

## **Current State and Development Perspectives of the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe in Istria County**

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**Abstract:** The paper examines the current state and development prospects of the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe within Istria County (Croatia). The authors began with the premise that Istria, being a cross-border, multicultural, and multilingual area distinguished by a unique cultural landscape, possesses significant potential for establishing European cultural routes. The research problem arises from the observation that the implementation of the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe in Istria has remained in its initial stages of development, and that key stakeholders have not yet fully recognized the strategic potential of enhancing the region's distinctive heritage through the establishment of transnational cultural routes. The research methodology employed a qualitative case study approach, incorporating both desk and field research, which involved interviews with representatives from key stakeholders. After conducting a literature review, this research presents a case study of Istria County. The analysis focuses on identifying existing challenges, developmental prospects, and recommended strategic measures concerning the implementation of the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe in the region. The findings indicate that European thematic cultural routes, recognized as the most accessible and cost-efficient forms of cultural tourism, can play a crucial role in reinforcing local identities and promoting sustainable economic development in the region. Istria County, as a cross-border area, has the potential to promote cultural routes as a model for the valorisation of shared European heritage and core European values.

**Keywords:** cultural routes, Council of Europe, transborder regions, European heritage, Istria

**JEL Classification:** O10, O19, Z1, Z32

## **1. Introduction**

The turbulent geopolitical history of Europe, where states and borders have changed over the centuries, has led to the emergence of specific cultural-historical and socio-political zones, known as cross-border regions. Cultural heritage represents a driver for intercultural dialogue and transnational cooperation in such regions, as meeting places of different cultures. On the other hand, the pressures resulting from irresponsible management of tourism development across Europe have been raising questions for decades about how to responsibly valorise cultural and natural resources and redirect tourism economic systems that operate based on economies of scale towards sustainable development. Cultural routes could respond to such current challenges, acting as a model of valorisation of common European heritage (Urošević and Afrić Rakitovac, 2017), redirecting to sustainable tourism development (Duda, 2024), and strengthening regional identities (Cappellano and Rizzo, 2019).

According to Gravari-Barbas (2014), the development of cultural routes is a holistic heritage management strategy, which transforms a static focus on isolated monuments and sites into a dynamic and participatory development framework. The Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe programme was launched in 1987, with the initial idea to emphasize the unity of European cultural heritage and the common foundations of Europe in an illustrative manner. They were created as grass-roots networks promoting the principles and values of the Council of Europe: human rights, cultural democracy, cultural diversity, mutual understanding and exchanges across boundaries. They act as channels for intercultural dialogue and promote a better knowledge and understanding of European history (Council of Europe, 2025). The project's founder's main idea was to provide greater visibility and respect for a common European identity, and to preserve and promote European heritage in terms of improving social, economic and cultural development.

The primary aim of this paper is to analyse the current state and development perspectives of the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe in Istria County (Croatia), a cross-border, multicultural, and multilingual region that represents a rich source of resources well-suited for the development of European routes. The research problem arises from the fact that the development of the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe in Istria is still in its early stages, and that key stakeholders have yet to fully recognize the developmental potential of valorising the region's unique natural and cultural resources through the creation of transnational cultural routes. Despite the growing academic and policy interest in cultural routes, there is a notable research gap regarding their implementation, management, and stakeholder involvement in Istria, making the region an underexplored context for studying Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe. This paper represents one of the first academic studies to address these gaps by exploring the development challenges and perspectives of European cultural routes in Istria. By combining an analysis of current literature, available data, and stakeholders' attitudes, the research provides a comprehensive overview of the current state and underscores the critical importance of transnational collaboration and stakeholder engagement for the effective development of sustainable cultural tourism initiatives in the region.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

The turbulent global context, characterized by economic, political, social and environmental crises, requires the elaboration of new models for the effective management and sustainable use of limited and valuable cultural resources. As pointed out by Urošević and Afrić Rakitovac (2017), current strategic frameworks emphasize the importance of national and regional competitive advantage through transnational cooperation and sustainable mobilization of unique local resources, with cultural heritage

representing a form of capital of irreplaceable cultural, social, environmental, and economic value. Transnational cultural tourism initiatives, which respect both the local population and visitors, cultural heritage and the environment, offers appropriate models for the sustainable management of cultural heritage (Urošević and Afrić Rakitovac, 2017). The role of cultural heritage in sustainable development has become a widely recognized and crucial concept advocated by leading international organizations (ICOMOS, 2011; UNESCO, 2013b; UNESCO, 2015; Labadi et al., 2021), especially by the United Nations in 2015 through the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A key aspect of cultural sustainability is the empowerment of local communities through their active participation in heritage management (Labadi et al., 2021). The involvement of key stakeholders in heritage management represents an innovative model within the cultural and tourism sectors, as it fosters a collaborative ecosystem that enhances the sustainability and resilience of cultural resources (McKercher and du Cros, 2002; Huibin and Marzuki, 2012; Mihalic, 2016; Afrić Rakitovac and Urošević, 2023).

