EPS European Politics and Society

Universiteit Leiden

European Politics and Society:
Václav Havel Joint Master Programme

Leiden University

Between Recognition and Exclusion: Investigating Structural Biases in the Cultural Routes Certification Process

Master's Thesis

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the functioning of recognition mechanisms at the supranational level, with particular reference to instruments such as the UNESCO World Heritage List and European structural funds. This thesis contributes to this debate by analyzing the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes programme, with the aim of understanding whether this instrument, formally oriented towards inclusion and cultural cooperation, is also influenced by structural selective logics. Through a comparative and methodologically articulated approach, the research examines the relationship between institutional capacity, territorial participation, and dynamics of access to the certification process. In particular, it analyzes geographical patterns, statistical data on quality of government, as well as two case studies of recently nominated routes. The study aims to contribute to the understanding of the factors that condition access to cultural enhancement mechanisms in Europe, questioning the apparent neutrality of devices that, while claiming to be technical and inclusive, may reflect pre-existing inequalities in the European institutional landscape.

INTRODUCTION

Obtaining an internationally recognized certification brings several benefits, such as increased visibility, attraction of investment, increased local tourism and the strengthening of national, regional and local identity, as evidenced by the UNESCO World Heritage status. It appears that UNESCO's certification mechanism favors or at least tends to favor those countries that are economically more developed, to the detriment of those with fewer economic and institutional resources to successfully participate in the nomination process.[1] In fact, inclusion on the World Heritage List entails a considerable increase in visibility and a potential economic return, particularly for the tourism sector, making this recognition highly coveted by governments, local authorities and economic operators.[2] This same interest has helped transform UNESCO certification into a strategic field marked by rent-seeking dynamics, where recognition is not only an outcome of cultural or conservationist merit, but also the result of political negotiations and institutional influences.

In other words, the candidacy phase is increasingly becoming a competitive space, where diplomatic skill and the strength of institutional ties become as decisive as, if not more so, than the objective cultural value of the proposed site. Although the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, signed on 23 November 1972, establishes ten 'objective' criteria for admission to the List, the actual selection of sites often reflects geopolitical balances and diplomatic pressures.[3] In this sense, the decision-making process appears anything but neutral and lends itself to being instrumentalized by actors capable of mobilizing political and bureaucratic resources to their own advantage. The success of a bid may depend not only on the quality of the site or its cultural relevance, but also on factors such as a state's political weight in international organizations, the longevity of its participation in the Convention and the efficiency of the institutions involved.[4]

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[1] Enrico Bertacchini, Claudia Liuzza, and Lynn Meskell, "Shifting the Balance of Power in the UNESCO World Heritage Committee: An Empirical Assessment," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 23, no. 3 (2015): 336, https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2015.1048243.

[2] Lynn Meskell, "Transacting UNESCO World Heritage: Gifts and Exchanges on a Global Stage," *Social Anthropology* 23, no. 1 (2015): 4, https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12100.

[3] Lynn Meskell, "UNESCO's World Heritage Convention at 40: Challenging the Economic and Political Order of International Heritage Conservation," *Current Anthropology* 54, no. 4 (2013): 486-489, https://doi.org/10.1086/671136.

[4] Enrico Bertacchini and Donatella Saccone, "Toward a Political Economy of World Heritage," *Journal of Cultural Economics* 36, no. 4 (2012): 327–52, https://ssrn.com/abstract=1757864.

In addition, the member states historically most present in the UNESCO system, typically major European cultural powers, concentrate a disproportionate number of recognized sites.[5] This imbalance reflects how the supposed objectivity of the system is actually permeated by historical and institutional logics that favor certain countries, creating a cumulative effect over time. The result of all this is a system that, while intended to celebrate global cultural diversity, ends up reproducing historical inequalities and privileging those contexts best equipped administratively and economically. Ultimately, the distribution of international recognition does not follow a purely meritocratic logic but is strongly influenced by extra technical and structural factors.

This situation illustrates how international certification schemes, although framed as tools of recognition and cultural valorization often act as selective devices. As the authors note, these mechanisms appear neutral and technocratic, but in practice their selective logic benefits certain categories of actors at the expense of others.[6] The apparent technicality of these instruments actually conceals a strong capacity for political direction, capable of deeply affecting European territorial and cultural balances.

A similar dynamic is also found in other institutional processes where recognition or resource allocation is at stake, such as in the effective absorption and utilization of EU structural funds. In this case, too, despite being a distinctly different context from that of UNESCO certification, the issue of equity in access resurfaces. In the panorama of European policies, structural funds represent one of the most incisive financial instruments made available by the European Union to reduce disparities between regions and support integrated development. However, the possibility of accessing these resources depends on a series of institutional, technical and political conditions that are not equally distributed among the Member States and their territorial units.[7] In particular, economically weaker regions often face difficulties not only due to a lack of resources, but also due to shortcomings in planning and operational management. In this sense, the structural funds are

[5] Bruno S. Frey, Paolo Pamini, and Lasse Steiner, "Explaining the World Heritage List: An Empirical Study," *International Review of Economics* 60, no. 1 (March 2013): 5-9, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12232-013-0174-4.

[6] Frey, Pamini, and Steiner, "Explaining the World Heritage List," 1–19.

[7] Florence Bouvet and Sandy Dall'erba, "European Regional Structural Funds: How Large Is the Influence of Politics on the Allocation Process?" *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 48, no. 3 (2010): 502-503-508-509-511-512-523-524, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2010.02062.x.

also configured as selective devices, whose actual impact is strongly mediated by the so-called absorption capacity of the actors involved. This capacity is articulated on several levels: from the macroeconomic one, linked to the size of the national GDP, to the financial one, connected to the possibility of co-financing the requested projects, up to the administrative capacity, understood as the technical and managerial competence of the authorities responsible for preparing, implementing and reporting on the interventions.[8]

The effectiveness of cohesion policies, therefore, cannot be achieved without an adequate administrative infrastructure and a stable institutional environment. It is precisely this latter dimension that has proved particularly problematic, especially in countries where a shortage of qualified personnel, institutional fragmentation and inefficient public structures hinder the effective use of available funds. Moreover, the management of European funds requires an articulated system of multi-level governance involving central administrations, local authorities, private actors and civil society. Lack of coordination between these actors or unclear distribution of responsibilities can generate delays, waste and, in the most serious cases, mismanagement or irregularities.[9]

The availability of appropriate technical tools, such as codified procedures, guidelines, management software and monitoring systems, also plays a crucial role in ensuring that projects are carried out to the required standards.[10] In this framework, access to the structural funds cannot be read solely as a question of political will or planning merit, but as the outcome of a complex system that rewards those capable of mobilizing a combination of economic resources, technical knowledge and relational skills.[11] An integrated project capability supported by transnational collaborative networks is often a decisive competitive advantage. The risk, even in this case, is that resources designed to rebalance disparities instead contribute to exacerbating them, ending up strengthening

[8] Jan Pavel and Stanislav Klazar, *EU Funds: Absorption Capacity and Effectiveness of Their Use, with Focus on Regional Level in the Czech Republic* (conference paper, 2003): 2.

[9] Brian Terracciano and Paolo R. Graziano, "EU Cohesion Policy Implementation and Administrative Capacities: Insights from Italian Regions," *Regional & Federal Studies* 26, no. 3 (2016): 2-3-4-8-9-10, https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2016.1200033.

[10] Pavel and Klazar, *EU Funds: Absorption Capacity and Effectiveness: 2-3.*

[11] Marco Di Cataldo and Andrés Rodríguez-Pose, "What Drives Employment Growth and Social Inclusion in the Regions of the European Union?" *Regional Studies* 51, no. 12 (2017): 1842-1843-1844-1854-1855, https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2016.1255320.

those territories already endowed with greater administrative infrastructure and professional skills, and further marginalising those structurally weaker.

