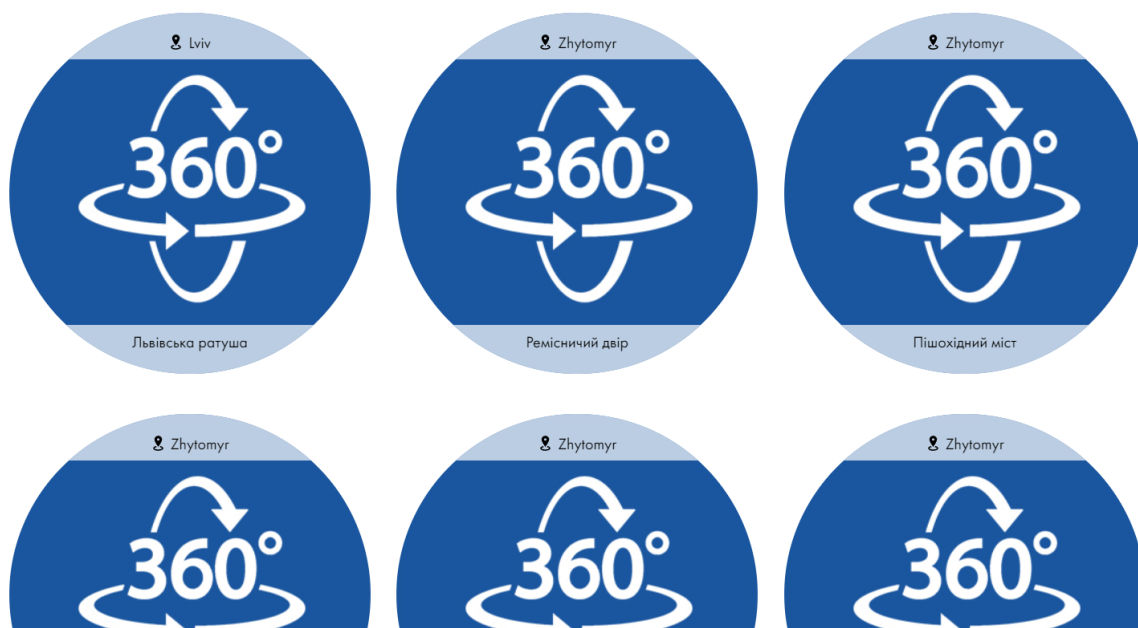


Figure 2- 360 virtual tours



These actions highlight the VR network made corresponding to the new conditions imposed by Covid-19 to accelerate digital resource and service platform constructions. This example of <https://via-regia.org.ua> digital transformation shows that VR is prepared to adapt to unabated technological advances set during cultural and social revolution, now intrinsic to the digital landscape in which cultural routes are inevitably connected and participating

across the global digital ecosystem as an inclusive integrative cultural route model between physical and digital reality. Given the Via Regia's long history, support from a number of German states more recently, and the VR Route Secretariat's headquarters in Erfurt, Via Regia is widely promoted in Germany and Ukraine. Concluding, VR contributes to the enhancement of physical and intangible heritage, and explains their historical significance, and highlight their similarities in the different regions of Europe.

3.2.3 Cultural and educational exchanges for young Europeans

The VR serves as an important focal point for cultural and educational exchanges of young Europeans, as it does with many cultural routes. Under the direction and instruction of the network VR, exchange work, workshops, and collaborative creative performances have been organized by disseminators of youth work. Even during the pandemic era, VR managed to present various and important event on cultural and educational exchanges for young Europeans: The Leben. Outdoor Puppet theater Festival, Intercultural week 2020, International Festival of Children's Folklore, an organized "Youth Day," children's exhibitions Guided tours for children and KunstLabor are just a few examples of educational activities that can take advantage of the VR's theme, in Erfurt, Thuringia, in Luzé and other destinations of the route. The ongoing guided tours of the Route in the City, which are specifically designed and professionally delivered for children and are available in Erfurt with a focus on the Via Regia, are particularly noteworthy as an example of good practice. The network plays a crucial role in facilitating educational exchange between young people from disparate regions of Europe who have been historically and continuously connected by VR. The latest School project 2021/2022 is a cooperation between two schools for 1 year in the funded project "VIA REGIA - on the traces of a medieval trading route with grade of schools 6,7 and 9. Although it is acknowledged that there are resource limitations, there is a role for the VR Secretariat to encourage more exchanges, even though this function would appear to be dependent on the actions of the members. Erasmus and other youth programs would add value to VR work as they support non-formal learning mobility of young people in the form of Youth Exchanges. In that way these programs would engage and empower more young people from more (and other nations) to become active citizens and members of VR, connect them to the VR history and vision as well as to help them acquire and develop cultural competences.

3.2.4 Contemporary cultural and artistic practice

The VR demonstrates a wide range of projects and initiatives that engage contemporary cultural and artistic practice even during the pandemic. Numerous projects of this kind have been in operation: exhibitions on a regular basis (e.g., art, gardening), activities (Market place Cultur -Cultural platform TRAVOGELSBURG), the creation of concerts (e.g., VIA REGIA-Concert at the Bach-Museum Leipzig, Audite Mortales with Polish Music), festivals (Novalis-Festival week, International MESSIAEN days Görlitz-Zgorzelec, etc.), and public art, such as the innovative Outdoor Puppet theater Festival Leben at Bautzen. There is a wealth of artistic activity aimed at a variety of audiences, including the general public, the cultural and creative industries, the elderly, and people with disabilities. Related to cultural

"amateurs" the VR will start with a competition "Ostroh local artists for Via Regia" with 10 local artists of Rivnenska region in summer 2023 within their present project TExTOUR to practise in this field. This highlight VR's innovative practices in terms of creativity and link them with the history of skills development.

Members of the Network provide the impetus for the cultural and artistic projects, with varying degrees of input and engagement from the VR central point. Even though they aren't directly or solely connected to the VR theme, most of these projects embody the theme's values and promote unified Europe. Participation in such endeavors is crucial because they also provide the VR Secretariat with funding and revenue. This shows how much "buy-in" there is and how much more people feel like they own the VR route and the idea. A single funding point would not be able to support such a large number of activities. Activities that are loosely or not directly connected to the VR but are taking place as a matter of course among VR Network members vary in the extent to which these activities are focused on the VR. The majority of the listed activities and events take place in multiple cities of the route, though Ukraine was doing great job online (mostly online now due to the war restrictions).

Concluding, VR artistic practice gives rise to debate and exchange, in a multidisciplinary and intercultural perspective, between the various cultural and artistic expressions and sensibilities of the different countries of the route. It also encourages activities and artistic projects which explore the links between heritage and contemporary culture and give rise to networks and activities which break down the barriers between professionals and non-professionals.

3.2.5 Cultural tourism and sustainable cultural development.

Tourism has been one of the sectors worst affected by the Covid-19 pandemic: hotels, restaurants, and culture and heritage had to stop their activity almost completely during a long period and only now touristic activity is slowly recovering back to pre-2020 levels.