The European Cultural Heritage Strategy for the 21st Century (Council of Europe, 2017) defines the common European heritage as an irreplaceable repository of knowledge and a valuable resource for economic growth, employment and social cohesion. The way we preserve and valorise it is the main factor in defining the attractiveness of Europe as a place to live, work and travel. Transnational cooperation is vital for valorising and managing common European heritage, with several initiatives exemplifying this collaborative approach. UNESCO plays a key role through the World Heritage Sites programme, which encourages countries to work together to protect and promote their shared cultural and natural heritage of Outstanding Universal Value (UNESCO, 2013a). The Creative Cities Network initiative fosters collaboration among cities that prioritize creativity and cultural development, enhancing local identities (UNESCO, 2020). Similarly, the European Capitals of Culture programme promotes cultural exchange and tourism by highlighting the diverse cultural expressions across Europe in selected cities each year, encouraging them to showcase their heritage and engage citizens and visitors alike. European Heritage Label promotes the symbolic European values by celebrating heritage which played the significant role in the European history and culture (European Commission, 2025). The Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe programme promotes transnational cultural tourism by connecting sites and regions through thematic routes that reflect shared heritage and historical narratives, fostering a sense of common identity among diverse communities (Council of Europe, 2015).

As indicated by Prokkola (2007), cultural routes emerge as powerful tools for connecting fragmented heritage across borders and for stimulating both cultural and socioeconomic growth. European cross-border regions have become spaces of communication and interaction, by using opportunities for tourism development through transnational cooperation projects. Harris (2017) elaborated on specificities of identity and heritage of cross-border regions of eastern and central Europe, focusing on the fluidity of borders in the EU and the hybridity of this transborder identity. According to Timothy (2001), these regions often encompass multiple linguistic and cultural identities, making them ideal settings for the development of cultural routes promoting intercultural dialogue, shared narratives, and sustainable territorial development. Urošević and Kaurin (2017) affirm that valorising the shared European heritage of cross-border regions aligns closely with the principles of transnational cooperation embedded in the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe programme. Serving as frameworks for interpreting and linking heritage assets across borders through thematic storytelling, cultural routes also encourage collaborative governance and community engagement (Berti, 2013; Council of Europe, 2015). The authors of this paper aim to examine the development potential of investing in such transnational cultural routes, which may not only reinforce historical and cultural ties but also foster socioeconomic development and political cooperation between neighbouring countries.

The Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe were established in 1987 with the certification of the first European cultural itinerary: the pilgrimage route The Camino de Santiago. To date, 49 cultural routes have been certified, of which 21 pass through the Republic of Croatia, all with the aim of discovering and presenting our common rich and diverse heritage, fostering a better understanding of European cultural identity, and connecting people and places within a shared European space (Council of Europe, 2015; Trupković, 2021, Council of Europe, 2025). The “Roadmap for the Adriatic-Ionian Region” (Council of Europe, 2018) provides background information and recommendations for stakeholders working in the field of sustainable tourism, cultural cooperation and social participation. It contains guidelines for national, regional and local authorities in the Adriatic-Ionian Region on the certification and management of the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe.

Itineraries and routes emerge from the intricate and inseparable interconnection of a region's culture, history, nature and economy (Trono, 2022). Recognized as the most powerful medium for interpreting cultural heritage and history, routes represent a developmental model of cultural tourism by valorising unique local cultural resources and offering an innovative cultural-tourism product that meets the needs and expectations of modern tourists. These thematic routes are particularly distinctive as they can diversify and expand demand over time and space, contribute to the valorisation of underutilized cultural assets, and create new segments of demand for specific forms of tourism. Furthermore, cultural routes enable visitors to understand and appreciate cultural relationships and phenomena, while tourism based on these routes serves as a model for cultural and tourism development that promotes not only the tourism sector but also social and economic growth (Nagy, 2016; Urošević and Kaurin, 2017).

In recent years, numerous and varied definitions of cultural routes have emerged. According to Sugio (2005), a cultural route can be understood theoretically through both spatial and temporal axes, serving as a geographical representation of continuity rooted in movement and exchange dynamics. Council of Europe defined European cultural routes as: „a route crossing one, two or more countries or regions, organised around themes, whose historical, artistic or social interest is European, either by virtue of the geographical route followed or because of the nature and/or scope of its range and significance“ (2015, 15). Trono (2022, 14) indicates that cultural routes and itineraries are seen as „open-air museums, the historical and contemporary expressions of a complex regional heritage rich in cultural and environmental assets and meanings“. A cultural route can be also seen as a combination of three elements: the geographical area encompassing key attractions and sites, the theme that unifies the various components of the route, and the tourism products and services provided to visitors at the different destinations included in the route (Majdoub, 2010; Zabbini, 2012; Pattanaro and Pistocchi, 2016).

Cultural routes represent a complex and multidimensional concept primarily associated with cultural-historical heritage, its preservation, management, valorisation, and interpretation. As a concept that meets the aspirations of the postmodern tourist, cultural routes derive from both material cultural-historical heritage and intangible culture. By combining the past and the future, they lead to unique experiences. Thus, cultural routes represent a geographical journey across a specific territory, through various local identities, imbued with representative values, meanings, expectations, and experiences, ultimately forming a distinctive cultural-tourism product (Horvat and Klarić, 2013). According to Dolenc (2024), potential for development of cultural routes depends on the effective coordination and collaboration of stakeholders from the tourism and cultural sectors; public institutions, the private sector, local communities, and experts.