The cases of UNESCO certification and the allocation of EU structural funds have already been extensively analysed in the existing literature, revealing how these instruments, although formally oriented towards cultural enhancement and territorial rebalancing, often end up reproducing selective dynamics and reinforcing already existing inequalities.[12] The literature shows, therefore, that these mechanisms are far from neutral and require careful reflection on their real socio-economic impact.

In contrast, other less explored devices, such as the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes programme, have not received the same critical attention, and whether they present similar problems has not yet been investigated. This programme also operates through a certification process, which grants institutional recognition and ensures greater visibility and legitimacy at the international level for certified itineraries. Obtaining such recognition can translate into concrete benefits for promoters, such as access to funding, inclusion in transnational networks and more effective tourism promotion. Moreover, this recognition may also have implications in terms of symbolic capital for the territories involved, echoing the dynamics already seen with UNESCO and EU funds.

A certified cultural route acquires institutional legitimacy that can facilitate new collaborations and attract external investment. However, it is still unclear whether this certification process replicates selection logics similar to those highlighted in the UNESCO and EU cases, where extra-technical factors such as political-institutional weight, administrative capacity of the proponents come into

[12] Giovanni Cunico, Eirini Aivazidou, and Edoardo Mollona, "Decision-Making Traps Behind Low Regional Absorption of Cohesion Policy Funds," *European Policy Analysis* 8, no. 4 (2022): 439–66, https://doi.org/10.1002/epa2.1162; Carlos Mendez and John Bachtler, "The Quality of Government and Administrative Performance: Explaining Cohesion Policy Compliance, Absorption and Achievements across EU Regions," *Regional Studies* 58, no. 4 (2022): 690–703, https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2022.2083593; Enrico Bertacchini and Donatella Saccone, "Toward a Political Economy of World Heritage," *Journal of Cultural Economics* 36, no. 4 (2012): 327–52, https://ssrn.com/abstract=1757864; Lasse Steiner and Bruno S. Frey, "Imbalance of World Heritage List: Did the UNESCO Strategy Work?" *SSRN Electronic Journal*, January 2011, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1807889; Bruno S. Frey, Paolo Pamini, and Lasse Steiner, "Explaining the World Heritage List: An Empirical Study," *International Review of Economics* 60, no. 1 (March 2013): 5-9, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12232-013-0174-4; Simona Milio, "Can Administrative Capacity Explain Differences in Regional Performances? Evidence from Structural Funds Implementation in Southern Italy," *Regional Studies* 41, no. 4 (2007): 429–42, https://doi.org/10.1080/00343400601120213; Meskell, "Transacting UNESCO World Heritage," 3–21; Bouvet and Dall'erba, "European Regional Structural Funds," 501–28.

play. As in the other two cases, one might hypothesize that applicants with greater institutional experience and strategic networking capabilities are in a more favorable position. This research therefore aims to fill a gap in the existing literature by adopting an approach that analyzes whether the Cultural Routes programme also has structural biases within it.

The absence of systematic studies on this specific certification mechanism represents a knowledge gap that this research intends to fill. The research assumes particular relevance in the context of contemporary academic debate, which increasingly questions the political and selective dimension of cultural governance instruments and the need to ensure greater transparency and equity in decision-making processes. To date, there are no consolidated studies critically analysing the functioning of the certification mechanism of European cultural routes, nor questioning the apparent neutrality of the mechanism. In light of these considerations, the research will focus on understanding the certification process of the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes programme and the possibile presence of structural biases that may influence decisions. The research question that will serve as a basis for the development of the research is:

“Does the certification process of the Council of Europe’s Cultural Routes programme reproduce structural biases similar to those observed in the UNESCO World Heritage certification process and the EU Structural Funds allocation process?

This research question allows to analyze the implications for cultural governance and equity in decision-making processes. The methodological approach adopted in this research was structured with the aim of identifying whether and to what extent structural conditions affect the probability of obtaining certification within the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes programme. The analysis focused on broader spatial patterns, statistical correlations with key structural indicators, and selected case studies. The value of this research lies precisely in the process of analysis that explores a topic that is still too little studied; if the results were to reveal the presence of structural biases in the certification process, it would have implications for the management of cultural routes and expand the academic debate already present in the literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

CULTURAL RECOGNITION AND INEQUALITIES IN SUPRANATIONAL PROGRAMMES

Over the years, academic attention to cultural and cohesion policies promoted by supranational organizations such as UNESCO and the European Union has intensified, bringing to light the structural ambiguities that characterize mechanisms of cultural recognition and economic redistribution.[13] Numerous studies have highlighted how formally inclusion-oriented programs, the World Heritage List on the one hand, and European structural funds on the other, actually operate through selective logics that tend to reproduce systemic hierarchies and inequalities.[14] Although they are profoundly different in purpose and scope, the former operating in the cultural field, the latter in the financial one, both share structural features that make them subject to selection mechanisms that are neither always transparent nor fair.

However, within this extensive literature, one element is overlooked: the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes programme and its certification process. Despite its longevity, growing political prominence and transnational nature, it has rarely been the subject of critical analysis comparable to that reserved for the other two frameworks. This research aims to fill this gap by examining whether structural obstacles similar to those already well documented in UNESCO and EU programmes are reflected in the less visible but equally ambitious case of cultural routes.

To do so, a comparative and conceptually informed approach will be used, based on some cross-cutting theoretical categories that emerge strongly from the existing literature. The first key concept is that of structural biases; as demonstrated in the literature, these biases operate by selecting

[13] Steiner and Frey, 2011. "Imbalance of World Heritage List: Did the UNESCO Strategy Work?"1-19; Cunico, Aivazidou, and Mollona, 2022. "Decision-Making Traps Behind Low Regional Absorption of Cohesion Policy Funds." 439-66.

[14] Bertacchini and Saccone, "Toward a Political Economy of World Heritage."327-52; Mendez and Bachtler, 2022. "The Quality of Government and Administrative Performance." 690-703; Frey, Pamini, and Steiner, 2013. "Explaining the World Heritage List: an empirical study." 1-19; Milio, 2007. "Can Administrative Capacity Explain Differences in Regional Performances?"429-42.

actors capable of mobilizing technical-bureaucratic expertise, diplomatic networks, and adaptability to the languages and standards of supranational organizations.[15]

A second analytical axis concerns administrative capacity. In the European context, it's defined as "the capacity of national and regional government authorities: to design regional development programmes to meet EU objectives and in accordance with local needs; to allocate funding to eligible projects in line with EU rules; and to account for the funding spent in financial terms (audit) and physical outcomes (evaluation)"[16]. Similarly, in the case of UNESCO, adequate support for the preparation of candidacy dossiers is crucial to obtaining recognition. This is evident if one looks at the marked disparity between countries in the global North and South in the number of recognized sites, reflecting disparities in the capacity to prepare effective candidacies.[17]

A third central element is the politicization of decision-making practices. Numerous studies, show how, behind the rhetoric of technical neutrality, opportunistic logics, political favoritism, and negotiating strategies between states or levels of government are often hidden.[18] This politicization is not a failure of the system, but a recurrent mode of operation of the system that continually redraws the maps of cultural and economic power. Building on these theoretical premises and the existing literature, the research aims to ascertain the extent to which these dynamics recur or are transformed in the context of the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes programme. Without assuming a priori perfect continuity, the analysis aims to understand whether this instrument is able to escape the selective logics observed elsewhere or whether, instead, it represents a more subtle and less scrutinized declination of them.

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[15] Neculai-Cristian Surubaru, 2016. "Administrative Capacity or Quality of Political Governance? EU Cohesion Policy in the New Europe, 2007–13," *Regional Studies* 51, no. 6: 846-847-848-849, https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2016.1246798.; Frey, Pamini, and Steiner, 2013. "Explaining the World Heritage List: an empirical study."3-4-5-6-9-10-11-12-15.