One of the findings of the VR previous evaluations emphasized the VR's potential for the growth of cultural tourism. For the following reasons, this report emphasizes the significance of tourism development: The growth of tourism is a major driver for municipalities and businesses to use Via Regia; Despite its historic "royal" significance, the VR travels through economically disadvantaged regions of Europe, and the development of cultural tourism would be extremely beneficial to the long-term well-being of the local communities; The VR, with its philosophy of slow, sustainable cultural tourism, has the opportunity to shape development in a way that is appropriate because tourism is not well developed along some of the route. Cultural tourism can be a powerful tool for promoting dialogue and exchange between different cultures, regions, and communities, promoting the VR and CoE values. At a macro level, tourist routes that connect Western Europe and the East play a significant role in fostering intercultural dialogue between places that were previously very far apart; In relation to the preceding, the tourism industry's communication strategies have the potential to raise awareness of the route among a broader segment of society and new audiences that have not yet heard of VR; Engaging with the tourism industry provides opportunities for attracting investment in order to achieve financial stability for the management and sustainability of the route itself. The VR has been working well and has built a brand based

on authenticity and history. There are already a lot of VR Network members working in the tourism industry. Despite its recognition of the type of tourism it wants to see aligned with the Route's larger principles, the VR Route would be benefited by engaging in the development of cultural tourism in a significant or strategic manner. Certainly, a lot has been accomplished in recent years. Notable is the creation of the -Hiking to the Sonnenkuppe, developed and promoted by Network members along the route. The Ukrainian website promotes major attractions and tourist activities in selected destinations in the route. The latest transnational tourism product (website: <https://www.outdooractive.com/de/route/panoramastrasse/via-regia/30183108/#dm=1>, online and printed brochure: <https://www.via-regia.org/bibliothek/pdf/Reisefuehrer.ITB.2020.pdf>) has analytical route maps, updated and related content, and audio guides. The VR seems to engage digital technology advances by 3D mapping generators and real time mapping and social sharing options.

Of course, there is great potential in the visibility of the unique cultural traditions and heritage of VR by cultural tourism that can foster understanding and appreciation between different groups of people. This can be particularly important in fostering dialogue between urban and rural cultures, as well as between regions in different parts of Europe and with different levels of development. VR promotes dialogue through cultural tourism is by offering a wide range of cultural experiences and activities that showcase the diverse traditions and heritage of a region. This includes offering guided tours of cultural landmarks and historical sites, showcasing local art and crafts, and hosting cultural events and festivals. By providing a range of different experiences, you can appeal to a wide range of travellers and help them learn about and appreciate the unique culture of the region. In addition to offering a wide range of cultural experiences, it is also important to ensure that cultural tourism is inclusive and accessible to all. This also involves working with local community groups and organizations to ensure that their voices and perspectives are included in the development of cultural tourism initiatives.

It can also be helpful for VR to seek partnerships with public and private organisations that are active in the field of cultural and sustainable tourism. Some examples of public and private organisations that VR could consider partnering with include municipality tourism boards, cultural travel agencies, hotels and other hospitality businesses, cultural organizations, and local community groups. To find potential partners, VR members could start by conducting research to identify organizations that are active in the tourism industry and that share your goals and values. In addition, they could consider attending tourism industry conferences and events (e.g., by searching related events databases https://www.eventseye.com/fairs/zst1_trade-shows_europe_tourism-travel.html), to meet potential partners and learn about the latest trends and developments in the field of cultural routes tourism. Overall, partnering with public and private organizations active in the field of tourism can be a valuable way to develop tourist products and tools that are effective in targeting all potential markets for such cultural routes tourism initiatives. By leveraging the expertise and resources of these organizations, VR can create high-quality and effective tourist experiences that are appealing to a wide range of travellers.

3.3 Cultural Route Network

3.3.1 Overview of institutional /legal structure of the network

During the VR Route's last evaluations, the question of the VR Route's legal status was brought up and the following points had been made regarding the issue of eligibility in relation to Criterion III, Resolution CM/Res(2013)67: According to CM/Res(2007)12, the VR was officially established as a Cultural Route prior to the adoption of the current certification rules, which were adopted in December 2013 and replaced CM/Res(2010)52. Moreover, the CDCPP (2012) 32 (page 4) states that VR's version of solving the legal status question has been acknowledged and agreed with the Governing Board of the Enlarged Partial Agreement's decision to approve the following four networks of routes certified before the adoption of Committee of Ministers Resolutions (2007)12 and Res(2010)52. As a result, it was officially designated as a Cultural Route of the CoE, and despite two rule changes, it has remained so for the past years. Even though issues regarding its legal status have been raised in all evaluations and recommendations have been made to investigate this status, these are only recommendations and not requirements. In terms of precedent, the VR Route has been awarded continued certification by the Bureau of the Governing Board of the EPA on both occasions after its evaluators recommended it for continued certification. The VR Route has met all other eligibility requirements, including this one, and has been praised on multiple occasions for its efforts to promote the CoE's values. The fact that the VR Route has continued to develop all these years suggests that the Route's lack of the necessary legal status has not hampered its operation. The VR has delivered numerous projects that have been financially and organizationally viable in relation to the other conditions outlined in Article III of the Rule for Certification. Additionally, the VR has the required number of CoE member States, operates democratically, and meets the other conditions. Finally, a strong argument on the approval of the current legal status and organisation of VR is the study made by the University of Applied Sciences Erfurt that provides the full explanation of the situation and that explains that all the current legal structures are not convenient to fulfil the requirements for a European VR network. Here this network is not a singular case. There are several NGOs that are confronted with the same problem. The solution would be a European association founded under European law. But till today there is no corresponding legislation.

In terms of institutional structure, the VR Route's management has looked at various forms of "association" (including in 2011 with the help of outside experts) and rejected them for largely understandable reasons: they didn't want to deal with more layers of bureaucracy, they didn't like the inclusivity and flexibility of a free open membership approach, and they weren't sure what members would get for their fee. With great success, the VR functions as a "community of practice". The VR Network's members are subject to "rules of procedure". Members would appear to adhere to these as a fairly robust set of procedures, rights, and responsibilities. It is worth noticing that the current institutional /legal structure of the network is fully acknowledged and approved by the VR members as the survey results revealed (100% approval of the institutional /legal structure of the network).

3.3.2 Overview of the financial situation of the network

There are many potential sources of financial income for a cultural route organization. Some common sources of income for cultural route organizations include government grants, sponsorships from businesses and organizations, membership fees from individuals and

organizations, fees for participation in cultural route programs, and revenue from the sale of souvenirs and other merchandise. Cultural route organizations may also generate income from the sale of tickets to cultural events and activities, and from the provision of services such as guided tours and travel planning. In addition to these traditional sources of income, cultural route organizations may also explore creative and innovative ways to generate revenue. For example, they may offer educational programs or workshops that provide a fee-based service to participants, or they may explore partnerships with other organizations or businesses to create unique cultural tourism experiences. By diversifying their income sources, cultural route organizations can increase their financial stability and sustainability.

