

EPA-CR-ICG(2026)01
11 February 2026

INFORMAL CONTACT GROUP OF CULTURAL ROUTES

1st Meeting

11 December and 12 December 2025

European Institute of Cultural Routes, 1 rue Auguste Lumière, L-1950 Luxembourg

REPORT

Document prepared by the EICR Secretariat

1. OPENING AND INTRODUCTION OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Rui GOMES, Director of the European Institute of Cultural Routes, Executive Secretary of the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe, opened the meeting. The participants introduced themselves and their expectations to the meeting.

2. CHAIRING AND FACILITATION

The participants agreed with Rui GOMES facilitating the meeting; this role may be taken up by someone else later in the agenda.

3. AGENDA AND PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF THE MEETING

The group agreed with the agenda proposed by the secretariat and noted that it was well prepared.

4. TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE GROUP

Rui GOMES invited the participants of the meeting to share ideas and feedback about the terms of reference of the Informal Contact Group. The participants noted that the pilot project's rationale and timeframe are well established, running until the end of June 2027. They welcomed the initiative and stressed that it should be conducted transparently, keeping all Cultural Routes representatives informed about its proceedings.

Some noted that closer cooperation between the routes and the Institute previously existed through regular meetings in Luxembourg. While this was feasible with fewer certified routes, revitalising this cooperation and strengthening networking among certified routes is now considered important as the programme has evolved.

They also supported the Informal Contact Group initiative, stressing the importance of an interface between the Secretariat and the routes to ensure smoother communication and information sharing. Participants further highlighted the need to strengthen the programme's image and visibility when developing partnerships with stakeholders. Overall, all the participants emphasised the need to strengthen the programme internally in terms of identity, capacity, cooperation and then reaching out to strengthening it externally.

Participants highlighted the need for more practical sessions in the Training Academy, with stronger involvement of the Institute with training modules. Key challenges discussed included funding, visibility, and stakeholder leadership, with consensus on the need for concrete actions. They also stressed the importance of strengthening cooperation between Cultural Routes and EPA member states, citing France and Spain as positive examples.

Rui GOMES thanked the members of the group for their interest and commitment. He acknowledged the discussion of past and current challenges faced by routes and emphasised the need to enhance visibility and strengthen a sense of belonging and ownership among internal and external stakeholders, while taking into account available capacity and resources.

5. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AND PERSPECTIVES OF THE PROGRAMME

Rui GOMES provided information related to the recent developments and perspectives of the programme, such as:

- The Netherlands and Ireland joined the Enlarged Partial Agreement in 2025, bringing the total to 43 member states. The objective is to bring also the UK, Iceland, Belgium and Denmark to the EPA and make the programme more solid.
- While the number of certified routes has increased, the programme's budget and human resources have not evolved proportionally.
- The potential joining of the European Commission in the programme is complex, with negotiations ongoing since 2010.
- As part of the 2025-2026 Certification Cycle, 6 candidate routes are under evaluation: The Routes of Masonic Architecture and Heritage; Jerusalem Way; Singing Heritage Route, The Columban Way; European Paganini Route and Via Querinissima.
- A study on the consequences of the armed aggression by the Russian Federation on the Cultural Routes in Ukraine is to be conducted. The financial support for this study comes from the International Prize Grupo Compostela–Xunta de Galicia that the EICR received in September.
- A Working Group on Youth Perspective and Participation will be established to develop guidelines in this area and better integrate the youth perspective to the Cultural Routes.
- A Reflection Group on the thematic representativeness of the Cultural Routes was set up to examine and discuss the current levels of representativeness within the Programme. The Reflection Group comprises representatives from the EPA Bureau, member states, international organizations with observer or participatory status, various Council of Europe bodies, certified Cultural Routes representatives, and thematic experts, forming a multidisciplinary composition. One expert, Teodora Konach, was tasked with completing a study on representativeness to support the Group's work.
- A regular newsletter should be launched from next year.
- One member of the secretariat will be appointed to accompany the University Network for Cultural Routes Studies.
- A seminar in connection with the Moldovan Presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe is to be organised in Republic of Moldova (15-17 April)
- The Training Academy will be organised from 2-5 June in Pécs, Hungary and Osijek, Croatia.
- The Advisory Forum will be organised from 22-25 September in Yerevan, Armenia.