[16] Bachtler, Polverari, Domorenok, and Graziano, 2023. "Administrative Capacity and EU Cohesion Policy: Implementation Performance and Effectiveness," *Regional Studies* 58, no. 4: 685, https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2023.2276887.

[17] Christoph Brumann, 2018. "Slag Heaps and Time Lags: Undermining Southern Solidarity in the UNESCO World Heritage Committee," *Ethnos* 84, no. 4: 721-722-723-725, https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2018.1471514.

[18] Nicola Francesco Dotti, 2015. "Unwritten Factors Affecting Structural Funds: The Influence of Regional Political Behaviours on the Implementation of EU Cohesion Policy," *European Planning Studies* 24, no. 3: 530–50, https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2015.1047328.; Bertacchini, Liuzza, and Meskell, 2015. "Shifting the Balance of Power in the UNESCO World Heritage Committee.".

ANALYTICAL CATEGORIES: STRUCTURAL BIAS, ADMINISTRATIVE CAPACITY AND POLITICIZATION

Barriers to access represent one of the main cross-cutting issues in both the European cohesion programs and the UNESCO system of cultural heritage recognition and enhancement. In both contexts, access to resources, whether material funds or symbolic recognition, is conditioned by preconditions that not all actors are able to meet equally. The literature has shown that these imbalances do not result only from differences in merit or contingent failures, but from structural arrangements and implicit criteria that, often, end up reinforcing existing inequalities.[19]

A first common element concerns the presence of unequal baseline conditions in terms of institutional capacity, technical know-how and relational capital. In the context of EU funds, these conditions translate into a capacity to present, manage and especially spend the allocated resources, resulting in divergent territorial outcomes.[20] These so-called capacities are often determined by domestic political factors.[21] Similarly, UNESCO recognition is often tied to the ability of national and local actors to conform to a specific technical-evaluation grammar. Often, dealing with nomination dossiers of hundreds and thousands of pages, countries that lack the necessary means and specialized personnel do not even try to apply. This automatically goes back to the importance of the economic aspect: if you have the economic power and influence and thus the indispensable means to act, you are more likely to gain recognition from UNESCO.[22]

Brumann shows very clearly how the UNESCO selection process is dominated by Eurocentric logics that condition the chances of recognition. In particular, the author highlights how decisions are often influenced by a "universalizing" view of heritage that reflects aesthetic, material and conceptual values typical of Western cultural elites.[23] This translates into easier access for European

[19] Christoph Brumann, 2014. "Shifting Tides of World-Making in the UNESCO World Heritage Convention: Cosmopolitanisms Colliding," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37, no. 12: 2176–92, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2014.934261.; Di Cataldo and Rodríguez-Pose, 2017. "What Drives Employment Growth and Social Inclusion in the Regions of the European Union?"1840-59.

[20] Milio, 2007. "Can Administrative Capacity Explain Differences in Regional Performances," 430-431-432.

[21] Surubaru, 2016. "Administrative Capacity or Quality of Political Governance?" 845-846-847-848.

[22] Bertacchini and Saccone, "Toward a Political Economy of World Heritage."327-52.

[23] Brumann, 2018. "Slag Heaps and Time Lags: Undermining Southern Solidarity in the UNESCO World Heritage Committee."719-38; Brumann, 2014. "Shifting Tides of World-Making in the UNESCO World Heritage Convention: Cosmopolitanisms Colliding."2176-92.

countries, which can rely on experts already integrated into UNESCO networks, but also on a narrative language that is more easily recognized and legitimized. Proposals from non-European contexts or those not aligned with these codes, on the other hand, often have to "translate" their specificities to make them compatible with international institutional expectations, losing part of their authenticity.

From the side of access to European funds, Terracciano and Graziano, focuses on Italian regions and shows how administrative capacity is a key determinant in the success or failure of cohesion policy. Drawing on empirical data and interviews, the authors show that areas with stable bureaucratic structures, trained staff and greater experience in community planning succeed in obtaining a greater share of funds and managing them more efficiently. In contrast, regions with weaker administrative apparatuses, while needing more support, face obstacles in meeting the criteria imposed by the Commission. This produces a paradoxical dynamic in which those who need more receive less, and vice versa.[24]

Milio 's contribution is particularly helpful in understanding how these gaps have crystallized over time. Analyzing the case of Southern Italy, Milio highlights the persistence of patterns of systemic exclusion, in which local administrative weakness combines with a lack of multilevel coordination, making both project planning and implementation difficult. His analysis is enriched by longitudinal data showing how the same deficiencies recur cycle after cycle, suggesting the existence of a structural rather than a contingent barrier.[25]

Comparatively, Surubaru expands this perspective by extending it to the new EU member states. His research is based on a statistical analysis of the absorption of funds, comparing several indicators of administrative capacity and political governance. The result shows that the quality of governance (understood as institutional stability, transparency and control of decision-making processes)

[24] Terracciano and Graziano, 2016. "EU Cohesion Policy Implementation and Administrative Capacities: Insights From Italian Regions." 293-320.

[25] Milio, 2007. "Can Administrative Capacity Explain Differences in Regional Performances? Evidence from Structural Funds Implementation in Southern Italy."429-42.

carries even more weight than mere technical capacity.[26] This confirms that access barriers are related also to the configuration of political power and decision-making rules.

Through an analysis on the conditioning exerted by the quality of local governance on European financial flows, the extent to which inequalities are institutionalized is perceived. The study, which uses a regional-scale dataset, shows that areas with high levels of autonomy and accountability tend to receive more funds, while those with opaque or clientelistic structures are penalized, regardless of objective need or the intrinsic quality of the projects submitted.[27] When we talk about barriers that do not allow access to institutional arrangements for the allocation of recognition and resources, we are not talking about simple side effects, but rather about direct consequences of mechanisms put in place that reproduce and reinforce pre-existing inequalities. The latter manifest themselves through administrative complexity and other elements such as the opacity of decision-making processes and the inappropriateness of criteria to specific local contexts.

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS AND INEQUALITIES IN ACCESS TO EU FUNDS AND CULTURAL AWARDS

Although the institutional arrangements related to the allocation of European funds or the designation of UNESCO sites are formally based on objective and universalistic criteria, a part of the literature has highlighted the persistent and in some cases structural role of political exchanges and power dynamics that profoundly affect decisions.[28] In both contexts, a constant tension emerges between the aspiration for meritocratic criteria and the reality of opaque and often asymmetrical negotiations. The adoption of transparent procedural arrangements is not in itself sufficient to prevent actors with greater bargaining power or political clout from steering decisions toward their own interests. It is useful to emphasize that these kinds of processes do not necessarily take the form of corruption or rule-breaking: rather, they are a normalization of informality within multilevel dynamics. Informal logics become an integral part of the functioning of the system, and their

[26] Surubaru, 2016. "Administrative Capacity or Quality of Political Governance? EU Cohesion Policy in the New Europe." 844–56.

[27] Nicholas Charron, 2016. "Explaining the Allocation of Regional Structural Funds: The Conditional Effect of Governance and Self-Rule," *European Union Politics* 17, no. 4: 638–59, https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116516658135.

[28] Meskell, 2015. "Transacting UNESCO World Heritage: Gifts and Exchanges on a Global Stage."; Deniz Aksoy, 2010. "Who Gets What, When, and How Revisited: Voting and Proposal Powers in the Allocation of the EU Budget," *European Union Politics* 11, no. 2: 171–94, https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116510363658.

effectiveness depends on the ability of actors to mobilize relationships, alliances and symbolic resources.