With the above said, the financing of the VR network is as follows: a) the network does not have any own budget, b) membership in the network is free, c) expenditures for own activities inside the network have to be paid for by the member (including contact point), d) financing of projects is ensured by the members contributing to the network. They share costs according to a cost and financing plan with no other regulations stipulated, and they are recommended to develop joint funded projects. e) members not participating in the respective project are not obliged to take any financing, and finally f) financial liability of the network is excluded. Members themselves are responsible for third-party-claims within the given legal regulations.

From that can be followed that network members do not have the duty to supply information on their financial situation and their expenses for the VIA REGIA actions towards the point of contact. According to the annual account 2022 of the association NETZ – Medien und Gesellschaft as bearer of the European Centre for Culture and Information in Thuringia as point of contact for the network „VIA REGIA – Cultural Route of the Council of Europe“ the sources from funded EU projects are considerable (120.000 euros).

Up to now, the work that has been done deserves nothing less than praise. However, it is suggested that strategic planning, financial sustainability, and succession planning be examined. The Route's growth can be described as organic rather than strategic, driven by timely projects and the numerous activities of its members. This demonstrates the community of members' dedication and commitment. There is no justification for this not to continue. There is no core funding for the VR Network to support its administration or invest in its development because membership is free. To date, projects, publications, and events have received funding. This project-by-project approach should undoubtedly be maintained once more.

3.3.3 Current composition of the network by country and type of member

The members of the network declare their membership in writing and confirm to keep the regulations of this agreement. New members have to introduce their aims and activities to the network in a suitable form. The admission can be refused based on the proposal of one member and the simple majority of all members agrees on this refusal. Membership of the network means for every member amongst other things the obligation to fulfil the requirements of the program of Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe acc. to the actual resolution and not to contravene these regerminations, to always apply the title “VIA REGIA – Cultural Route of the Council of Europe“ in connection with the logo of the Council of Europe for own publications within the frame of VIA REGIA projects, to realise own VIA REGIA projects or to support and/or actively participate in joint projects of the VIA REGIA network. The network acts according to agreed rules of procedure in order to facilitate experience-oriented work where the democratic functioning is defined. All members have the

same voting right. All decisions considering the whole network are made by voting. The agreement of the network states that according to their importance decisions shall be taken by single or two-thirds majorities or even unanimity.

Concerning the composition of the network by country of member, the following observations are made:

Germany – 87

Ukraine – 17

Poland – 4

France – 3

Belarus - 2

Russia – 1 (Prof. Kirill Novoselskiy scientific director, member type: individual)

Given that Germany is the office and center to the VR network it makes sense that it's the home to its core members. Continuous efforts on expanding the network members should (and are) on. (see subsection 3.3.4).

Concerning the composition of the network by type of member, the following observations are made:

Municipality – 27

Person - 26

cultural organisation – 23

SME – 12

tourism stakeholder – 8

Network - 5

Association – 4

natural park - 1

SMS – 1

Membership in the VR network is free as is the case for many cultural networks. This is because cultural route networks are typically created with the goal of promoting and supporting cultural heritage and traditions and providing free membership to cultural route organizations can help to support and grow the network. However, while membership in the network may be free, cultural route organizations may still need to explore creative and innovative ways to generate revenue to support their operations and activities. Some potential sources of income for cultural route organizations include government grants, sponsorships from businesses and organizations, membership fees from individuals and organizations, fees for participation in cultural route programs, and revenue from the sale of souvenirs and other merchandise. By exploring these and other potential sources of income, cultural route organizations can support their operations and activities without relying on membership fees. This can help to ensure the sustainability of the VR network and allow it to continue to support and promote cultural heritage and values of VR and CoE.

3.3.4 Network extension since last evaluation

The VR network is vivid and creative and moves for extension are evident. Due to the pandemic the network did not grow significantly as it would like but there are already interested party to join the network. The last call is from France and is the Département de Seine-et-Marne.

Of course, it is common for cultural route networks should expand over time. As the network grows and more cultural route organizations join, the network can become more diverse and

provide more opportunities for cultural exchange and collaboration. However, apart from the expansion for a cultural route network continues to thrive and provide value to its members, it is important to regularly evaluate the network and identify areas for improvement. This could include conducting surveys and interviews with member organizations to gather feedback on their experiences and needs, as well as analysing data on the network's performance and impact. Based on this evaluation, the cultural route network can then develop strategies and initiatives to address any identified areas for improvement. This could include providing additional training and support to member organizations, developing new programs and activities to support the network's goals, and exploring partnerships and collaborations with other organizations to expand the network's reach and impact. By regularly evaluating and improving the network, the cultural route network can continue to grow and support the cultural heritage and traditions of its members. Based on the results of the primary member survey conducted for this evaluation all members found the VR "extremely successful" in terms of relations between members.

3.3.5 Strategy for the network extension in the three years to come

VR have strategies to extend their networks to new countries, involving new cities and regions, reinforcing relationships with stakeholders and partners at local, regional, national level, in coherence with their theme.

VR process on extending the network contains the following (as advised by CoE 6TH ADVISORY FORUM, 2016):

- 1- Inform the EPA secretariat /European Institute of Cultural Routes about the Countries they seek to involve in their network;
- 2- Work with National Authorities on the expansion;
- 3- Support the involvement of Countries involved in the Routes but not yet members of the EPA so they may join the Cultural Routes programme.

3.4 Communication tools

3.4.1 Current state of communication tools developed by the network (graphic charter, communication materials, logo, communication channels, signposting, maps, etc.)

Today more than in the past, tourists seek authentic cultural products and communications that dazzle senses, stimulate minds and touch hearts (Schmitt, 1999; Prentice, 2001; Lagiewski and Zekan, 2006; Majdoub, 2011)¹⁰⁸. Furthermore, world-wide easy internet

access, the booming industry of affordable air travel to small regional airports and the digital economy allowing individuals to create their personalized cultural experience are all trends supporting the “growth of this type of tourism: authentic, off the-beaten track, sustainable”. Those tourism trends impose a major challenge for the marketing and visibility of Cultural Routes.

The VR website serves as the primary entry point for audiences both outside and inside Europe. The VR and Cultural Routes Programme logos are featured on the website. In addition, it provides a wealth of useful information and explains the VR's concept and history. A link to the VR website can be found on the Wikipedia page, which comes in second place in a Google search.

The website analysis (<https://website.grader.com/tests/www.via-regia.org>) provided:

average results on website performance leaving room for improvement. Optimizing a website's performance is crucial to increasing traffic, improving conversion rates, generating more leads, and increasing revenue.

Excellent results on seo. Optimizing a website content for search helps you drive organic traffic to website.

Poor to no results on Mobile responsiveness and ease. Traffic from mobile devices is growing fast so its crucial for VR to work on this otherwise they miss out on valuable traffic, leads, and revenue.