6. THE FORMER TASK FORCE – CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

As former contact person of the former Task Force, Inger HARLEVI was invited to introduce this point by recalling the mission of the body, how it worked and especially "lessons learned". Inger informed that the idea of a contact person was born in 2011 at the initiative of the former Executive Secretary of the EPA, Penelope Denu. The role was defined as a bridge between the Cultural Routes and the Institute, providing support to the latter.

From the beginning of its establishment, elections were held every two years. It should be noted that the Coordinator of the Task Force was invited to the EPA Governing Board meetings taking place in May until 2018.

As number of routes grew, routes were grouped by themes, with specific contact people. From 2018 the Task Force played an important role in preparing the Training Academy programme.

After the pandemic and the threat of implanting fees on Cultural Routes, the interest for cooperation really grew and at the 11th Advisory Forum held in Greece in 2022, it was decided by all the participants to create Working Groups on specific themes related to the routes and the Task Force was assigned to share the outcomes/reports of the followings to all the Cultural Routes representatives.

Considering the weak points, Inger mentioned the absence of clear mandate or functioning structure of the Task Force. Elections were announced ahead of the 13th Advisory Forum held in Hungary in 2024, but not all routes' representatives present at the Forum had the right to vote. The lesson learned would be clarifying the rights, duties and procedures and to ensure transparency of proceedings.

Other group members also shared their perspectives on the former Task Force. Some highlighted that having such a body represented good initiative, nevertheless it lacked democratic functioning and a concretization of leadership. Also, there was not much sense in dividing routes that do not align thematically or have the same focus in specific working groups. It would be more valuable to cooperate between the routes on applying for European projects and receive funds to be used for concrete activities and results.

Rui GOMES thanked all the members for sharing their insights. He highlighted that the Governing Board of the EPA was, seemingly, not fully aware of the works undertaken by the former Task Force and the Working Groups. Therefore, it would be very important to link the works of the Informal Contact Group with the works of Governing Board or at minimum to keep the formal bodies of the programme well informed.

7. STATE OF PLAY AND EVALUATION OF THE RESULTS OF THE WORKING GROUPS

Rui GOMES introduced the point and invited the group members to share their experience in view of understanding the current state of play of the Working Groups.

a. Sustainability

The Working Group on Sustainability was running from 2022 to late 2023; they produced a report, with Stefanie Bishop as coordinator and contact point of the latter. Guidelines on sustainability at the programme level were discussed and developed – they were not adopted by the EPA Bureau or Governing Board. Rui will follow-up the matter with the Bureau of the Governing Board.

b. Tourism

This group is still ongoing; it is the group that has most members. The coordinator was Miguel Ángel MARTÍN RAMOS (European Routes of Charles V); recently this task was passed on to Quintín CORREAS DOMINGO from the same route. The group produced a report with important layers in connection with tourism. However, the tourism challenges that the networks face vary from route to route, also according to the themes they encompass.

It was noted that the tourism industry is very vast and may have different approaches. It would thus be important to define the role of tourism at the programme's level. It was proposed to address the report and related tourism matters during the 13th Training Academy.

Rui GOMES stressed the importance of making good use of the report by extracting key insights on tourism and possibly conducting a survey on specific needs related to tourism.

c. Cooperation

This Working Group did not (yet?) produce visible outcomes or report. The coordinator was Victor Sorensen (European Route of Jewish Heritage). The group operated without a fully defined framework, which naturally made it challenging to set specific objectives. Collaboration between routes also varies across countries, depending on the number of routes in place. In some regions, alignment with the EU macro-regional format is followed.

Moreover, the group's focus - whether on inter-routes cooperation or on external collaboration - was not explicitly defined. It is understood that the work of the group is finished.

d. Visibility

Participants informed that the group is no longer functioning and is to be considered closed.

8. PREPARATIONS FOR THE 13TH TRAINING ACADEMY

a. Expected content and programme

Danko ČOSIC, representative of the route organising the 13th Academy gave an overview on the expected content and programme. He informed about the decision to focus on cross-border territory and cooperation, choosing Pécs (Hungary) and Osijek (Croatia).