In the case of UNESCO, the World Heritage Committee has progressively lost its technical centrality and turned into a political arena, where final decisions increasingly deviate from the recommendations of the advisory bodies. The increasing politicization of the decision-making process reflects dynamics of multipolar fragmentation and geopolitical tensions that challenge the system's original principles of cooperation and impartiality. Technical assessments are sometimes ignored or altered to suit state interests, strategic alliances and the logic of regional representation, opening questions about the legitimacy and transparency of the entire mechanism.[29]

An interesting perspective is offered by Nielsen, who analyzes the inner workings of the UNESCO bureaucracy, highlighting how decision-making processes are influenced not only by geopolitical factors, but also by the ability of actors to perform the "right" kind of culture. The author argues that the projects and applications that successfully pass through technical and political vetting are those that best adhere to a cultural imaginary legitimized by UNESCO itself: a codified aesthetic, a universalizable heritage narrative, and a rhetorical capacity that conforms to officials' expectations. This produces a systemic bias, in which cultures that fail to "translate" into the appropriate languages are marginalized, not for lack of intrinsic value, but for formal inadequacy to the organization's implicit standards.[30] Evaluation, then, is never neutral, but filtered through a set of bureaucratic codes that reinforce some views of heritage at the expense of others.

Another interesting study is collocated in the context of the European Union's structural funds. The rules for allocating funds are formally presented as technocratic and tied to performance criteria. But it has been highlighted how relevant decisions are made in unseen spaces influenced by national and intergovernmental political dynamics. The political behavior of regions significantly influences the successful implementation of structural funds. Dotti shows, through comparative analysis and data on the programming cycle, that political alignment between regional authorities

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[29] Meskell, Liuzza, Bertacchini, and Saccone, 2014. "Multilateralism and UNESCO World Heritage: Decision-Making, States Parties and Political Processes," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 21, no. 5: 430-431-432. https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2014.945614.

[30] Bjarke Nielsen, "UNESCO and the 'Right' Kind of Culture: Bureaucratic Production and Articulation," *Critique of Anthropology* 31, no. 4 (2011): 273–92, https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X11420113.

and central government significantly improves absorption performance.[31] This dynamic confirms that formal capacity is not enough: political positioning matters as much as administrative capacity. The multilateral structure does not eliminate power inequalities, but often reproduces them through less visible forms. The formalization of procedures does not negate politicization, but rather tends to conceal it behind a rhetoric of neutrality.

Still on the topic of European funds, Bouvet and Dall'Erba through a study on the allocation of European funds, analyze how political factors, particularly the electoral weight of a member state in the Council, substantially influence financial distribution, especially when negotiating multi-year budgets.[32] The research confirms the idea that the "decision-maker" has a direct impact on the "recipient," revealing the deeply political nature of the decision-making process. This perspective allows the idea of impartiality in multilateral decision-making to be problematized. Politicization is not an anomaly, but a systemic feature of contexts in which national, regional and personal interests are pervasively intertwined. Understanding the informal politics governing these decisions is critical to assessing not only the efficiency but also the fairness of mechanisms for distributing cultural and economic value on a global scale.

POLITICALIZATION, INSTITUTIONAL ADAPTATION AND SYSTEMIC INEQUALITIES

The structural barriers that make it difficult for certain actors to access European funds and the associated economic benefits and international visibility through UNESCO designations are not only of a political nature. In many cases, they also take the form of processes of institutional reform and adaptation to achieve the necessary administrative capacities. In the field of European fund management, which, compared to UNESCO, sees this barrier act much more decisively, many regions have implemented structural reforms to improve their administrative capacity and adapt to EU requirements to benefit from structural funds.

Kun-Buczko's work, more relevant than ever having been published in the same year that Poland became a member of the EU, highlights how, in several candidate countries, the pressure to adapt

[31] Dotti, 2015. "Unwritten Factors Affecting Structural Funds: The Influence of Regional Political Behaviours on the Implementation of EU Cohesion Policy," 530–50.

[32] Bouvet and Dall'erba, 2010. "European Regional Structural Funds: How Large Is the Influence of Politics on the Allocation Process?" 501–28.

to EU bureaucratic mechanisms has led to the creation of new technical structures and coordinating agencies, often set up from scratch and staffed specifically for the fund cycle.[33] The process of adapting to European standards is crucial since without the proper technical capacities, less developed countries and regions cannot fully benefit from EU structural funds, which are a very effective tool for promoting territorial cohesion. Indeed, the authors show how, in the most developed regions, EU structural funds implement territorial cohesion.[34]

The issue becomes even more complex when one considers that, the implementation of technical-administrative tools is not sufficient for countries and regions with less institutional experience. In fact, the time factor comes into play: local governments are often forced to quickly mobilize their capacities to intercept funding rounds and benefit from them within the stipulated timeframe. However, this time pressure favors short-term approaches, which rarely allow for the development of solid and sustainable skills over the long term.[35] Where there are adequate implementation mechanisms and effective institutional and administrative capacity, cohesion policy has contributed to reducing disparities, significantly supporting less developed regions and member states. This shows that the effectiveness of the policy is not intrinsic to the design of the instrument itself but is highly dependent on the institutional context in which it is dropped, and the ability of local and national actors to adapt to its operational logic.

The success of European policies lies not only in their formal architecture, but also in the ability of territorial institutions to transpose and adapt them. In this sense, the adaptation process is not just a compliance exercise, but an opportunity for institutional transformation. When these tools are accompanied by adequate technical support and conscious territorial governance, they can effectively act as structural rebalancing levers, triggering more inclusive and sustainable development processes.

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[33] Magdalena Kun-Buczko, 2004. "The Capacity Building of the Institutional System as One of the Elements Necessary to the Effective Structural Funds Absorption," paper presented at the 12th NISPAcee Conference, *Central and Eastern European Countries Inside and Outside the European Union: Avoiding a New Divide*, Vilnius, Lithuania, 13–15 May 2004.

[34] Eduardo Medeiros, Oto Potluka, Barbara Demeterova, and Ida Musiałkowska, 2024. "EU Cohesion Policy towards Territorial Cohesion?" *Regional Studies* 58, no. 8: 1513-1514-1515, https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2024.2349736.

[35] Cunico, Aivazidou, and Mollona, 2022. "Decision-Making Traps Behind Low Regional Absorption of Cohesion Policy Funds."441-442-443.

In the context of UNESCO, Nielsen points out that UNESCO's internal bureaucracy requires a high degree of linguistic and procedural adaptability. Local actors must demonstrate the ability to employ the "right words" and present projects in line with a standardized cultural narrative in order to see their proposal recognized.[36] In this sense, the absence of administrative capacity translates not only into a technical obstacle, but into an ideological barrier that conditions access to international recognition and enhancement of one's heritage.

This adds to Brumann's analysis that points out how countries of the global South, seeking greater representation, often find themselves having to adapt their demands to the dominant logics of the North, lacking the administrative structures necessary to deal effectively with application and negotiation processes. The author shows how in the absence of solid capacities to navigate UNESCO's language and bureaucratic codes, many actors risk being left out.[37] Governance policies and practices, even when formally neutral, reflect historical balances and opportunity structures that vary from context to context. In this scenario, administrative capacity is not only a technical tool, but also becomes the ground on which inclusions, exclusions and recognition processes are played out. Institutional reforms and adaptations are never neutral: they translate into administrative form conflicts, worldviews and power relations that cross local, national and international arenas. Understanding this dimension allows to move beyond the rhetoric of "administrative capacity" as a mere technical variable, recognizing instead its inherently political and relational nature.

METHODOLOGY

This research sets out to investigate the presence of structural biases within the certification process of the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes. In line with the theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapters and considering the cases of UNESCO and the EU structural funds [38], the objective is to verify whether the institutional recognition granted by the programme is truly accessible to all European realities or not. In line with this objective, the expression "similar structural biases" used in the research question mainly refers to the tendency to favour regions with greater institutional

[36] Nielsen, 2011. "UNESCO and the 'Right' Kind of Culture: Bureaucratic Production and Articulation," 273–92.

[37] Brumann, 2018. "Slag Heaps and Time Lags: Undermining Southern Solidarity in the UNESCO World Heritage Committee." 719-720-721-722-723-724-725.

[38] Meskell, "Transacting UNESCO World Heritage," 3–21; Bouvet and Dall'erba, "European Regional Structural Funds," 501–28.

capacity. This research translates this concept into operational terms through the indicator of quality of government. The selected case study, the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes programme, is a particularly relevant object of analysis, not only due to the increasing political visibility it acquires in the European context, but also due to the scarce critical attention it receives in the literature to date.

Although the programme has some similarities with the certification mechanisms of UNESCO and the European Commission, such as the emphasis on transnational cooperation, heritage valorization and access to networks and resources, it differs in several key aspects. Firstly, the decision-making structure appears less hierarchical and more decentralized; secondly, the rhetoric underpinning its legitimacy is based less on the universalism of heritage and more on the promotion of specifically European values. In fact, the stated aim of the programme is to strengthen a shared sense of European identity through the promotion of cultural themes common to several countries, while also being formally open to itineraries extending beyond the continent's borders.[39] These peculiarities make the programme an interesting case for verifying whether the selective logics observed in UNESCO and European contexts are similarly reproduced in an apparently less visible and more value-based instrument.

The methodology adopted is divided into three distinct phases: an analysis of the territorial distributions, a statistical verification of the structural correlations, and a qualitative in-depth study through two selected case studies. Starting from the theoretical framework of the previous chapters, the key concept on which the entire methodological strategy is based is that of “structural bias”. The objective of the research is, in fact, to observe whether the certification process of the Council of Europe Cultural Routes is affected by structural elements that systematically lead to the exclusion of certain regions from the programme. It is therefore not a question of analyzing individual failures or occasional shortcomings, but of verifying the presence of recurring mechanisms rooted in the institutional and administrative conditions of the candidate territories.

In the specific context of the programme, “structural bias” is understood to be that dynamic whereby certain regions are systematically more likely to obtain certification, not because of the

[39] Council of Europe, “Certification,” *Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe*, n.d., https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes/certification (accessed June 10, 2025).

intrinsic merit of the proposals submitted, but as a result of prior conditions. Translating this abstract concept into an empirical research object requires a multi-step operationalization process.

It is hypothesized that the presence of a structural bias can be detected if one observes:

- A markedly unequal territorial distribution of certifications.
- A statistically correlation between certification success/failure and certain structural characteristics of the regions, such as the quality of government.

These hypotheses guide the construction of the research design and the identification of the relevant variables. The dependent variables are the presence/absence of certified and rejected itineraries in a given European region, while the independent variable is data selected from existing literature on the quality of government.[40] Furthermore, it is considered crucial to distinguish between three categories of regions: those in which certified routes have been developed, those that applied but did not obtain recognition (for which data is only available from 2015 onwards), and those that never participate in the programme. This distinction makes it possible not only to detect the unevenness of access, but also to avoid hasty conclusions on the role of non-participation, taking into account the possibility that the absence of applications may also reflect structural constraints. The research design is developed with the intention of understanding whether systemic conditions exist that make certain European regions systematically more likely to be recognized, regardless of the intrinsic merit of individual proposals. To this end, the methodological strategy is articulated in three complementary phases, each designed to explore a different aspect of the problem and cumulatively contribute to the construction of a robust interpretative framework.

FIRST PHASE

The first phase of the research design is conceived with the aim of providing a picture of the territorial distribution of the certifications issued within the framework of the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes programme. This phase represents a preliminary but crucial step to question the possible existence of systematic disparities in the awarding of certificates and to hypothesize the

[40] Frey, Pamini, and Steiner, 2013. “Explaining the World Heritage List: an empirical study.”, 1-19; Mendez and Bachtler, 2022. “The Quality of Government and Administrative Performance.” 690-703.

possible presence of recurring patterns. Central to this analysis is the mapping of the European regions involved, directly or indirectly, in the programme from 1987 to the present day. The territorial unit chosen is NUTS2 regions, according to the Eurostat classification used in European regional policy studies. They are basic regions with a population of between 800.000 and 3 million inhabitants.[41]

This level is the most appropriate for at least two reasons. First, it reflects an administrative scale that is sufficiently detailed to capture the territorial dynamics of participation in the programme. Secondly, the promoters of the itineraries are often regional institutions, local consortia or networks of actors operating at sub-national level, rather than state or supra-national entities. It is chosen to consider not so much the regions physically traversed by a stage of a cultural route, but rather those in which the promoters of the route itself, namely the organizations responsible for its conception, management, and coordination, are based. In many cases, these regions coincide with those in which the stages are located, but this is not always the case. The mere presence of a stage within a territory does not necessarily imply an active role in the decision-making or organizational process. In some instances, regions merely provide financial support or maintain formal membership in the network, without playing a proactive or strategic role. For this reason, only those regions that assume a leading or operational responsibility are mapped. This choice enables a more accurate identification of the territories that effectively contribute to the development and implementation of the itinerary, thanks to their administrative, organizational, and relational capacities.

Moreover, the geographical scope of the analysis is also the result of a deliberate methodological choice. Although the Cultural Routes programme is formally open to any country, the analysis is limited to a specific group of states: EU Member States; EU candidate or potential candidate countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey, Ukraine, Georgia; EFTA countries: Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland; Former member countries: United Kingdom and finally, Azerbaijan Lebanon and Armenia. This selection reflects a concern for consistency and analytical rigor, aimed at ensuring a balance between openness and comparability. These countries are either directly involved in the programme or share comparable institutional frameworks, and they all fulfil, at least formally, some

[41] Eurostat, "NUTS - Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics," (accessed June 10, 2025.) https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/nuts.

of the core requirements for obtaining certification: the route's theme must represent shared European values and involve at least three European countries; it must illustrate the memory, history, and cultural heritage of the continent, and contribute to an interpretation of Europe's contemporary diversity. Furthermore, the certification process requires the establishment of a legally recognised European network, bringing together stakeholders from at least three Council of Europe member states. Based on these criteria, the inclusion of this specific group of countries is considered methodologically consistent for defining the field of analysis.[42]

Based on the available data, the regions are divided into three main categories:

- Regions with certified routes: regions in which at least one route has been officially certified by the Council of Europe (from 1987 to present).
- Regions with candidate but non-certified itineraries: regions that participate in submitted but not approved projects (only available for the years 2015 onwards, due to the limited accessibility of historical data).
- Regions never involved in the programme: without any evidence of direct or indirect participation in application processes (from 1987 to present).

The next step involves the construction of two different European maps of NUTS2 regions, supplemented with data on the presence, absence or failure of applications. Heat maps are provided, which are useful for visualizing the density of certified routes and identifying any geographical concentrations (clusters) or marginal areas. These visual representations have a double function. On the one hand, they make it possible to empirically verify the inhomogeneity in the territorial distribution of certifications. On the other, they offers a cognitive basis for the formulation of explanatory hypotheses, which are subsequently developed in the correlational analysis phase. In summary, this first phase makes it possible to set up a fundamental analytical tool: a spatial reading of the programme's participations, from which to reveal, a potential indications of exclusion or non-random concentration, which motivate the subsequent phases of the research design.

[42] Council of Europe, Resolution CM/Res(2023)2 Revising the Rules for the Award of the "Cultural Route of the Council of Europe" Certification, adopted by the Committee of Ministers on April 5, 2023, https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes/certification-criteria (accessed June 14, 2025); Council of Europe, "Certification Criteria," *Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe*, n.d., https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes/certification-criteria (accessed June 11, 2025).