Average results on Security: A secure website equipped with an SSL certificate and free from vulnerabilities is now the standard online. People and search engines love secure websites.

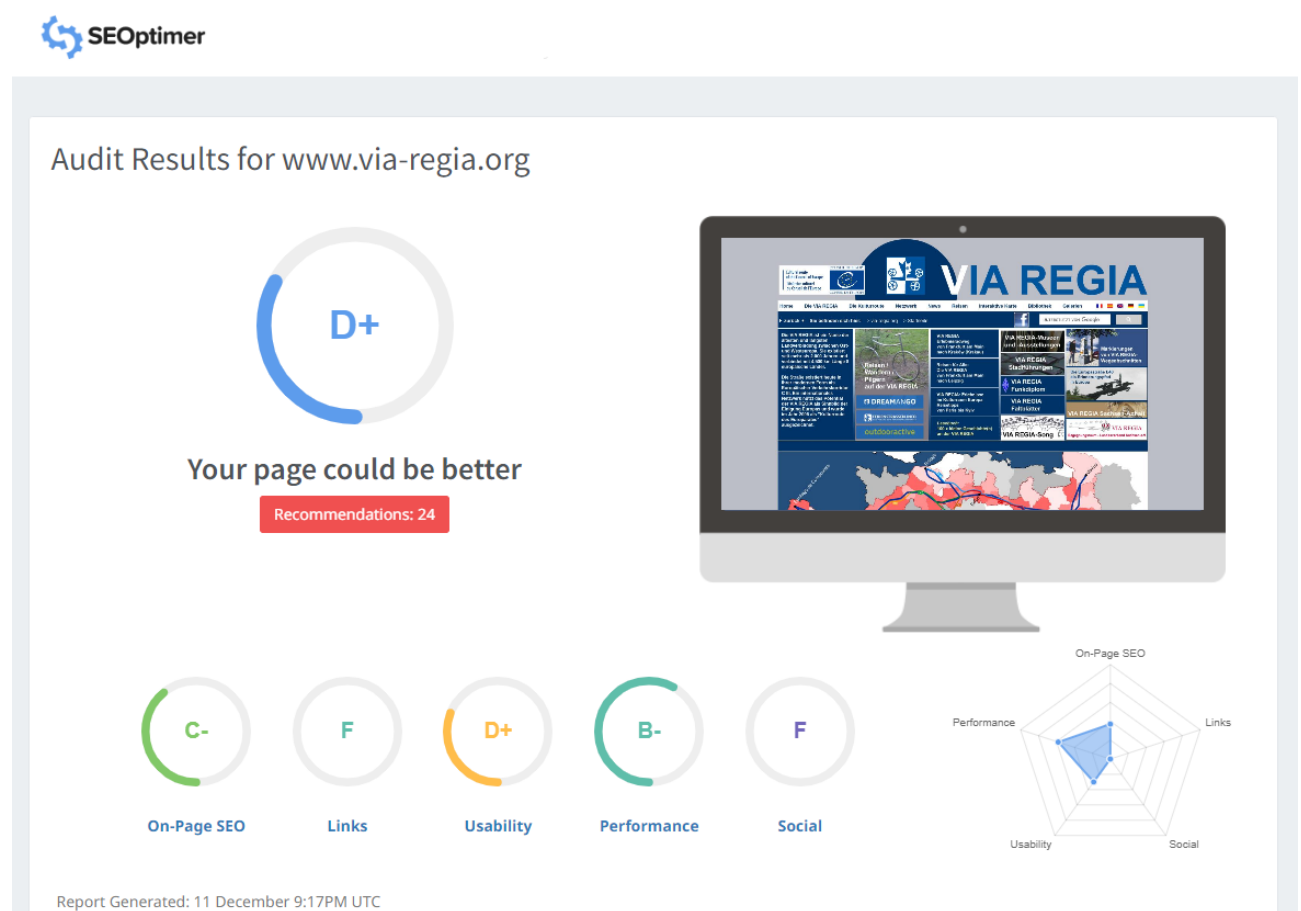
Table 2- Website results and recommendations:

PERFORMANCE	CURRENT	RECOMMENDATION
Page requests	47 < 30	Reduce the number of HTTP requests your site makes. Remove any unnecessary images, scripts, or files, and consider lazy loading your images.
Image Size	No Yes	Use responsive images or SVGs to optimize your images for different screen sizes.
Minified JavaScript	No Yes	Use a minifier tool or contact your web host to ensure your JavaScript is minified.
Minified CSS	No Yes	Use a minifier tool or contact your web host to ensure your CSS is minified.
MOBILE	CURRENT	RECOMMENDATION
Legible Font Size	No Yes	Increase the font size of some of your text so at least 60% of the page has a font size of 12px or larger.
Tap Targets	No Yes	Tap targets (e.g., links and buttons) should be at least 8px apart from each other, and at least 48px wide and 48px tall so they are clickable for mobile users.
Responsive	No Yes	Give your site the gift of responsive design by using the HubSpot Website Platform.
SECURITY	CURRENT	RECOMMENDATION
HTTPS	No Yes	Some resources on your page are still loading over HTTP and should be converted to HTTPS.
SM is active Facebook recent posts.		

An interactive map and graphical representation of the Route's entire course are available. Although the news section is kept up to date, it tends to focus on events that have already occurred rather than an announcement section for upcoming events. There are five available languages for the website. Although this is commendable and demonstrates a great deal of effort, many parts of the website default to the German language even from sites in other languages. This is not meant to be an evaluation of the VR website, but it is worthwhile to highlight a few issues that reflect some of the organization's more pressing issues: The website contains a lot of text and content in some places, making it difficult to navigate. There are a lot of out-of-date links, which don't make a good first impression. The website's tourism and travel section contain very little information about how visitors can experience a VR journey. The aforementioned issues are ones that affect a lot of large and complex websites, and they get even worse when there is interaction. Despite the fact that the website is still in the process of being developed, it reflects the VR's German focus, the limited involvement of other states along the VR, the difficulties of communicating in multiple languages, the difficulties of coordinating a lot of material and keeping it current and relevant, and ultimately the pressures placed on the existing sect with limited resources. It's possible that some of the Route's fundamental messages are lost in the website's dense content.

Overall digital marketing assessment of the VR is depicted in the following Figure 3 and analysed in the link (<https://www.seoptimizer.com/www.via-regia.org/>).

Figure 3 - Digital marketing assessment of the VR



There is a link to a VR Facebook page with the VR and CoE logos. The Facebook page is active with regular and engaging posts that meets the performance standards of similar projects (cultural routes).

Furthermore, some other actions highlight the VR network made corresponding to the new conditions imposed by Covid-19 to accelerate digital resource and service platform constructions. This example of <https://via-regia.org.ua> digital transformation shows that VR is prepared to adapt to unabated technological advances set during cultural and social revolution, now intrinsic to the digital landscape in which cultural routes are inevitably connected and participating across the global digital ecosystem as an inclusive integrative cultural route model between physical and digital reality.

