

EICR-CR-ICG (2026) 3

10 August 2026
Luxembourg

ONLINE MEETING OF THE INFORMAL CONTACT GROUP OF CULTURAL ROUTES

Wednesday 15 July 2026 (09:00 – 11:00) (CET)

REPORT

Document prepared by the EICR Secretariat

1. OPENING OF THE MEETING AND ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA

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 agenda was adopted.

2. NEWS ABOUT THE GROUP

Rui invited the members to share any news or feedback they have received from other Route representatives regarding the recent developments of the ICG.

Members have shared the following comments:

- Most of them reported positive feedback and progress from their fellow colleagues;
- The sharing and publication of ICG meeting reports on the Programme's website has been greatly appreciated, as it helps ensure transparency and strengthen the constant communication;

Regarding the composition of the ICG, the question about the mandate of the representative of the 2026 Academy organisers was also raised. Rui confirmed that the representative should remain in the group at least until the end of 2026. He also informed the group that the organisation of the 2027 edition of the Academy has not yet been fully confirmed by the European Jewish Heritage Route. Final confirmation is expected by mid-August.

He also provided updates from the Secretariat, in particular on the launch of voluntary contributions for EPA member states, encouraging ICG members to contact their EPA representatives and promote participation in this call. He further informed members that the number of candidates expected for the 2026–2027 certification cycle is likely to be high.

For the functioning of the ICG, Rui highlighted that holding meetings more regularly, even if they are shorter, would enhance the group's transparency and credibility.

The ICG members also shared recent developments at the national level and within their respective Routes, including:

Antonio BARONE informed the group about the meeting with Creative Europe Desk following the National meeting of Cultural Routes in Italy, last June. He also reported on the creation of a lab between Routes crossing Italy for sharing best practices on different subjects such as governance, youth perspective, 40th anniversary. 10 Routes were present and the lab is expected to meet once every 2 months. He also informed about the participation of the Phoenicians' Route in the training for tour operators in Malta. Furthermore, a mapping of indicators for the Routes that could be of particular interest to tour operators is currently underway.

He strengthened that this approach of indicators from Italy could be applied to all the Routes, thus reinforcing the brand promise discussed in last December. This vision should be replicated.

Danko ČOSIC outlined that the ICG could explore developing a brand promise at the Programme level, which could potentially be replicated by the Routes. In the context of the 40th anniversary, establishing such a broader vision would provide added value.

Inger HARLEVI highlighted the successful organisation of the Hanseatic Day and informed the group that the topic of crossroads/intersections between the Routes was discussed during the event.

In addition, most members highlighted the challenges related to managing information among the Routes, as the level of knowledge and experience varies considerably. It was suggested that future events of the Programme could include two separate programmes: one targeting recently certified Routes and another aimed at more experienced Routes, in order to better address their respective needs.

Concerns were also raised regarding newly certified Routes that may not yet be fully familiar with the Council of Europe's rules and requirements. In this context, the potential role of the ICG in supporting the implementation of these principles by new Routes was discussed.

Furthermore, it was noted that the involvement of Routes in the Programme's activities differs significantly. Some of the networks that had not participated in recent years remained the same.

Rui thanked the members for sharing these recent developments and insights. He noted that, with the increasing number of certified Routes, levels of involvement are likely to vary, with some Routes becoming more engaged and others less involved. However, for the different levels of Routes' involvement, he emphasised that further exchanges with these Routes could help identify the reasons for this, including any potential financial or organisational constraints.

3. FIRST IMPRESSIONS ON THE REFLECTION GROUP ON REPRESENTATIVENESS

Rui invited Simone to share her experience and impressions of the meeting, in which she participated on behalf of the ICG, attending the first day onsite and the second day online (25–26 June, Strasbourg).

She expressed her positive feedback about the meeting, underlining the importance of bringing together representatives from across the Programme's ecosystem. She clarified that this level of representativeness relates to the Programme as a whole and does not imply representation at the level of individual Routes.

She stressed the importance of ensuring that this distinction is clearly communicated and understood, as it was not sufficiently clear during the Training Academy. She welcomed the opportunity provided by the meeting to exchange views and further discuss the topic of Representativeness.

Rui thanked Simone for the presence and for the efforts made to participate in the meeting. He acknowledged that the role and functioning of the group may not have been sufficiently clear during the Training Academy.

As for the whole meeting and outcomes, he referred to the indicators presented by the expert Leonardo Porcelloni and highlighted the importance of developing such indicators, noting that while the Programme has established rules and criteria, a dedicated framework of indicators is still needed. He informed that the next meeting is planned for December. He also expressed his view that the group's work should continue beyond 2026, potentially addressing new thematic areas such as brand promise and inclusion.

Regarding the question of indicators, Antonio also informed about the European project in which the Pheonicians' Route was involved altogether with Creative Europe Desk. They had to work on clear indicators related to the impact of the Routes at the local and regional level.

At the same time, it was acknowledged that EPA Representatives have different levels of experience and familiarity with their role at the national level, as well as with the methodology and functioning of the Routes. Further opportunities for exchange and capacity building could help to ensure a shared understanding.

Simone suggested to take into account the handbook about the Cultural Routes that was prepared some years ago in German and that could be translated and picked up as a tool to the new stakeholders within the Programme as to further understand the methodology of the Routes.

In conclusion of this point, Rui described the meeting as positive and expressed optimism about the ongoing process. He explained that the experts' work will be further analysed, with the decisions expected to be taken in May 2027, potentially leading to the development of a five-year work plan, subject to the views of the EPA members states.

He emphasised the importance of ensuring transparency and keeping the ICG closely involved throughout the process. He also reiterated that the objective of the Reflection Group is to strengthen the Programme making it better, not necessarily bigger, while acknowledging the varying levels of capacity across the Programme ecosystem. He suggested that these issues could be further discussed in Yerevan.

4. UPDATES FOR THE PREPARATION OF THE ROUTES' MEETING IN YEREVAN

The Secretariat prepared a first draft agenda, and the ICG members were invited to give their feedback. Accordingly, the agenda will be revised based on the received comments.

The Secretariat also informed that the meeting will be facilitated by an external facilitator and a report of the meeting will be prepared.

Some ICG members proposed circulating a questionnaire to the Routes representatives ahead of the meeting to gather input on further supporting the work of the ICG, with responses to be discussed during the meeting.

Moreover, it was suggested that, should more Routes representatives already be present in Yerevan on the afternoon of 22 September, an informal meeting be held to exchange updates on inter-route projects. The Secretariat will check the availability of a meeting room for this purpose.

5. MEETING WITH THE EPA BUREAU IN YEREVAN

Rui informed that the meeting will be held on 22 September after the EPA Bureau will end their own meeting.

The ICG members were invited to provide comments on the points to be discussed during the meeting, with several topics being raised, including:

- Establishing a clear cooperation between the Routes and the member states;
- Strengthening the bottom-up approach within the Programme, emphasizing the role of Routes in contributing to and supporting its implementation;
- Reinforcing visibility at the national level;

Rui will propose the discussion points for the meeting to the Bureau.

Regarding participation in this meeting and the Forum, Danko informed that he is unlikely to attend the Forum in Armenia due to other commitments on the same dates. He will keep the Secretariat informed.

6. 40th ANNIVERSARY PREPARATIONS

Rui thanked Simone for developing the communication of 52-52 (initiative proposed by Routes during the 2026 Training Academy) and noted that limited progress has been made on the initiative so far. A logo for the anniversary of the Programme is under development and following the meeting of the EPA Bureau in August, a Working Group for the 40th anniversary should be created with an appointed person from the Secretariat.

The initiative to launch a short video competition was also discussed as part of the anniversary. Further discussions on the feasibility and details will take place in due course and communicated accordingly.

As part of further promoting the Programme and the anniversary, Simone reported on her meeting with the European Travel Commission (ETC), during which she informed their team about the anniversary of the Cultural Routes Programme.

ETC showed interest in the initiative and indicated the need for further communication tools, including a video, logo, dedicated website, and social media campaign.

The possibility of organising a press trip with influencers was also discussed.

Most ICG members emphasised the importance of defining a clear message for the 40th anniversary at the Forum, outlining expectations from the Routes and possible contributions/actions.

In this sense, Rui confirmed that a concept note for the anniversary should be developed along with the feasibility for the 52-52 initiative. He also suggested following up with ETC to encourage their registration for the Forum. Simone will follow up with them accordingly.

It was further noted that ETC could serve as an effective promotional channel and provide access to National Tourism Boards. The possibility of Rui participating in the ETC General Assembly in his capacity as Executive Secretary was also discussed.

Other ICG members highlighted the need for involving the press at the national level at the occasion of the anniversary.

It was further suggested to establish the agenda well in advance to avoid overlapping events.

At the same time, members emphasised the need to further define the campaign strategy, with particular attention to identifying the target audience for the 40th anniversary events, before moving forward.

7. COOPERATION WITH THE UNIVERSITY NETWORK

The Secretariat informed that the membership of the Network was updated, removing those universities that have not been active for a long time.

With regards to other updates, the ICG was informed about the upcoming 2nd International Academic Conference, the number of submitted papers and the call for registrations.

It was highlighted that at least one member from ICG should participate to the conference in November.

8. WORKING METHODS OF THE INFORMAL CONTACT GROUP

This item was not discussed, as further clarification was not considered necessary at this time.

9. NEXT STEPS AND DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The members will meet again online on 19 August (09-11h CEST).

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Members

ANTONIO BARONE	Phoenicians' Route
BENEDETTA DIAMANTI	European Route of Ceramics
DANKO ĆOSIC	Roman Emperors and Danube Wine Route
INGER HARLEV	The Hansa
QUINTÍN CORREAS DOMINGO (<i>Absent, not notified</i>)	The Routes of Emperor Charles V
SIMONE ZAGRODNIK	European Route of Historical Thermal Towns

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