It should be noted that due to the lack of publicly accessible data on rejected applications in the period prior to 2015, it was not possible to include in the classification the entire historical series of projects that did not obtain certification. To overcome this obstacle, a formal process was initiated to request access to the historical documentation held in the archives of the Institute of Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe. However, it was not possible to obtain access to the requested documents, which would have made it possible to identify itineraries submitted but not certified in the period between 1987 and 2015, a chronological interval currently not covered by the official website. According to information from the secretariat of the Institute of Cultural Routes, it will not be possible to proceed with an archive activity that would allow the preparation and transmission of the requested documents, for internal organizational reasons**.** In light of this, it was decided to adopt a partial and conservative classification, based exclusively on data available from 2015 onwards, which nonetheless allows a significant trend to be identified and supports the initial hypothesis concerning the possible presence of systemic asymmetries in access to certification.

SECOND PHASE

Starting from the results of the territorial mapping, the second phase of the research design is oriented towards investigating the existence of systematic relations between the distribution of certified routes and certain structural characteristics of European regions. In other words, an attempt is made to ascertain whether success or exclusion from the programme can be explained by pre-existing conditions linked to the institutional quality of the areas involved. The explanatory hypothesis underlying this phase is that the presence of certified itineraries is positively correlated with the quality of government and, more generally, with forms of structural capacity that make regions more likely to participate in and successfully support application processes. This hypothesis is based on what is already observed in the contexts of UNESCO and the European structural funds, where these factors are decisive in selecting who can access the symbolic or financial benefits of the programmes.[43]

The decision to use the quality of government as independent variable is well justified in the literature, which has long recognized this dimension as a key factor in explaining inequalities in

[43] Milio, 2007. “Can Administrative Capacity Explain Differences in Regional Performances?”429-42; Meskell, “Transacting UNESCO World Heritage,” 3–21

development and access to resources. In particular, a government perceived as impartial, efficient and free from corruption is associated with better socio-economic performance, greater equity and greater institutional capacity.[44] In order to translate this element into empirical variable, reference is made to one of the main sources of regional data at the European level: the Quality of Government Institute of the University of Gothenburg. In particular, the use of the QoG-EU Regional Data dataset is envisaged, which offers a series of indicators at the NUTS2 level, useful for measuring the quality of government.[45]

The methodological approach outlined therefore includes:

- A map of European regions, this time based on selected indicators of EQI: quality of government.
- Relate this map to the maps constructed in the first phase, containing data on the distribution of certified routes.
- Conduct a statistical analysis, using Pearson's coefficient and linear regression models, to observe the strength and direction of any associations.

The objective is to test the empirical plausibility of the theoretical hypothesis, providing an initial quantitative confirmation of the intuition that the programme can favor structurally better equipped actors.

This stage presents a specific methodological criticality related to the temporal availability of data. Many of the indicators provided by the Quality of Government Institute have in fact only been available since 2010, whereas the Cultural Routes programme has been active since 1987. The analysis is therefore based on the assumption that the institutional characteristics of a region, especially those related to the quality of government, show a relative stability in the medium term, and that more recent data can still provide significant indications for the observation of structural trends.

THIRD PHASE

[44] Nicholas Charron, Victor Lapuente, and Paola Annoni, "Measuring Quality of Government in EU Regions across Space and Time," *Papers in Regional Science* 98, no. 5 (2019): 1926, https://doi.org/10.1111/pirs.12437.

[45] Quality of Government Institute, "EU Regional Data," *The QoG Institute*, n.d., https://eu-regional.qog.gu.se/ (accessed June 14, 2025); Charron, Lapuente, and Annoni, "Measuring Quality of Government in EU Regions."

The third and final phase of the methodological design aims to integrate quantitative analysis with a qualitative perspective, aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of the causal mechanisms underlying the unequal distribution of certifications issued by the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes programme. While the first two phases identified general trends and correlations at an aggregate level, this phase aims to explore how these outcomes take concrete shape in the evaluation processes, looking closely at two specific cases. Unlike the previous phases, the work is carried out at the level of individual cultural routes. The decision to focus on itineraries rather than regions responds to two needs: on the one hand, the unit of certification is the itinerary itself, not the territory that hosts it; on the other hand, access to available sources is more direct and effective when referring to specific project dossiers that have been formally evaluated by the Council of Europe.

The selection of the two itineraries is based on the principle of maximum contrast of outcomes: on the one hand, an itinerary coordinated in a region with a high success rate, which has recently obtained certification without any previous failures; on the other hand, an itinerary promoted in a territory with mixed experience, which has suffered two official rejection.

- The first case is represented by a route certified in 2023/24, coordinated in Tuscany, a region with 12 certifications and 0 rejections.
- The second case concerns a non-certified route in 2023/24, whose application was rejected in the context of a region, Veneto, which, despite having obtained 3 certifications, has accumulated 2 rejections.

The exclusion of cases relating to regions completely absent from the programme is motivated by the difficulty of interpreting absence as direct evidence of exclusion: in such circumstances, it is not possible to determine whether non-participation is linked to structural obstacles or a mere lack of interest. The qualitative analysis is based exclusively on official evaluation reports drawn up within the framework of the programme. For the certified itinerary, reference is made to the report written by independent evaluators, which assists the EPA steering committee in deciding whether to grant certification. This report is available and accessible on the cultural itineraries programme website.[46] For the rejected itinerary, however, a document not accessible to the public was used, namely the

[46] Cantoni, Lorenzo. *European Leonardo da Vinci Ways: Independent Expert Report. Certification Cycle 2023–2024*. Council of Europe. n.d. https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes/candidate-networks-2023-2024 (accessed June 13, 2025).

letter signed by the EPA communicating the rejection of the itinerary and the reasons behind this decision, obtained through direct contact with the organization involved in the application. The main objective is to explore which factors have favored or hindered the outcome of the application, going beyond the numerical data to understand:

- To what extent administrative capacity, project experience, and internal organization have influenced the outcome.
- Whether and how the language used, alignment with the Council of Europe's priorities, or the narrative construction of the application have made a difference.
- What role was played by adaptation to the implicit logic of the programme, which is often not explicitly codified.

The comparative analysis highlights convergences and divergences, not only on a technical level, but also in terms of symbolic and strategic adherence to evaluation expectations. This phase is the final and integrative stage of the entire research process. After mapping the territorial distribution and testing the statistical correlation between governance and participation, qualitative analysis allows us to examine the selection logic in detail. This completes the transition from structure (aggregated data) to process (decision-making dynamics), offering a more realistic and layered reading of the formal and informal barriers that regulate access to European cultural recognition.

EMPIRICS

THE CULTURAL ROUTES PROGRAMME AND ITS CERTIFICATION PROCESS

Launched in 1987 with the Pilgrim's Way to Santiago de Compostela as the first certified route, the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes programme represents one of the most established European initiatives to promote transnational cultural cooperation. Since its inception, the programme has aimed to show how the heritage of different European cultures, crossing geographical and temporal boundaries, contributes to the construction of a shared and dynamic cultural identity.[47] Itineraries are not simply physical routes to be travelled, but thematic networks linking territories, sites and communities around cultural elements of transnational relevance. The term “itinerary”

[47] Council of Europe, “Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe,” *Council of Europe*, n.d., https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes/home (accessed June 12, 2025).

thus takes on a conceptual meaning, referring to a constellation of actors and places united by a common theme.

The operational networks supporting them are composed of public and private entities, regional and local administrations, cultural institutions, third sector organizations, engaged in the promotion of educational, tourism and heritage enhancement activities.[48] Underlying the initiative is a wide-ranging purpose: to promote intercultural dialogue, strengthen cohesion between the peoples of Europe and foster a model of multi-level, participatory cultural governance based on the democratic values of the Council of Europe. The itineraries cover a wide range of topics: from medieval religious routes to industrial routes, from shared historical memories to emblematic figures of European art and science.[49]

Institutionally, the programme is supported by the Enlarged Partial Agreement (EPA), which has ensured a political and financial structure since 2010. Working alongside it is the European Institute of Cultural Routes (EICR), based in Luxembourg, which provides technical support and organises training and evaluation activities.[50] Currently, 48 active itineraries have been certified in more than 60 countries, many of them crossing rural and peripheral areas. However, territorial participation is uneven, and not all actors are equally equipped to enter and remain in the programme. Indeed, the effectiveness of the initiative depends on the ability of the networks to meet high standards and activate adequate resources. Although also aimed at local development, sustainable tourism and access to European funds, the success of the initiative is unevenly distributed.[51]

Having outlined the general purpose, operational structure and institutional positioning of the programme, it is now necessary to dwell on the mechanism through which the cultural routes obtain formal recognition by the Council of Europe. In fact, the certification process constitutes the

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[48] Council of Europe, "Overview," *Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe*, n.d., https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes/overview (accessed June 11, 2025); Council of Europe, "All Cultural Routes," *Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe*, n.d., https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes/all-cultural-routes (accessed June 10, 2025).

[49] Council of Europe, "All Cultural Routes."

[50] Council of Europe, "Decision-Making Bodies," *Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe*, n.d., https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes/decision-making-bodies (accessed June 13, 2025).

[51] Council of Europe, "By Theme," *Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe*, n.d., https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes/by-theme (accessed June 10, 2025).

programme's real regulatory infrastructure: it is through this mechanism that it is decided which proposals are worthy of access to the official network and benefit from its visibility, legitimacy and access to resources. Understanding in detail how this process works, who evaluates, on the basis of what criteria, in what manner and within what timeframe, is the first step towards questioning whether it is truly open, fair and transparent.

The certification of Council of Europe Cultural Routes is managed within the Enlarged Partial Agreement (EPA), created in 2010 to strengthen the programme politically and financially. Each year, within the framework of an official cycle, cultural networks wishing to obtain recognition must submit an application and demonstrate that they meet a detailed set of requirements, defined by a resolution of the Committee of Ministers. The final award is decided by the Council of Europe, on a proposal by the EPA, following a multilevel evaluation process.[52]

The selection mechanism is based on three macro-sets of criteria: thematic, operational and organizational. Thematically, the proposing network must articulate a project centered on a topic of European relevance, developed through scientific research shared between at least three European countries. The topic must reflect values recognized by the Council of Europe and lend itself to the promotion of collective memory, cultural diversity and civic education. Furthermore, the proposed theme must be representative of a shared memory, easily recognizable, and capable of generating inclusive narratives that involve different territories. To be considered eligible, it must be the subject of in-depth study by experts from several European countries, to ensure a pluralistic perspective and scientific grounding. Finally, there must be clear consistency between the title of the itinerary and the thematic content developed, so that the name itself immediately reflects the cultural identity of the route. [53]

Secondly, the activities must be consistent with five priority areas: research, heritage enhancement, educational exchanges, contemporary artistic expression and sustainable cultural tourism. These areas are not optional, but constitute a functional framework against which to assess the project's actual adherence to the program's objectives. In particular, emphasis is placed on the ability to integrate lesser-known regions, actively involve young Europeans through educational

[52] Council of Europe, “Certification,” Cultural Routes.

[53] Council of Europe, *Resolution CM/Res(2023)2*, 2023; Council of Europe, “Certification Criteria,” Cultural Routes.

initiatives, and stimulate contemporary artistic practices related to the historical theme of the itinerary. Similarly, it is essential to demonstrate a concrete contribution to sustainable tourism development through partnerships with local and international actors. [54]

Finally, the organizational structure of the network must have legal personality, operate in at least three Member States and guarantee financial sustainability, participatory governance and operational transparency**.** The network must have a formal legal status, preferably in the form of an association registered in one of the member states of the Council of Europe and have been active for at least two years at the time of application. It is also required that the network's functioning complies with democratic principles, ensuring fair geographical and gender representation, as well as the rotation of elected positions. A multi-annual activity plan, a sustainable budget, and indicators to assess the impact of the actions promoted must be submitted. [55]

The certification cycle lasts about ten months and takes place according to a well-defined time schedule. After the application is submitted, the documentation is analyzed by independent experts appointed by the EPA Secretariat. This phase also includes site visits, collection of additional materials and drafting of an evaluation report. Subsequently, the dossier is reviewed by the Bureau and finally discussed at the Steering Committee meeting. The decision, announced by June of the following year, covers both new certifications and the renewal of existing ones.[56]

The certification is not permanent: every five years, already recognised networks are required to submit a report demonstrating that they maintain the required standards. In case of a critical issue, an extraordinary evaluation can be initiated. This involves a further inspection by experts, followed by a new report and, if necessary, formal proceedings that may also lead to the withdrawal of recognition. In controversial situations, the final decision may be referred to the Committee of Ministers.**[57]** The decision-making process involves two main actors. The EPA, composed of representatives of the Member States (mainly Ministries of Culture and Tourism), takes

[54] Council of Europe, *Resolution CM/Res(2023)2*, 2023; Council of Europe, "Certification Criteria," Cultural Routes.

[55] Council of Europe, *Resolution CM/Res(2023)2*, 2023; Council of Europe, "Certification Criteria," Cultural Routes.

[56] Council of Europe, "Certification Cycle Timeline," *Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe*, n.d., https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes/certification-cycle-timeline (accessed June 11, 2025).

[57] Council of Europe, "Regular and Exceptional Evaluations," *Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe*, n.d., https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes/regular-and-exceptional-evaluations (accessed June 14, 2025).

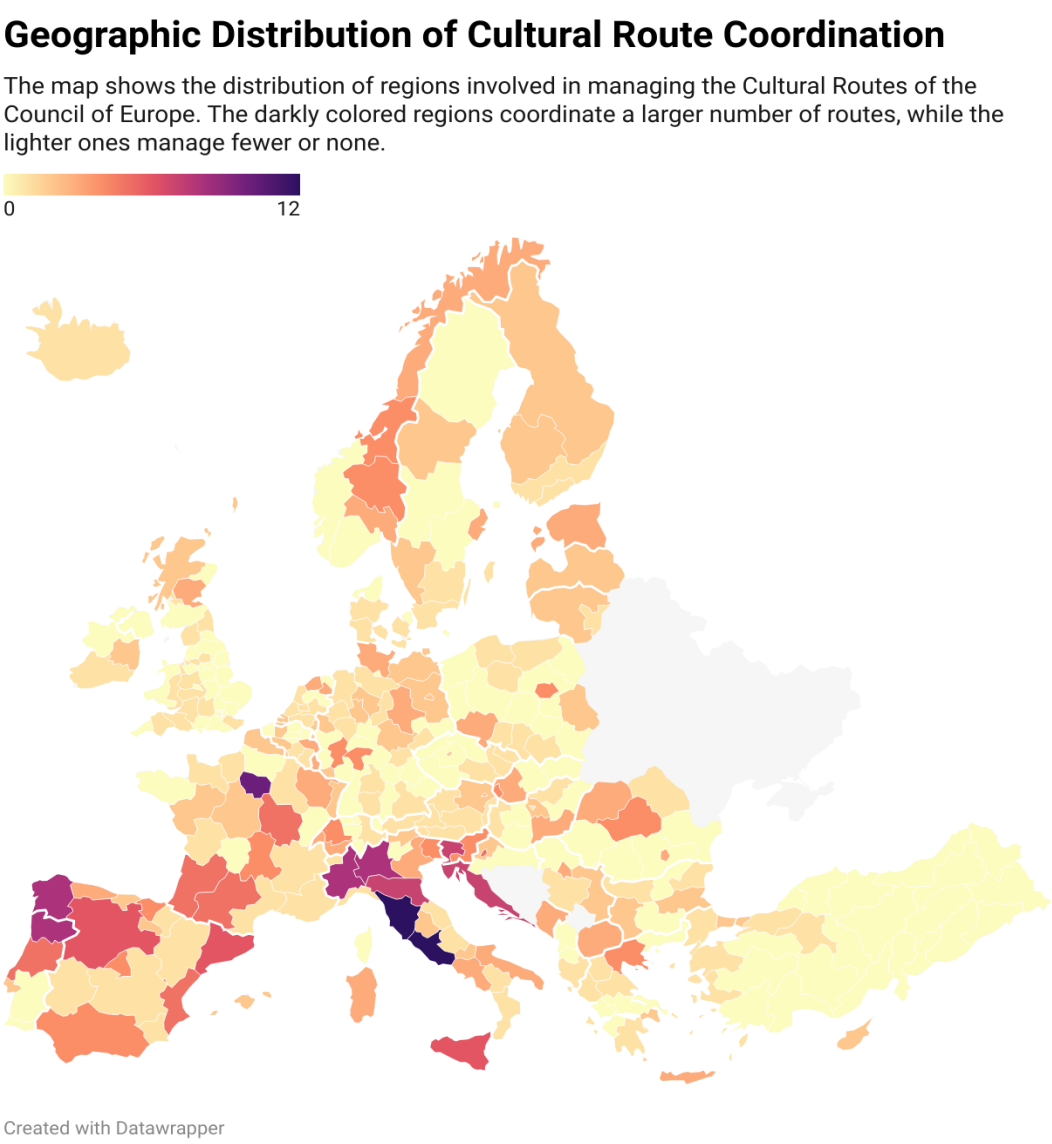
responsibility for the final deliberations. It is supported by the European Institute of Cultural Routes (EICR), based in Luxembourg, which provides technical assistance, coordinates the stages of the cycle and organises training activities for promoters. The interaction between EPA and EICR is the institutional backbone of the certification system.[58]