The VR has produced or influenced a wide range of printed materials, including books, reports, and leaflets, some of which can be downloaded. The majority are in German and indicate activity levels. Particularly in other nations, it is challenging to assess the adoption and utilization of the printed materials. The printed materials are distributed at promotional events attended by the VR. Effective materials that suggest to potential visitors where to go, what to see and do, and how to experience the VR – as a cross-European Route become increasingly important as work continues to develop regarding the VR's potential for cultural tourism. Distribution is critical, as is the case with all promotional materials. The Route can be accessed by tourists in Gorlitz or Erfurt, but it is unknown to what extent this is possible in Poland, France, or Ukraine.

The VR, through its numerous initiatives and members, receives a significant amount of press coverage. The VR Secretariat is where the press gets involved, and the website has a list of news stories from over the years. The German language receives the most press coverage, as expected. The transmission of coverage from its membership is necessary for the VR Route. A great example of visibility is the concept of the 100 little stories in the form of a book should also be used in other Via Regia countries while each country is able to include their own regional stories. The publication should be translated into all Via Regia languages. video documentation Various sections of the Via Regia are flown with a drone to document them on video.

3.4.2 Compliance with the Guidelines for the Use of the Logo “Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe”

A key characteristic of a successful brand is its appeal to customers and its effectiveness in communicating the core idea behind the brand (Padgett & Allen, 1997). VR brand building and marketing strategy must go hand in hand to complement each other.

Key pillars that should be considered when designing the VR brand strategy to ensure that every aspect of the brand is carefully considered and designed to achieve the desired goals are:

- **Consistency and Resilience:** It's important to maintain a consistent visual identity across all platforms, both internal and external, and at all levels. Stable brands are better equipped to "ride out" difficult times because they are more resilient to risk and change.
- **Authenticity and values:** Authenticity is essential because it communicates the history and the people who created the brand, the "good" that the brand not only conveys but also has to offer in terms of the "human aspect" that makes it relatable to something more than

just a good or service. VR brand has its own set of "brand values," which constitute the essence of the brand and should serve as its guiding principles.

- Uniqueness and differentiation: What distinguish a brand from its rivals and gives customers a reason to form an attachment and sense of loyalty is uniqueness. VR brand should be intended to highlight or overstate the distinctive qualities that set it apart from the competition. Differentiation of VR can be based on real differences in a product or service offering, but it can also be based on how those differences are perceived.
- Recognized visual identity: A brand must encompass all channels of communication and go beyond the logo in order to be distinctive and memorable. Even without the logo, people will be able to recognize a successful brand right away. Even the images used, the visual arrangement, the colours, and the typefaces should all be consistent with the brand guidelines so that the other graphic elements do not require the logo to be recognised.

The logo of the VR is prominently displayed next to the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe logo on almost all information material produced (print, video, digital, online), in accordance with the general requirements on the use of the Council of Europe logo.

As per the VR Network's membership terms, members are obligated to use the VR logo alongside the CoE logo. This applies to all new members. On both printed and electronic media, the required logo is very well visible. The suggested standard paragraph that emphasizes the Council of Europe's values can be found on the website. Efforts are made from the VR secretariat for the It is unknown to what extent the logo is seen in other nations. Incorporating the CoE logo itself, particularly on signage, is difficult.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions and recommendations are given in narrative form for each criterion.

I. Cultural route theme

The theme of the VR, a Cultural Route of the Council of Europe, complies with criteria established in Resolution CM/Res(2013)67. The theme of the cultural route is unique and representative of European memory, history and legacy. The VR is a representation of "unity in diversity" because it links various ethnic groups, religious communities, cultural regions, and linguistic communities while treating them equally as project participants. Its brand values of human rights, democracy, tolerance, and peace that support the individual actions are more relevant than ever. The European values are directly related to VR's theme. Therefore, in this context no additional recommendations can be provided for these criteria.

II. Priority fields of action

Cooperation in research and development

There is ongoing investigation into the Via Regia's past. The VR network works on four research axes: a) history of the route(s), b) contribution to European community and identity (communication sciences - culture and social sciences - European studies), c) methods for cultural tourism (European communication - tourism), and d) geographical information systems, touristic services (geographical information - cartography - computer science). There is a Scientific Committee with representatives from member states that meets the basic needs and requirements, as is comprised from scientists from 3 countries and several areas of specialisation (e.g., cultural science, communication science, historical research, and tourism) that work continuously, with a strong emphasis on projects and outcomes. It is suggested that the Scientific Committee expand its membership to include academics and researchers from other member countries to take on a more strategic role in the future and identify additional narratives for the VR. In the recent past, tourism has been particularly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, in this context, no significant events, conferences and symposia were held the years of the evaluation and it is reasonable.

Enhancement of memory, history and European heritage

On-the-ground interpretation, publications, and associated touristic communication materials, as well as the various activities and events that take place along the Route, enhance and promote the VR's memory, history, and heritage. For example, Jubilee „Bauhaus 100“ event in Weimar recorded a record number of 257.000 participants is a remarkable event that showcases the promotion abilities of the VR. Due to COVID-19 many activities in 2020 and 2021 have been cancelled according to the VR secretariat. The last 3 years the network has focused on strategic development in the Ukraine (<https://via-regia.org.ua>) and on raising awareness about the Cultural Routes programme in Germany. Due to the current situation in the Ukraine detailed information cannot be provided. On the other hand, several initiatives are evident that the VR network is resilient and adaptive to new normality with stand-out examples that can be used as a best practice for other routes. The website of <https://via-regia.org.ua> is an indicative example of digital transformation of routes in response to covid restrictions. Figure 1 and 2 present Virtual tours and 360 virtual tours on major cities/ places of the Ukrainian VR network available for online visitors:

Cultural and educational exchanges for young Europeans

The VR serves as an important focal point for cultural and educational exchanges of young Europeans, as it does with many cultural routes. Under the direction and instruction of the network VR, exchange work, workshops, and collaborative creative performances have been organized by disseminators of youth work. Even during the pandemic era, VR managed to present various and important event on cultural and educational exchanges for young Europeans. It is possible to recognize a number of good practice examples. Erasmus and other youth programs would add value to VR work as they support non-formal learning mobility of young people in the form of Youth Exchanges. In that way these programs would engage and empower more young people from more (and other nations) to become active citizens and members of VR, connect them to the VR history and vision as well as to help them acquire and develop cultural competences.

Contemporary cultural and artistic practice

There is a wealth of artistic activity aimed at a variety of audiences, including the general public, the cultural and creative industries, the elderly, and people with disabilities. Related to cultural "amateurs" the VR will start with a competition "Ostroh local artists for Via Regia" with 10 local artists of Rivnenska region in summer 2023 within their present project TExTOUR to practise in this field. This highlight VR's innovative practices in terms of creativity and link them with the history of skills development. Members of the Network provide the impetus for the cultural and artistic projects, with varying degrees of input and engagement from the VR central point. Even though they aren't directly or solely connected to the VR theme, most of these projects embody the theme's values and promote unified Europe. Participation in such endeavors is crucial because they also provide the VR Secretariat with funding and revenue. Again, Germany and the Ukraine are home to the majority of the projects, or at least the ones that have been identified. Again, encouraging more projects within other nations and involving a number of nations throughout the Route would be extremely beneficial.

Cultural Tourism and Sustainable Cultural development

Tourism has been one of the sectors worst affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and only now touristic activity is slowly recovering back to pre-2020 levels. One of the findings of the VR previous evaluations emphasized the VR's potential for the growth of cultural tourism. Certainly, a lot has been accomplished in recent years. The latest transnational tourism product (website: <https://www.outdooractive.com/de/route/panoramastrasse/via-regia/30183108/#dm=1>, online and printed brochure: <https://www.via-regia.org/bibliothek/pdf/Reisefuehrer.ITB.2020.pdf>) has analytical route maps, updated and related content, and audio guides. The VR seems to engage digital technology advances by 3D mapping generators and real time mapping and social sharing options. Of course, there is great potential in the visibility of the unique cultural traditions and heritage of VR by cultural tourism that can foster understanding and appreciation between different groups of people. It can also be helpful for VR to seek partnerships with public and private organisations that are active in the field of cultural and sustainable tourism. In addition, they could consider attending tourism industry conferences and events (e.g., by searching related events databases), to meet potential partners and learn about the latest trends and developments in the field of cultural routes tourism.

III. Criteria for networks

Overview of institutional /legal structure of the network

According to CM/Res(2007)12, the VR was officially established as a Cultural Route prior to the adoption of the current certification rules, which were adopted in December 2013 and replaced CM/Res(2010)52. Moreover, the CDCPP (2012) 32 (page 4) states that VR's version of solving the legal status question has been acknowledged and agreed with the Governing Board of the Enlarged Partial Agreement's decision to approve the following four networks of routes certified before the adoption of Committee of Ministers Resolutions (2007)12 and Res(2010)52. As a result, it was officially designated as a Cultural Route of the CoE, and despite two rule changes, it has remained so for the past years. The fact that the VR Route has continued to develop all these years suggests that the Route's lack of the necessary legal status has not hampered its operation. It is worth noticing that the current of institutional /legal structure of the network is fully acknowledged and approved by the VR members as the survey results revealed (100% approval of legal structure of the network).

Overview of the financial situation of the network

Financing of the VR network is as follows: a) the network does not have any own budget, b) membership in the network is free, c) expenditures for own activities inside the network have to be paid for by the member (including contact point), d) financing of projects is ensured by the members contributing to the network. They share costs according to a cost and financing plan with no other regulations stipulated, and they are recommended to develop joint funded projects. e) members not participating in the respective project are not obliged to take any financing, and finally f) financial liability of the network is excluded. Up to now, the work that has been done deserves nothing less than praise. However, it is suggested that strategic planning for financial sustainability should be developed.

Current composition of the network by country and type of member

The network acts according to agreed rules of procedure in order to facilitate experience-oriented work where the democratic functioning is defined. All members have the same voting right. All decisions considering the whole network are made by voting. Given that Germany is the office and center to the VR network it makes sense that it's the home to its core members. Continuous efforts on expanding the network members should (and are) on. Membership in the VR network is free as is the case for many cultural networks. This is because cultural route networks are typically created with the goal of promoting and supporting cultural heritage and traditions and providing free membership to cultural route organizations can help to support and grow the network. However, while membership in the network may be free, VR may still need to explore creative and innovative ways to generate revenue to ensure the sustainability of the VR network and allow it to continue to support and promote cultural heritage and values of VR and CoE.

Network extension since last evaluation

The VR network is vivid and creative and moves for extension are evident. Due to the pandemic the network did not grow significantly as it would like but there are already interested party to join the network. The last call is from France and is the Department de Seine-et-Marne. However, apart from the expansion for a cultural route network continues to thrive and provide value to its members, it is important to regularly evaluate the network and identify areas for improvement. This could include conducting surveys and interviews with member organizations to gather feedback on their experiences and needs, as well as analysing data on the network's performance and impact. Based on the results of the primary

member survey conducted for this evaluation all members found the VR “extremely successful” in terms of relations between members.

Strategy for the network extension in the three years to come

VR have strategies to extend their networks to new countries, involving new cities and regions, reinforcing relationships with stakeholders and partners at local, regional, national level, in coherence with their theme. VR process on extending the network contains the following (as advised by CoE 6TH ADVISORY FORUM, 2016. it would be beneficial to the Route to engage in more strategic development through members and partners in order to boost activity and visibility in the countries that are already partners.

Communication Tools

A detailed analysis of the performance of both offline and online communication tools described in the previous section of the evaluation. In summary, the Via Regia Route adheres to the CoE visibility / logo guidelines in terms of its website, publications, public signage, interpretation panels, projects, and events. Although the VR uses the CoE logo, it has its own logo. The VR website serves as the primary entry point for audiences both outside and inside Europe. The VR and Cultural Routes Programme logos are featured on the website. In addition, it provides a wealth of useful information and explains the VR's concept and history. The website analysis provided average results on website performance leaving room for improvement. Optimizing a website's performance is crucial to increasing traffic, improving conversion rates, generating more leads, and increasing revenue. All printed materials from the Cultural Route manager were reviewed, as were additional VR brochure and leaflet examples from the VR Office. On the other hand, some other actions highlight the VR network made corresponding to the new conditions imposed by Covid-19 to accelerate digital resource and service platform constructions. This example of <https://via-regia.org.ua> digital transformation shows that VR is prepared to adapt to unabated technological advances set during cultural and social revolution, now intrinsic to the digital landscape in which cultural routes are inevitably connected and participating across the global digital ecosystem as an inclusive integrative cultural route model between physical and digital reality.

Overall, the VR's main priorities should be its sustainable development via a holistic strategic planning and marketing and visibility plan. It is argued that addressing these actions will entail expanding the Route's strategic partnerships and actions and the promotion and visibility plan to target markets. Via a common marketing and branding plan across its entire length of the route will be adding to the successful work that has already been done, primarily in Germany but also to other member states and partners. A common strategy and marketing/ branding would facilitate the integration of the VR Route into a broader European consciousness, increase VR's visibility and visitation, leverage additional resources, and increase opportunities for large-scale, interregional, and transnational funding.