In order to elaborate the programme of the event in line with the expectations of the Routes, the network of Roman Emperors Danube Wine Route carried out some informal discussions and exchanges with peers. The main outcomes and feedback from past editions were that the programme was too packed and with too many lecturing coming from other stakeholders than Cultural Routes representatives. Therefore, they propose a 3 full day programme with day zero for arrival, divided in 3 thematic slots, such as: HERITAGE INTERPRETATION, PROMOTION and TOURISM, MANAGEMENT PRACTICES. In addition, speakers will be exclusively representatives of the Cultural Routes, and each session will be lasting 3 hours with a facilitator and focusing on discussions and exchanges between the participants.

The ICG members commented on several aspects related to the Academy and mainly:

- the possibility of splitting the participants in smaller groups for better interactions;
- reserving specific moment for presentations and introductions among the participants;
- sharing "good" and "bad" practices among the Cultural Routes;
- reserving time for exchanges after plenary sessions.

The ICG members praised the work undertaken by the Roman Emperors and Danube Wine Route. They emphasised the importance of consolidating the "brand promise", having a common theme for the Academy, and securing a programme centred on participants. The event should also be an opportunity to clarify the role of the Institute and the role of the ICG. Rui GOMES also noted the need to strengthen the cooperation with the Institute in the organisation of the Training Academy. The Institute should, for example, secure interventions related to youth participation, Ukraine and the Group on Representativeness. The purpose of the Academy should be working closer together for a more inclusive and unified programme.

b. Role of the ICG in the preparatory process

A preparatory meeting with the Institute, including one member of the ICG, will be organised at the Academy's venue. Accordingly, the ICG, together with the Institute, should be directly cooperating with the Roman Emperors and Danube Wine Route in preparing the programme.

9. COOPERATION WITH THE UNIVERSITY NETWORK

Crina ZUGRAV presented the mission and the current status of the University Network for Cultural Routes Studies. Created in 2012 with the main objective to connect universities and researchers that study cultural routes. It also encourages internships at the Institute headquarters and the conducting of thesis on the topic of cultural routes.

Several academic activities have been organised and mainly the first onsite academic conference held in 2024 in Santiago de Compostela highlighted the already existing research. Moreover, during this event, it was decided to have a Chair of the Network and to organise biannual academic conferences. The Chair is now ensured by the Compostela Group of Universities, and the next on-site conference will be held in November 2026 by Università della Svizzera Italiana.

Rui GOMES informed that the aim is to reinforce and further develop the role of the University Network in cooperation with the Cultural Routes and other stakeholders of the programme.

The possibility of inviting the organiser university of the next academic conference or the Chair of the network to the 13th Training Academy was raised. In addition, the members of the ICG emphasized the importance of further linking the Scientific Committees of the Cultural Routes with the University Network.

The importance of a specific training or programme on Routes management was also raised.

10. ONGOING AND POTENTIAL COOPERATION WITH PARTNERS AND OBSERVERS

a. European Heritage Days

The members of the ICG shared ideas about how to improve the cooperation between the Cultural Routes and the European Heritage Days. They mentioned that the application process is very complex, while the financial return is relatively modest. Furthermore, they identified the need for a dedicated way to highlight the Cultural Routes in the context of the programme of EHD. The idea of planning a campaign highlighting the Cultural Routes under Heritage Days, with all activities scheduled for the same week was also discussed.

b. European Travel Commission (ETC)

ICG members provided feedback on past Cultural Routes promotional campaigns by the ETC. The campaigns' role in increasing routes visibility on the ETC website was noted, highlighting the need to reinforce cooperation. The possibility of a small fee, matched by ETC, was discussed. The Secretariat recorded the proposals. While some cultural routes have individual cooperation agreements, a programme-level arrangement was considered advantageous.

c. UN Tourism

UN Tourism's observer status in the EPA was noted. Its expertise in capacity building, highlighted during the Forum in Cappadocia, was also acknowledged. Some members reported having individual agreements with UN Tourism and described its role as more political than operational. At present, ways to strengthen or further develop cooperation with this partner remain to be determined.

d. European Commission

Rui GOMES noted that the cooperation with the European Commission was fluctuating. Some important joint projects were coordinated in the past.

Current possibilities for cooperation were discussed by the members of the ICG. It was highlighted the crucial need to convey the role of the Cultural Routes in ensuring the sustainability of funded projects results. Additionally, it was proposed to convey the need for

political support for the Cultural Routes and to seek a dedicated budget from the Commissioner for Culture for the programme's 40th anniversary in 2027.