Based on the theoretical insights gathered, it is evident that cultural routes serve for connecting heritage, tourism, and local communities across regions and borders. The effective management and sustainable development of cultural routes strongly depend on the active involvement of multiple stakeholders,

including public authorities, local governments, tourism boards, cultural experts and local community representatives, whose collaboration ensures both the preservation of cultural assets and the promotion of socio-economic benefits for the region. This paper focuses on Istria County, and the research highlights the current state of development of certified Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe in the region. This leads to the formulation of the following research questions, which will be addressed in detail through the following chapters: (RQ1) which certified cultural routes are currently actively managed in Istria County, and what is the role of different stakeholders in this process? and (RQ2) what are the main opportunities and challenges for further development and integration of Istria County into the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe programme?

### **3. Research methodology**

The conducted primary research was designed to address the lack of empirical knowledge regarding the development of the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe in Istria County. Its main aim was to investigate the current state of certified routes, assess the roles and perspectives of key regional stakeholders, and identify both challenges and opportunities for further development and integration into the European programme. By combining field and desk methods, this research provides concrete, locally grounded evidence that complements the literature review and enables a comprehensive understanding of the region's development potential, stakeholder engagement, and strategic priorities. This paper is based on a case study design, suitable for researching socio-cultural phenomena within their real-life context, enabling an analysis of institutional, thematic, and stakeholder dimensions (Sitorus, 2021; Richards and Munsters, 2010). The authors chose this qualitative methodology due to the lack of academic research dedicated to cultural routes in Istria County (Ilić, 2017; Rizzo, 2022; Urošević et al., 2024), limited available data and information about certified routes, as well as the initial phase of their development in the region.

After the literature review, the authors present the results of the conducted empirical research. Given the lack of available information on the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe in Istria County, the research results analysis starts with an overview of certified routes in Croatia, followed by a focused analysis of Istria County as a specific cross-border region, including previous projects related to the development of various cultural routes and the mapping of active certified routes in the region. For the first part of the research, desk research was employed, based on available European publications on cultural routes, official websites, and media articles, complemented by field research method.

To present the current state of cultural routes development in Istria County, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews with representatives of regional stakeholders (N=7), including representatives of regional administrative departments (Tourism Department of Istria County; Istria Cultural Agency), local self-government units (City of Labin), tourism boards (Tourist Board of Pula; Tourist Board of Labin), and experts (Juraj Dobrila University of Pula; international expert in heritage interpretation). Interviews were conducted live, via telephone and email, and the responses were analysed using synthesis and interpretation methods. For the research purpose, over 20 representatives of key stakeholders in Istria County, who are currently involved or could potentially be involved in the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe programme, were contacted. Despite multiple attempts to reach them, the limited response may already anticipate either a lack of awareness or insufficient interest regarding European cultural routes in Istria County.

The results of the empirical research were critically discussed and are presented in Table 3. Additionally, the discussion includes findings from research conducted by students at the Interdisciplinary Study

Programme of Culture and Tourism, Juraj Dobrila University of Pula, Croatia. Besides the student research projects, cultural routes have become a highly relevant subject for researchers at the Juraj Dobrila University of Pula, as a member of the University Network for Cultural Routes Studies. Recent studies by Urošević et al. (2024) and Dolenc (2024) reflect growing interest in theoretical foundations and methodological frameworks for analysing the development of European cultural itineraries.

The conducted research provides a foundation for addressing the research questions formulated in the paper and for initiating a discussion not only on the status but also on the possibilities for certifying new routes and their development in Istria.

## **4. Research results**

### **4.1 Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe in Istria County**

The Republic of Croatia has been a full member of the Council of Europe since 6 November 1996. In 2018, Croatia took over the chairmanship of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers for a period of six months. Croatia has continuously adopted and implemented the standards of the Council of Europe and actively participated in its programmes and activities, positioning itself as an engaged and active member. To date, Croatia is a member of 13 out of 14 partial agreements of the Council and has ratified 93 of its instruments. In 2010, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes to facilitate better cooperation between member states, and today the agreement includes a total of 34 states. The Republic of Croatia acceded to the agreement in 2016 and has been an equal member since then (Trupković, 2021; Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Croatia, 2025). Croatia's heritage, shaped by centuries of interaction with neighbouring cultures, reflects its unique transnational and multicultural dimension, bridging Mediterranean, Central European and Balkan influences. By participating in the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe, Croatia emphasizes its role within European heritage networks, joining 21 certified cultural routes (Table 1) that highlight common European narratives. These routes are shown in Table 1 in Appendix A of this article (Table 1, Appendix A).

Due to its strategic location along key road and maritime corridors connecting the Mediterranean with Central Europe, Istria historically functioned as a vital crossroads of peoples and cultures (Trono, 2022). Istria is the westernmost county of the Republic of Croatia and is recognized as a multi-ethnic, multicultural, and multilingual community. As both a peripheral Mediterranean peninsula and a frontier of Mediterranean multicultural civilization, Istria represents a unique intersection of cultural influences, making it an especially relevant region for the development and study of transnational cultural routes. Elaborating on the specificities of the regional identity of Istria as a trans-border region, Šuligoj (2022, 73) emphasizes that, due to its extremely dynamic history and rich cultural exchange, „Istria could be classified into a Central-European trans-border group of regions as a special trans-border spatial system“.