Summary of recommendations as well as those given by the expert during the previous evaluation of the route:

CRITERIA		Recommendations previous evaluation 2018-2019	Has the route addressed the recommendation since the last evaluation?		Recommendations current evaluation 2022-2023
			YES	NO	
I. Cultural route theme		Need to develop and link more fully with other countries of the VR	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	The European values are directly related to VR's theme. in this context no additional recommendations can be provided for these criteria.
			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
II. Priority fields of action	Cooperation in research and development	it is suggested that the potential of the local universities in each of the countries that cooperate with the Route be more fully utilized, not only for historical research but also for assisting with the Route's ongoing management and development.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	partially adopted recommendation (working contacts to Lithuania and Belgium)
			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Enhancement of memory, history and European heritage	this can be developed to a much greater extent	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Adopted recommendation, in the light of the COVID-19. Several initiatives are evident that the VR network is resilient and adaptive to new normality with stand-

					out examples that can be used as a best practice for other routes (e.g. digital transformation of cultural routes via website of https://via-regia.org.ua)
			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Cultural and educational exchanges for young Europeans	to encourage more exchanges between states, particularly between the extremes of the Route in the West and East.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Adopted recommendation, even during the pandemic VR managed to present various and important event on cultural and educational exchanges for young Europeans.
			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Erasmus and other youth programs would add value to VR work
	Contemporary cultural and artistic practice	encouraging more projects within other nations and involving a number of nations throughout the Route would be extremely beneficial.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	partially adopted recommendation. Again, encouraging more projects within other nations and involving a number of nations throughout the Route would be extremely beneficial.
			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

	Cultural Tourism and Sustainable Cultural development	establishment of a fee-paying membership scheme for tourism interests	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	partially adopted recommendation but in the direction to seek partnerships with public and private organisations that are active in the field of cultural and sustainable tourism. Should continue to create tourism strategic alliances, directed via a marketing plan.
III. Cultural Route Network		the Route needs resources and a stronger structure due to the VR's long-term viability	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Up to now, the work that has been done deserves nothing less than praise. However, it is suggested that strategic planning for financial sustainability should be developed.
			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Communication Tools		Communications tools were mostly observed in Germany	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Fully adopted recommendation. The example of https://via-regia.org.ua digital transformation shows that VR is prepared to adapt successfully to the pandemic challenges.
		Website needs improvement	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Optimizing a website's performance is crucial to increasing traffic, improving

				conversion rates, generating more leads, and increasing revenue.
				Overall the VR's main priorities should be its sustainable development via a holistic strategic planning and marketing and visibility plan.

5. List of references

The References section contains the list of:

(a) Documents submitted by the network:

- Certification form (Document 1)
- Self-Assessment Grid (Document 2)
- Declaration of Honour (Document 3)
- Updated legal statutes of the network
- Updated list of members of the network
- Ordinary and extraordinary General Assembly meeting reports of the past three-years (if applicable)
- Financial information (Current operational budget, financial information of the past three years; 3-year Budget forecast; Extra-budgetary funding received for the implementation of specific activities)
- 3-year Programme of Activities forecast
- Copy of the last evaluation report of the route (Evaluation cycle 2018-2019)

(b) Additional documents submitted by the network upon request of the evaluator. All documents required for the evaluation had been duly submitted by the Cultural Route.

All printed materials submitted by the manager of the Cultural Route were consulted, along with supplementary examples of VR brochures and leaflets provided in the VR Office.

(c) Additional sources consulted by the evaluator (websites, publications, reports, etc.) sources analysed by the expert.

– Council of Europe Committee of Ministers Resolution CM Res(2013)67:

https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=09000016805c69fe

– Council of Europe Committee of Ministers Resolution CM Res(2013)66:

https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=09000016805c69ac

– “Cultural Routes management: from theory to practice”:

<https://rm.coe.int/gestion-des-itineraires-culturels-de-la-theorie-a-la-pratique/168098b061>

– Previous evaluation reports: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes/evaluation-reports>

– Other resources: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes/resources>

Websites consulted are given below.

Website: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes/via-regia>

Website: <https://www.via-regia.org/eng/>

<https://us.france.fr/en/northern-france/article/picardy>

<https://www.visit-thuringia.com/travel-hotel-holiday-tour/index.html>

<http://saxonytourism.com/>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Via_Regia

<https://poland.pl/tourism/>

<http://www.traveltoulraine.org/>

<http://ee.france.fr/>

<https://www.erfurt-tourismus.de/en/>

<https://www.hessen-tourismus.de/en/home/>

<https://via-regia.org.ua/>

<http://on-historic-routes.com/featured-routes/via-regia/>

6. Annex 1: Expert field visit and interviews with the network management and members

In December 1st 2022, a field trip to Erfurt, Germany had been arranged and booked. The visit was intended to meet the VR Route Manager, and other people involved in the route's and VR Headquarters' operations. Unfortunately, the expert tested positive in covid-19 at 29th of November and had to cancel the field trip. Instead, continuous online meetings were held during the scheduled time of the field trip.

Moreover, during all the evaluation phases, the following interviews scheme was the basis for the evaluation:

- Conversations and interviews with the VR's Manager and representative.
- Online interviews with key stakeholders and route's representatives and tactical communication for clarifications.
- Survey to the members of the VR network via a self-administered online questionnaire via google forms platform (<https://forms.gle/dX1FEoGvUgBu8Ro57>)
- Discussion with independent experts in cultural heritage who were not familiar with the VR previously.
- The VR's performance over the past three years is the focus of this evaluation, which is framed by its most recent assessment, which took place in 2018-2019.

Interviews were carried out on an individual basis online.

7. Annex 2: Expert assessment checklist

EXPERT ASSESSMENT CHECK-LIST					
QUESTIONS			Yes	No	Comments (if any)
3.1 THEME	1	Does the theme of the Route represent a common value (historical, cultural, or heritage) to several European countries?	1		
	2	Does the theme of the route offer a solid basis for youth cultural and educational exchanges?	1		
	3	Does the theme of the route offer a solid basis for innovative activities?	1		
	4	Does the theme of the route offer a solid basis for cultural tourism products development?	1		
	5	Has the theme been researched/developed by academics/experts from different regions of Europe?	1		
3.2 FIELDS OF ACTION	3.2.1 Co-operation in research and development	6	Does the Route offer a platform for co-operation in research and development of European cultural themes/values?	1	
		7	Does the Route play a unifying role around major European themes, enabling dispersed knowledge to be brought together?	1	
		8	Does the Route show how these themes are representative of European values shared by several European countries?	1	
		9	Does the Route illustrate the development of these values and the variety of forms they may take in Europe?	1	
		10	Does the Route have a network of universities and research center working on its theme at the European level?		0
		11	Does the Route have a multidisciplinary Scientific Committee?	1	
		12	Does the Scientific Committee work on its theme at the European level?		0
		13	Does the Scientific Committee carry out research and analysis of the issues relevant to its theme and/or activities on the theoretical level?	1	
		14	Does the Scientific Committee carry out		0