Designating a date or week to celebrate the Cultural Routes was discussed. The Secretariat took note of all the proposals and shared ideas.

e. Organisation of Ibero-American States

Rui GOMES provided information on ongoing and potential cooperation with OEI, specifically highlighting the Ibero-American Cultural Routes and Itineraries Program (PRICI) and the meeting he attended. Some members of the ICG mentioned ongoing individual collaborations with OEI, the interest of members from South America and the potential for development.

f. UNESCO

The ICG members highlighted that several certified Routes include sites recognised by UNESCO and therefore they are in contact with the organisation. The example of UNESCO Creative Cities was mentioned, including meetings organised with municipalities to review the fulfilment of the criteria. It was proposed to dedicate a similar day for the Cultural Routes, inviting all routes managers to discuss the fulfilment of certification criteria.

9. INTER-ROUTES COOPERATION PROJECTS AND INITIATIVES

Rui GOMES opened the topic of inter-routes cooperation for discussion. The ICG members proposed that mapping of the ongoing projects could be a task of the ICG and this point should have a dedicated segment at the 13th Training Academy.

The Secretariat noted the importance of having an overview of the cooperation projects with the most and less involved networks.

10. THE ICG AND THE REFLECTION GROUP ON REPRESENTATIVITY

Rui GOMES presented the rationale for the Reflection Group on Representativity. Launched by the EPA Governing Board in May, the group reviews representativeness in the Programme, focusing on women, science, minorities, intangible heritage, and contemporary developments. The group is also responsible for providing recommendations to support strategic development and further align the programme with the Council of Europe. The group is composed of members states, observers, experts and routes representatives.

It was proposed to connect the ICG with the works of the Reflection Group at a later stage.

11. WORKING METHODS OF THE INFORMAL CONTACT GROUP

The floor was open to explore possible working methods of the Informal Contact Group.

Several ideas were shared related to the mission and objectives of the ICG and mainly:

- The necessity to strengthen the network of 49 certified Cultural Routes as a unifying network.
- To position the ICG as a think tank and partner to the Institute.
- The need to strengthen the common identity of the Cultural Routes.
- To position the ICG to pass the message about the value of the network of Cultural Routes to different audiences.

Major points of focus of the ICG were highlighted and mainly pertaining to:

- Information and Knowledge Sharing for and about Cultural Routes

- Platform for resources and experiences.
- Survey routes to identify needs.
- Map routes and intersections for cooperation (“le carrefour”).
- Brand and Identity of Cultural Routes
 - Definition of common elements and brand promise.
 - Creation of a toolkit for network communication.
 - Enhancement of collective network value while respecting individual route identities.
- Governance and Structure of the ICG
 - Formalise the ICG as partner body to Institute.
 - Set clear rules, roles, and a rotation system of spokesperson.
 - The Institute leads official communications.

12. NEXT STEPS AND DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The following next actions were discussed among the members of the ICG:

- Agree on 3–4 tangible priorities for the ICG for the next meeting;
- Conduct survey and map cross-route opportunities and projects;
- Develop brand promise and toolkit;
- Clarify roles and expectations with the Institute and the Bureau of the EPA;
- Confirm the participation of a spokesperson for the Academy preparatory meeting.

13. CLOSING OF THE MEETING

Rui GOMES opened the floor for feedback regarding the first meeting of the ICG and possible improvements to be taken into consideration. The members were satisfied with the organisation and the format of the meeting, emphasising that it represents a good foundation for the future cooperation between the Cultural Routes and the Secretariat.

Rui GOMES thanked the members of the ICG for their active participation and generosity. He ensured the ICG members that all the Cultural Routes will be informed about the outcomes of this 1st meeting.

The meeting was closed.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Members

ANTONIO BARONE	Phoenicians' Route
BENEDETTA DIAMANTI	European Route of Ceramics
DANKO ĆOSIC	Roman Emperors and Danube Wine Route
INGER HALEVI	The Hansa
SIMONE ZAGRODNIK	European Route of Historical Thermal Towns

Apologised

QUINTÍN CORREAS DOMINGO	European Routes of Emperor Charles V
-------------------------	--------------------------------------

Secretariat

CRINA ZUGRAV	Project Officer, European Institute of Cultural Routes
RUI GOMES	Director of the European Institute of Cultural Routes Executive Secretary of the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes
RAFFAELLA CASTELLANI	Intern, Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes