

30 years of Cultural Routes history, values, and future perspectives

I want to try and present a picture of Cultural Routes as one important activity within the Council of Europe's and CDCPP's work. This is both because I am personally not an expert in Cultural Routes and because one often needs to look at a given phenomenon from a distance to see close.

HISTORY

The Council of Europe has important conventions in the fields of culture, heritage and landscape (such as Granada, Malta, Florence and Faro). They provide a solid legal framework for our work in these sectors. It is, however, useful, if not necessary, to complement the legal framework with concrete activities involving local communities and citizens in a more direct manner. After all, the aim of the CoE is to *“achieve a greater unity between its members for the purpose of safeguarding and realising the ideals and principles which are their common heritage and facilitating their economic and social progress”*. The European Cultural Convention goes on to state that this aim is to be *“furthered by a greater understanding of one another among the peoples of Europe”*.

Cultural Routes is, obviously, a good example of doing just that: to further greater understanding between people to realise the ideals that are our common heritage. Although the project was initiated in 1987, the establishment of the EPA in 2010 represented a milestone in harnessing the activity.

VALUES

Whenever I have been speaking in different conferences in my capacity as the CDCPP Chair, I have underlined that the *raison d'être* – as well as the common denominator – of the CDCPP is to promote democracy.

It may be worthwhile to remind ourselves of what democracy actually means. Of course, one aspect of political democracy is to be able to vote in elections. But the deeper meaning of democracy, as the term itself implies, is that we, as citizens, both

govern ourselves and are being governed. The absolutely critical precondition to democracy is the willingness of everyone to try and resolve, or at least accommodate, differences peacefully and without infringing anyone's rights.

It is self-explanatory, that insofar as Cultural Routes foster understanding of our common history and links, including across current state frontiers, it gives us a much welcome perspective. Such wider perspective should also help us when we are building and defining our identities and how we are seeing ourselves in relation to others, be it at local, regional, national, European, or global level.

FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

The way I and the CDCPP see it, Cultural Routes need to remain an important activity of the Council of Europe and its Member States with strong links to the European Commission. European Institute of Cultural Routes, under the leadership of Stefano Dominioni and backing from the Luxemburg government, is doing very good work and deserves the best support that we can give them.

It goes without saying that our Steering Committee is always willing to learn about any new developments of Cultural Routes and contribute to their further refinement. However, I would like to conclude by briefly reflecting on the role of Cultural Routes in the current political landscape.

It is not an exaggeration to say that our democracies are under pressure. A decade of economic depression or stagnation and the so called migration crisis have prompted many citizens and also politicians to resort to more or less openly racist and xenophobic discourse and even hate-speech. From democracy standpoint, this means rejecting the fundamental principles of human dignity, equality, freedom, diversity as well as the negation of the rights of "others" to participate in the process of deliberation.

All democratic governments and indeed the Council of Europe must try and counteract these doubts on the viability of democracy, or outright attacks against it. There is no one great "European platform" to defend democracy, but rather a myriad of smaller initiatives. Cultural Routes is one of them. As I already said, cultural routes have proven to be able to widen our perspectives. They portray and highlight how connected, and interconnected, Europe and European people have always been. Thereby, bringing this understanding to as many people as possible is

now more important than ever. We could probably underline this particular point in national and European political discourse even more actively than what we have done so far.

Finally, we should be vigilant in making sure that xenophobic movements will not “hijack” the Cultural Routes’ message of openness and inclusiveness and turn it into something Eurocentric and exclusive. Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe are an important tool to foster democracy and they possess the capacity to further spread this message and we need to protect and promote their ability to do so.