According to Afrić Rakitovac, Urošević and Vojnović (2021), there are more than 50 protected historical landscapes in Istria and many individual localities and monuments, which could all represent the points of a cultural landscape network, around which a narrative can be constructed on the past and present. At the same time Istria is the leading Croatian tourism region: due to its central position, diversity and richness of cultural and natural heritage, Istria counts for 25% of tourist arrivals, 25% of tourism beds and almost a third of total overnight stays in the Republic of Croatia (Table 2). The key challenge of the current tourism development model in Istria lies in the pronounced seasonality and the heavy

concentration of tourists in coastal destinations. This results in overcrowding during peak months and underutilization of resources in the off-season, creating economic and environmental pressures.

**Table 2.** Tourist arrivals and overnights in Istria 2019-2024

| Year | Arrivals  | Overnights |
|------|-----------|------------|
| 2019 | 4.609.799 | 28.709.556 |
| 2020 | 1.877.134 | 13.514.865 |
| 2021 | 3.500.149 | 23.534.894 |
| 2022 | 4.709.345 | 29.507.887 |
| 2023 | 4.970.172 | 30.134.117 |
| 2024 | 5.005.829 | 29.899.508 |

Source: Istria Tourist Board (2025). Statistical reports. Available at: <https://www.istra.hr/en/business-information/istria-in-media/statistics>.

Elaborating regional specificities and territorial complexity, Rizzo (2022) identified three multi-themed routes in the framework of the European Community project “Quality Network on Sustainable Tourism (QNeST)”: Cultural-natural route, Route of North Istria and Route of South Istria. After Glagolitic Alley, the first cultural-tourism brand in Istria (Bratulić, 1994), the exciting history and common European heritage of the Istrian region was presented in the Parenzana cross-border route (Parenzana, 2025). Through the European projects Heart of Istria and Revitas, cross-border routes were developed that valorised the cultural heritage of the interior of Istria, such as the Route of Istrian Castles, the Route of Frescoes and Istrian archaeological parks - The Path of Gods (Ilić, 2017).

In Istria County today, seven cultural routes certified by the Council of Europe are officially recognized and they will be presented in the following text. However, there is currently a lack of publicly available information detailing the actual status of these certified routes, including their descriptions, operations, functions, and overall implementation. This gap makes it difficult to fully understand their impact and role within the region.

The Roman Emperors and Danube Wine Route include exceptional Roman-era destinations and covers the whole of Croatia, promoting it directly at the level of archaeological tourism, including the city of Pula and National Park Brijuni. The route connects archaeological sites and their unique monuments with the activities of the Roman emperors and shows how the ancient Roman culture spread beyond the borders of the Empire (The Roman Emperors and Danube Wine Route, 2025). Part of the cultural route is the Pula Amphitheater, which is also the 6th largest arena in the world. In the National Park Brijuni, the Roman villa in Verige Bay represents a luxurious residential complex which included temples dedicated to the god of the sea Neptune, the Capitoline Triad and the goddess of love Venus.

The town of Labin is the leader of the ATRIUM cultural route, which also presents the good practice model of successful transnational cooperation in valorising and interpreting common European dissonant heritage. Labin involved the urban settlements of Podlabin and Raša, which are characterized by specific and unique architecture from the period of Italian fascism. The aim of the route is to give greater importance to the architecture of totalitarian regimes as a valuable cultural heritage and to recognize it as a key element of European architecture of the 20th century. The ultimate goal is to establish a transnational cultural route in the area of Southeast Europe (Atrium Route, 2025).

The House of Istrian Olive Oil – Museum Olei Histriae joined the Olive Routes in 2018. The museum provides an insight into the history of olive growing in Istria and olive processing methods from the

Roman era until today. It also offers guided tastings, where visitors can learn how to properly taste olive oil, the differences between varieties and how to match it with food.

Recognized by the Council of Europe in 2009, Iter Vitis Route highlights both the tangible and intangible elements of wine-growing traditions and landscapes as integral part of regional identity and history. The itinerary encourages to diversify wine tourism, focusing on the unique features of Europe's viticultural regions (Iter Vitis, 2025). Although Istria County is one of the most prominent wine regions in the world, only the picturesque historic town of Motovun has signed the charter of cooperation with the Iter Vitis route. Despite its strong wine identity and the ongoing development of renowned wineries, the region of Istria has yet to fully recognize the potential of formally integrating into the Iter Vitis Cultural Route. Poreč became the first city in Croatia to join the European Phoenician Route association. The route promotes Mediterranean culture and intercultural dialogue between Mediterranean regions and countries, as well as their historical, tangible and intangible heritage, landscape and ambience. This route also promotes sustainable, responsible, creative and cultural activities, strengthening local and common Euro-Mediterranean identity. The route of the Phoenicians refers to the main nautical routes used by the Phoenicians from the 12th century BC for trade and cultural communication in the Mediterranean. Through these routes, the Phoenicians, famous sailors and traders, became a powerful civilization that contributed to the creation of the Mediterranean cultural community. Other great Mediterranean civilizations, such as the Greeks, Romans, Etruscans and Iberians, used these routes for the same purpose, making them an important part of Mediterranean culture (Phoenician Route, 2025). Except for the information about joining this association, there are no available data regarding the current status and development of the route in Poreč.

Saint Martin of Tours, venerated since the 4th century, was a widely revered Christian bishop whose shrine in Tours, France, became a major pilgrimage destination in the Early Middle Ages. His legacy is honored through the Via Sancti Martini/Saint Martin of Tours Route, a network of over 5,000 km of pilgrimage routes across more than 12 European countries. Along these routes, travellers encounter not only impressive architectural monuments, such as fourteen cathedrals dedicated to him, but also living traditions, legends, and folklore that keep his spiritual and cultural heritage alive (Via Sancti Martini, 2025). The route also passes through Istria County, with sections running through Tar-Vabriga, Vrsar, and Ližnjan.

The Brotherhood of St. James with the cooperation with the Camino South Istria route created a new route in Istria, with the goal to become part of the Croatian Camino route in the European network of pilgrimage routes of St. James. As a circular route, which covers the entire area of southern Istria, with a total length of 192 kilometres, it connects the city of Pula with picturesque villages Medulin, Ližnjan, Marčana, Vodnjan and Fažana. The Camino South Istria route is divided into seven pilgrimage chapters, for seven days that are needed to experience the historical, cultural, and sacral heritage in impressive natural environment. The route has a great potential also in promoting the local way of life and traditions, local product and economies, but also healthier lifestyles (Cammino Croatia, 2025).

#### **4.2 Key Stakeholders' Attitudes: Current State, Challenges and Development Perspectives**

As part of the research, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders in Istria County, including representatives from regional administrative departments, local self-government units, tourism boards, and experts (N=7). The aim of these interviews was to gain in-depth insight into the current level of awareness, involvement, and strategic perspectives regarding the development and implementation of the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe in the region.

The first question concerned the extent to which stakeholders are familiar with the Council of Europe Cultural Routes programme and whether they believe that sufficient attention is being paid to their development in Istria. Most respondents showed some knowledge of the programme, although the level of information and involvement varied. Representatives of city departments and tourist boards confirmed their involvement in certified routes, and others indicated their contribution indirectly through project support or cultural planning. All respondents agreed that Istria, due to its multi-layered history and rich heritage, has a strong potential for development of European cultural routes. However, county department and agencies, as well as experts, highlighted that this potential has not yet been fully realised. Although some regional strategic documents recognise their importance and have supported similar initiatives, actual visibility, institutional commitment and long-term planning around the development of routes remain limited. Representatives of the expert group stated that “very little is known about these routes, and they are not sufficiently used, neither in promotion nor in concrete projects” (international heritage interpretation expert). A consistent response was that cultural routes are recognised in principle, but require greater attention, clearer leadership and better integration with local communities to become more effective tools for heritage valorisation and regional development.

The second question focused on the respondents’ institutions or local/regional self-government units’ active involvement in any certified route, and in what capacity. A small proportion of respondents (3) reported direct involvement in certified cultural routes, including contributions through thematic heritage resources (ATRIUM route in Labin, Camino South Istria in Pula). Representative of the regional tourism department reported that, although they are not formally part of the certified routes, they contribute through promotion, documentation or content development. There is also indirect involvement from the regional cultural agency (Istrian Cultural Agency) through interpretative programming, thematic itineraries and film-based storytelling, which serve as alternative approaches to engagement with European cultural heritage. This range of involvement reflects a broader reality: although relevant institutions and municipalities recognize the value of the routes, systematic and coordinated integration into the framework of certified routes is still lacking across the region. Expert stakeholders draw attention to a lack of transparency and accessible information regarding Cultural Routes in Istria. While acknowledging that several Istrian cities and municipalities are formally included in various routes, they emphasise that “there is no up-to-date information on most routes, their management, current status, or activities”.

The third question explored potentials of developing new cultural routes. Respondents agreed that routes provide structured frameworks for presenting regional identity and heritage in ways that are authentic and attractive to visitors. They also highlighted that routes represent tools for strengthening European identity, promoting intercultural dialogue and supporting experiential tourism models. Some stakeholders (Istrian Cultural Agency) suggested new practices in digital interpretation, film tourism and multimedia storytelling as particularly effective methods for increasing engagement and broadening audiences, especially among younger generations.

The fourth question examined the main challenges facing the development and certification of cultural routes in Istria. Several recurring challenges were identified. These include:

- Lack of coordination among key actors,
- Insufficient cross-sector collaboration,
- Limited funding and dedicated personnel,
- Property ownership and access issues,
- Dominance of mass tourism, and
- Limited strategic vision and planning capacity.

All respondents particularly highlighted that smaller cities often possess significant heritage but lack the administrative or technical capacity to participate in complex certification processes. According to interviewed experts, the activities of the cultural and tourism sectors are not coordinated. The bureaucratic requirements of the certification process, including documentation, long-term planning and cross-border partnerships, are considered challenging for institutions with limited resources.

The last question investigated the potential of cultural routes as innovative models for the valorisation of Istrian cultural heritage. Respondents agreed that cultural routes offer a valuable and effective model for valorising cultural heritage and promoting regional development, as cross-border platforms for education, cultural exchange, economic innovation and sustainable tourism. The interviewees emphasized that the unique heritage of Istria, from prehistoric and Roman remains to industrial and architectural heritage, offers a huge, untapped potential for the development of routes. With the right strategic support, investment and coordination, the region could position itself as a leader in the field of cultural tourism based on the principles of the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe. A recurring theme across interviews is the view that participation in cultural routes is an enabling mechanism rather than a prerequisite for successful heritage valorisation. Representative of the county tourism department stated that “inclusion in cultural routes can contribute to all of these goals, but it is not a precondition; everything depends on the individuals involved and the available financial resources.” This perspective highlights the importance of human capital, leadership, and institutional commitment over formal affiliation alone. Experts noted that, apart from the *Iter Vitis* route, there is limited awareness of other routes actively operating in the region, suggesting a gap between strategic frameworks and tangible outcomes.

## **5. Discussion**

The results of the empirical research are presented in Table 3. The table provides a structured synthesis of the main findings by identifying key dimensions affecting the development of the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe in Istria County, outlining current challenges, potential development opportunities, and recommended actions.

The conducted research indicates that strategic development in the fields of culture and tourism in Istria County should prioritize investment in the development and certification of cultural routes that most strongly reflect Istria’s shared Euro-Mediterranean heritage. Such investments would not only contribute to the valorisation and sustainable use of Istria’s unique cultural landscape but also foster transnational cooperation by linking Istria with other European destinations. This can be achieved through the creation of integrated cultural-tourism products, including thematic routes, interpretation centres, and other innovative heritage presentation tools, thereby strengthening Istria’s visibility and competitiveness within the broader European cultural landscape.

The research results highlight that the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe in Istria are currently insufficiently developed, weakly visible, and fragmented in their implementation. Although some Istrian cities are formally included in certified routes, they often function as isolated initiatives or symbolic affiliations, rather than as fully operational, strategically coordinated development instruments. This discrepancy between formal inclusion and practical implementation is one of the central findings of the research. A major obstacle identified across interviews is the fragmentation of goals and priorities among key stakeholders. While representatives of regional and local authorities, tourism organisations, cultural institutions, and experts generally acknowledge the potential of cultural routes, their expectations and

levels of engagement differ significantly. This lack of alignment is further reinforced by fragmented governance structures and weak intersectoral coordination, as reflected in the dimensions in Table 3. Interviews revealed the absence of a central coordinating body at the regional level responsible for managing, monitoring, and promoting cultural routes, as well as limited mechanisms for involving local communities, NGOs, and small and medium-sized enterprises. Consequently, stakeholder participation remains largely passive and project-dependent.

**Table 3.** Development Potential of Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe in Istria County

| <b>Dimension</b>                     | <b>Current Challenges</b>   | <b>Development Opportunities</b>   | <b>Recommended Actions</b>  |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|---|
| <b>Institutional Cooperation</b>     | Fragmented governance; limited coordination across borders                            | Potential for cross-border cultural governance frameworks                    | Establish transnational management bodies; enhance inter-municipal agreements |
| <b>Stakeholder Engagement</b>        | Low awareness among local actors; passive involvement                                 | Engaging local communities, NGOs, SMEs in co-creation of routes              | Conduct stakeholder workshops; develop participatory planning mechanisms      |
| <b>Funding and Investment</b>        | Reliance on short-term project funding  | Access to EU programs (e.g., Interreg, Creative Europe, Horizon Europe)      | Develop long-term funding strategies; promote public-private partnerships     |
| <b>Cultural Resource Integration</b> | Underutilization of tangible and intangible heritage                                  | Possibility to link diverse heritage types into unified thematic routes      | Map and digitize heritage assets; create cross-border thematic clusters       |
| <b>Tourism and Promotion</b>         | Lack of route visibility; weak marketing infrastructure; coastal and seasonal tourism | Development of sustainable, experience-based tourism offerings               | Design cross-border itineraries; enhance branding and digital presence        |
| <b>Education and Interpretation</b>  | Limited heritage interpretation tools   | Opportunities for multilingual, interactive cultural education               | Create digital storytelling platforms; promote school-route collaborations    |
| <b>Monitoring and Evaluation</b>     | Absence of systematic impact assessment   | Potential to develop indicators aligned with Council of Europe standards     | Implement local route observatories; use cultural impact metrics              |
| <b>Identity and Cohesion</b>         | National narratives may dominate over shared heritage                                 | Cultural routes can foster shared European identity and territorial cohesion | Promote inclusive narratives; encourage bi-national cultural festivals        |

Source: authors' research (2025)

Another significant issue is the low visibility of cultural routes, particularly in comparison to dominant coastal and seasonal tourism models. Apart from a few better-known thematic routes, such as wine-related itineraries, most European Cultural Routes in Istria are poorly promoted, weakly interpreted on-site, and insufficiently integrated into coherent tourism products. This reduces their capacity to contribute meaningfully to sustainable tourism diversification, cultural economy development, and territorial cohesion.

Importantly, the research indicates that Istria's situation is not exceptional. Previous studies (e.g. Timothy and Boyd, 2014; Lin et al., 2024) have shown that cultural routes often struggle with fragmented governance, limited institutional capacity, and dependence on short-term project funding, particularly in regions where mass tourism or sectoral policy silos dominate development strategies. In this sense, Istria exemplifies a broader structural challenge within the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe programme; certification alone does not guarantee effective implementation.

Additionally, this discussion includes findings from research conducted by students at the Interdisciplinary Study Programme of Culture and Tourism, Juraj Dobrila University of Pula, Croatia. In the framework of courses on Heritage Management and Cultural Routes, students explored the development potential of the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe programme in Croatia. By combining desk research and primary field research, they analysed existing routes and proposed the development of new sections for more than 20 European cultural routes.

Through consultations with key stakeholders and site visits, students collected data on heritage resources, accessibility, and development potential. Their final theses addressed topics such as Cultural routes of the Council of Europe in the Republic of Croatia; European cultural route of Historic Thermal Towns – Croatian section; European route of Industrial Heritage – regional route in Croatia; Possibilities of improving international cultural cooperation by creating new sections of European cultural routes; European cultural routes - Transromanica (proposal for the development of the Croatian section); European Cultural Routes – Routes of archaeological heritage; European cultural routes – Istrian cultural itinerary on the Route of Saint James, etc.

These findings further confirm the untapped potential identified in stakeholder interviews. This research reveals opportunities for developing new cultural routes in Istria County, such as the Istrian section of the European Route of Industrial Heritage, which could valorise the industrial heritage of Labin and Raša, and the integration of Istria's Glagolitic heritage into the Cyril and Methodius Route, focusing on sites such as the Glagolitic Alley between Roč and Hum. Furthermore, within ongoing European initiatives such as the FORTIC project (From Remains of the War to the Architecture of Peace in the Cross-Border Area of Italy–Croatia), there is significant potential for further development of Pula's fortification heritage. Integration within the FORTE CULTURA network could enhance transnational cooperation and provide new interpretative layers for Istria's fortified architectural heritage.

## **6. Conclusion**

Cultural heritage in cross-border and multicultural regions, such as Istria County in Croatia, could be used as a catalyst for sustainable economic development and valorisation of cultural heritage. The conducted research confirmed that the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe, as accessible and flexible cultural-tourism products based on the networking of attractions, services, and narratives, could offer significant potential to strengthen local identities and regional economy, enhancing the visibility of European cultural values and transnational heritage.

The research results, addressing RQ1 and RQ2, indicate that in Istria the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe remains at a very early stage of development, with seven certified routes. The lack of a

coordinated and strategic approach, limited stakeholder engagement, orientation towards the development of coastal and seasonal tourism, and weak institutional cooperation have contributed to the underutilization of Istria's full potential within the Council of Europe's programme. Istria is particularly well-positioned to become a model region for sustainable and transnational cultural tourism, given its geopolitical location, cultural diversity, and active cross-border partnerships. The success of cultural routes in Istria depends on their ability to function as dynamic, inclusive platforms that support not only economic innovations but also heritage management, education, and intercultural dialogue.

The scientific contribution of this paper arises from the analysis of the underexplored issue of the development of Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe in specific cross-border regions (such as Istria County), addressing a research gap in theoretical conceptualization and providing empirical evidence that has not yet been documented in this context. The paper also introduces an innovative methodological approach to the study of cultural routes, applying a multidisciplinary framework that combines desk and field methods, allowing a comprehensive understanding of both theoretical and practical aspects of cultural route development, including the transnational and cross-border dimension. A key recommendation emerging from the research is related to the importance of promoting European cultural routes, by the active involvement of regional stakeholders in the process of planning, implementation, and long-term management. In the process of valorising regional heritage through transnational initiatives, such as Council of Europe, cultural routes represent a model for developing the sensibility and belonging of local communities with the unique cross-border Istrian heritage.

This paper acknowledges several limitations. Besides the small sample size of interviewed representatives of key stakeholders, the paper focuses only on Istria County and does not provide a comparative analysis with other Croatian or European regions. Despite these limitations, the conducted research provided an initial insight into the current state of development of cultural routes in Istria, contributing to the growing academic discourse on cross-border heritage valorisation. Future research should include structured and in-depth assessment of cultural routes development, applicate cultural routes evaluation model and measuring the sustainability of existing sections of cultural routes.

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APPENDIX A:

**Table 1.** Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe in the Republic of Croatia

| Route Name                               | Year | Description   |
|--|------|---|
| Santiago De Compostela Pilgrim Routes    | 1987 | Historic pilgrimage path leading to the shrine of St. James in Santiago de Compostela, celebrated for its spiritual, cultural, and historical significance. |
| Phoenicians' Route                       | 2003 | Traces the ancient maritime trade routes of the Phoenicians across the Mediterranean, highlighting their cultural exchanges and influence.                  |
| European Route of Jewish Heritage        | 2004 | Explores Jewish cultural sites across Europe, focusing on Jewish history, heritage, and contributions to European culture.                                  |
| Saint Martin of Tours Route              | 2005 | Follows the path of Saint Martin, promoting his legacy of charity and peace, and linking sites associated with his life across Europe.                      |
| Routes of the Olive Tree                 | 2005 | Celebrates the Mediterranean's olive-growing heritage, highlighting cultural, historical, and economic impacts of olive trees and olive oil.                |
| TRANSROMANICA                            | 2007 | Showcases Romanesque architecture and art across Europe, with sites symbolizing a shared European heritage.   |
| Iter Vitis Route                         | 2009 | Dedicated to Europe's rich viticultural landscapes, this route emphasizes the cultural history of wine and traditional viticulture.                         |
| European Cemeteries Route                | 2010 | Highlights significant cemeteries across Europe, offering insight into social, cultural, and historical practices related to memorialization.               |
| European Route of Historic Thermal Towns | 2010 | Connects historic spa towns, celebrating Europe's tradition of thermal baths and the cultural importance of wellness and health tourism.                    |
| European Route of Ceramics               | 2012 | Focuses on Europe's ceramic heritage, covering regions known for traditional ceramic production and artistic ceramic works.                                 |
| ATRIUM                                   | 2013 | Highlights European totalitarian regimes' architecture, reflecting 20th-century political history through monumental structures.                            |
| Roman Emperors and Danube Wine Route     | 2015 | Combines Roman historical sites along the Danube with regional wine culture, connecting history with gastronomic tourism.                                   |

|                                       |      |   |
|---------------------------------------|------|---|
| Destination Napoleon                  | 2015 | Follows Napoleon Bonaparte’s influence across Europe, linking sites that highlight his era’s historical and cultural legacy.              |
| Impressionisms Routes                 | 2018 | Celebrates Impressionist art, connecting European sites that inspired and displayed works from this influential movement.                 |
| European Route of Industrial Heritage | 2019 | Explores Europe’s industrial heritage, highlighting historical sites of industry, engineering achievements, and their cultural impacts.   |
| Iron Curtain Trail - Eurovelo 13      | 2019 | Cycling route along the former Iron Curtain, emphasizing Europe’s division and subsequent reunification, with historic and scenic stops.  |
| Iron Age Danube Route                 | 2021 | Covers significant Iron Age archaeological sites along the Danube, highlighting ancient European civilizations and their heritage.        |
| Cyril and Methodius Route             | 2021 | Focuses on the legacy of Saints Cyril and Methodius, exploring cultural and religious sites across Europe connected to their missions.    |
| European Fairy Tale Route             | 2022 | Connects regions and sites associated with European fairy tales, celebrating folklore, storytelling traditions, and cultural imagination. |
| Women Writers Route                   | 2022 | Honors Europe’s historic women writers, promoting literary heritage and recognizing the contributions of women in literature.             |
| European Route of Historic Pharmacies | 2024 | Highlights Europe’s historic pharmacies, celebrating the history of medicine, pharmacy practices, and cultural heritage.                  |

Source: Council of Europe (2025). *Croatia – Cultural Routes*. Available at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes/croatia>.

## Trenutno stanje i perspektive razvoja Kulturnih ruta Vijeća Europe u Istarskoj županiji

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**Sažetak:** Rad se osvrće na trenutno stanje i razvojne potencijale Kulturnih ruta Vijeća Europe u Istarskoj županiji (Hrvatska). Autori su krenuli od pretpostavke da Istra, kao prekogranična, multikulturalna i višejezična regija koju karakterizira prepoznatljiv kulturni krajolik, ima veliki potencijal za stvaranje europskih kulturnih ruta. Istraživački problem proizašao je iz zapažanja da je provedba Kulturnih ruta Vijeća Europe u Istri još uvijek u ranoj fazi razvoja te da ključni dionici još nisu u potpunosti prepoznali strateški potencijal valorizacije jedinstvene baštine regije kroz razvoj transnacionalnih kulturnih ruta. Metodologija istraživanja temeljila se na kvalitativnom dizajnu studije slučaja i kombinaciji desk i terenskog istraživanja, što je uključivalo intervjue s predstavnicima ključnih dionika. Nakon pregleda literature, ovo istraživanje predstavlja studiju slučaja Istarske županije. Analiza se usredotočuje na identificiranje trenutnih izazova, razvojnih prilika i preporučenih strateških akcija povezanih s provedbom Kulturnih ruta Vijeća Europe u regiji. Rezultati sugeriraju da europske tematske kulturne rute, kao najpristupačniji i najisplativiji oblici kulturnog turizma, mogu imati važnu ulogu u jačanju lokalnih identiteta i poticanju održivog regionalnog gospodarskog razvoja. Istarska županija, kao transgranična granična regija, mogla bi promovirati kulturne rute kao model valorizacije zajedničke europske baštine i temeljnih europskih vrijednosti.

**Ključne riječi:** kulturne rute, Vijeće Europe, transgranične regije, europska baština, Istra

**JEL klasifikacija:** O10, O19, Z1, Z32