Exchanges of young Europeans	3.2.2 Enhancement of the memory, history and European heritage		research and analysis of the issues relevant to its theme and/or activities on the practical level?		
		15	Do the Route activities take into account and explain the historical significance of tangible and intangible European heritage ?	1	
		16	Do the Route activities promote the values of the Council of Europe?	1	
		17	Do the Route activities promote the brand of the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe?	1	
		18	Does the route work in conformity with international charters and conventions on cultural heritage preservation?	1	
		19	Do the Route activities identify, preserve and develop European heritage sites in rural destinations?	1	
		20	Do the Route activities identify, preserve and develop European heritage sites in industrial areas in the process of economic restructuring?		0
		21	Do the Route activities valorize the heritage of ethnic or social minorities in Europe?	1	
		22	Do the Route activities contribute to a better understanding of the concept of cultural heritage, the importance of its preservation and sustainable development?	1	
		23	Do the Route activities enhance physical and intangible heritage, explain its historical significance and highlight its similarities in the different regions of Europe?	1	
		24	Do the Route activities take account of and promote the charters, conventions, recommendations and work of the Council of Europe, UNESCO and ICOMOS relating to heritage restoration, protection and enhancement, landscape and spatial planning (European Cultural Convention, Faro convention, European Landscape Convention, World Heritage Convention, ...)?	1	
		25	Are the youth exchanges (cultural and educational) planned to develop a better understanding of the concept of European citizenship?	1	

		26	Are the youth exchanges (cultural and educational) planned to emphasize the value of new personal experience through visiting diverse places?	1	
		27	Are the youth exchanges (cultural and educational) planned to encourage social integration and exchanges of young people from different social backgrounds and regions of Europe?	1	
		28	Are the youth exchanges (cultural and educational) planned to offer collaborative opportunities for educational institutions at various levels?	1	
		29	Are the youth exchanges (cultural and educational) planned to place the emphasis on personal and real experiences through the use of places and contacts?	1	
		30	Are the youth exchanges (cultural and educational) planned to set up pilot schemes with several participating countries?	1	this can be developed more
		31	Are the youth exchanges (cultural and educational) planned to give rise to co-operation activities which involve educational institutions at various levels?	1	this can be developed more
	3.2.4 Contemporary cultural and artistic practice	32	Do the Route's cultural activities promote intercultural dialogue and multidisciplinary exchange between various artistic expressions in European countries?	1	
		33	Do the Route's cultural activities encourage artistic projects that establish links between cultural heritage and contemporary culture?	1	
		34	Do the Route's cultural activities encourage innovative cultural and contemporary art practices* connecting them with the history of skills development?	1	
		35	Do the Route's cultural activities encourage collaboration between culture amateurs and professionals via relevant activities and networks creation?**	1	
		36	Do the Route's cultural activities encourage debate and exchange - in a multidisciplinary and intercultural perspective - between various cultural and artistic expressions in different	1	this can be developed more

			countries of Europe?			
		37	Do the Route's cultural activities encourage activities and artistic projects which explore the links between heritage and contemporary culture?	1		
		38	Do the Route's cultural activities highlight the most innovative and creative practices?	1		
		39	Do the Route's cultural activities link these innovative and creative practices with the history of skills development?***		0	
	3.2.5 Cultural tourism and sustainable cultural development	40	Do the Route's activities (relevant to sustainable cultural tourism development) assist in local, regional, national and/ or European identity formation?	1		
		41	Do the Route's activities (relevant to sustainable cultural tourism development) actively involve 3 major means to raise awareness of their cultural projects: print, broadcast and social media?	1		
		42	Do the Route's activities promote dialogue between urban and rural communities and cultures?	1		
		43	Do the Route's activities promote dialogue between developed and disadvantaged regions?	1		
		44	Do the Route's activities promote dialogue between different regions (south, north, east, west) of Europe?	1		
		45	Do the Route's activities promote dialogue between majority and minority (or native and immigrant) cultures?	1		this can be developed more
		46	Do the Route's activities open possibilities for co-operation between Europe and other continents?		0	
		47	Do the Route's activities draw decision makers' attention to the necessity of protecting heritage as part of the sustainable development of the territory?	1		
		48	Do the Route's activities aim to diversify cultural product, service and activities offers?	1		
		49	Do the Route's activities develop and offer quality cultural tourism products, services or activities transnationally?	1		

		50	Do the Route's activities develop partnerships with public and private organisations active in the field of tourism?	1		this can be developed more
		51	Did the network prepare and use tools along the route to raise the number of visitors and the economic impacts of the route on the territories crossed?		0	
3.3 NETWORK		52	Does the Route represent a network involving at least three Council of Europe's member states?	1		
		53	Was the theme of the route chosen and accepted by the network members?	1		
		54	Was the conceptual framework of the route founded on a scientific basis?	1		
		55	Does the network involve several Council of Europe member states in all or part of its projects?	1		
		56	Is the network financially sustainable?	1		
		57	Does the network have a legal status (association, federation of associations, EEIG,...)?		0	The CDCPP (2012) 32 (page 4) states that VR's version of solving the legal status question has been acknowledged and agreed with the Governing Board of the Enlarged Partial Agreement. It is worth noticing that the current of institutional /legal structure of the network is fully acknowledged and approved by the VR members as the survey results revealed (100% approval of legal structure of the network).
		58	Does the network operate democratically?	1		
		59	Does the network specify its objectives and working methods?	1		
		60	Does the network specify the regions concerned by the project?	1		
		61	Does the network specify its partners and participating countries?	1		
		62	Does the network specify the fields of action involved?	1		
		63	Does the network specify its overall strategy in the short and long term?		0	a holistic and detailed strategic marketing and visibility plan would be valuable
		64	Does the network identify potential participants and partners in Council of Europe member states and/or other	1		

3.4 COMMUNICATION TOOLS			world countries?			
		65	Does the network provide details of its financing (financial reports and/or activity budgets)?	1		
		66	Does the network provide details of its operational plan?		0	a holistic and detailed strategic marketing and visibility plan would be valuable
		67	Does the network append the basic text(s) confirming its legal status?	1		
	For certified Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe only	68	Does the Route have its own logo?	1		
		69	Do all partners of the network use the logo on their communication tools?	1		especially the new members
		70	Does the Route have its own dedicated website ?	1		
		71	Is it the website available in English and French?	1		automated translation
		72	Is it the website available in other languages?	1		automated translation
		73	Does the network use effectively social networks and web 2.0?	1		
		74	Does the network publish brochures on the Route?	1		
		75	If yes, are the brochures available in English?	1		in German mainly
		76	If yes, are the brochures available in French?	1		limited
		77	Is the title of “Cultural Route of the Council of Europe” present on all communication materials (including press releases, webpages, publications, etc.)?	1		
		78	Is the certification logo present on all communication materials?	1		
		79	Is the certification logo used in accordance to the guidelines for its use (size and position,...)?	1		
		80	Are the logos (Cultural Route + certification logo) provided to all the members of the Route?	1		
81	Does the Council of Europe certification logo appear on road signs/ boards indicating the cultural route?	1		as far as can be assessed		
SCORE			71	10		

8. Annex 3: List of acronyms, figures and tables

Tables:

Table 1 - VR members reply on the survey about what makes VR unique

Table 2- Website results and recommendations

Figures :

Figure 1 – Virtual Tours types

Figure 2- 360 virtual tours

Figure 3 - Digital marketing assessment of the VR