Having outlined the general context of the programme and reconstructed in detail the functioning of the certification process, we now turn to the central part of this research: the analysis of the selective logics underlying the functioning of the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes. The analytical focus is on those dynamics which, although not formally explicit in the admission criteria, can produce systematic exclusionary effects. From this perspective, the aim is to assess whether the institutional recognition obtained through certification is actually accessible to all European contexts or whether, as observed in other supranational mechanisms (UNESCO, EU structural funds), it tends to reward actors with greater experience, resources and institutional capacity.[59] The intention is therefore to offer an integrated reading, capable of combining spatial, institutional and processual dimensions, in order to question not only the efficiency of the system, but above all its fairness. It will be through this methodological triangulation that an attempt will be made to answer the central research question.

[58] Council of Europe, "Decision-Making Bodies," Cultural Routes.

[59] Meskell, "Transacting UNESCO World Heritage," 3–21; Bouvet and Dall'erba, "European Regional Structural Funds," 501–28.

TERRITORIAL DISTRIBUTION AND SPATIAL PATTERNS



The map presented illustrates the geographical distribution of the regions that, from 1987 to the present, have been involved in the direct management of one or more certified itineraries (48 itineraries in total) within the framework of the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes programme.[60] The territorial unit of reference is the NUTS2 region, consistent with the standards used in European regional policies. For technical reasons related to the graphic construction of the map, some regions are not visible, even though they are included in the data. These are, in particular, the 27 regions of Ukraine (four certifications distributed one each between UA10, UA21, UA46, and UA51), Azerbaijan

[60] Davide Pandiani, "Geographic Distribution of Cultural Route Coordination," created with *Datawrapper*, June 05, 2025, https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/CCy1L/2/ (accessed June 15, 2025).

(three certifications: two in AZ01 and one in AZ08), and the national territories corresponding to Armenia (AM00, two), Lebanon (LB00, one), Moldova (MD00, two), Georgia (GE00, two), Bosnia and Herzegovina (BA00, two) and Kosovo (XK00, no certifications).

At this stage, regions that are simply crossed by a route are not taken into account, only those that play a central operational and organizational role, as leaders or coordinators of the network. The number of routes coordinated by each region is shown using a color scale: the darker the color, the higher the frequency. The data used to create the map was collected through systematic consultation of the official website of the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes programme, which has a section dedicated to the complete list of certified routes.[61] For each route, the linked official website was examined in order to identify the entities responsible for its management, whether public bodies, local consortia, foundations, or associations. The work involved a case-by-case analysis to identify the geographical location of each promoting body, so that it could be assigned to the relevant NUTS2 region. The information was generally available in a transparent manner on the official websites; in the few cases where it was not published, it was sufficient to contact the organization concerned directly to obtain clarification on the governance structure and territorial allocation of management. The map is fully accessible through the link provided in the citation and is not static: it allows zooming and displays the names of individual regions. The complete dataset used to generate the map can be viewed by clicking the “get the data” button in the lower-left corner.

At first glance, the map shows a territorially uneven picture. The European landscape presents some strong concentrations, alternating with gaps. Regions with a high number of certifications are clearly visible: Lazio (ITI4) and Tuscany (ITI1) lead with 12 itineraries each, followed by Île de France (FR10) with 10, Lombardy (ITC4), Norte (PT11), Piedmont (ITC1) and Galicia (ES11) with 8. These are not just high numbers, but signs of systemic and repeated presence in the program. These regions belong to countries such as Italy, France, Spain, and Portugal, which have shown structural involvement since the early stages of the program, both in terms of proposals and project coordination. Their centrality is visible not only on the map but also in the absolute data.

In the case of Italy, the most active regions are mainly located in the center and north of the country: in addition to Lazio and Tuscany, Emilia-Romagna (ITH5), Lombardy (ITC4), Piedmont (ITC1) and

[61] Council of Europe, “By Theme,” Cultural Routes.

Sicily (ITG1) stand out. Involvement is widespread, but the highest density is concentrated around the most established cultural and administrative centers. In France, Île de France (FR10) stands out clearly, but regions such as Aquitaine (FRI1), Midi-Pyrénées (FRJ2) and Bourgogne (FRC1) also show a recurring presence. The country's polycentric structure is reflected in a distribution that involves both urban and peripheral areas.

In Spain, in addition to Galicia (ES11), Catalonia (ES51), Castile and León (ES41) and Comunidad Valenciana (ES52) emerge. Regions such as Andalusia (ES61) and Comunidad de Madrid (ES30) are also well represented. The Spanish presence confirms a well-structured distribution, consistent with the administrative decentralization of the state. Portugal, although less fragmented, shows a strong concentration in Norte (PT11), which coordinates eight routes; Central Portugal (PT16) and Lisbon Metropolitan area (PT17) are also active. Some regions have a high number of certifications, not so much because of their territorial extension or cultural weight, but because of their institutional centrality. Brussels Capital region (BE10) has seven itineraries, and Luxembourg (LU00), despite being a small state, has three. Their position in European decision-making geography and the density of international organizations probably favor a greater capacity to activate networks and support projects.

Similarly, in Switzerland, Espace Mittelland (CH02) and region Lemanique (CH01) are active regions. Adriatic Croatia (HR03) also confirms the role of some Adriatic regions as active nodes, often thanks to their function as a bridge between EU member countries and neighboring contexts. A significant proportion of regions participate only once. These cases are spread across almost all countries, including those with high density (Italy, France, Spain), but also in regions of the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and the Baltic area. In some cases, this is a first entry into the program or an isolated experience. In others, it could signal a difficulty in project continuity, which has not led to further initiatives. Regions with only one certification may be vulnerable to systemic barriers that make long-term planning or access to stable networks difficult. However, these hypotheses remain to be verified in the next phase of the analysis.

One of the most striking features of the map is the existence of persistent territorial gaps. Several regions in Central, Eastern, and Balkan Europe are not involved. This is the case for large areas of Poland, inland Romania, Turkey and mainland Greece. Scandinavia and Germany also appears less present, with the exception of some regions. Ireland is practically absent, as are United Kingdom's

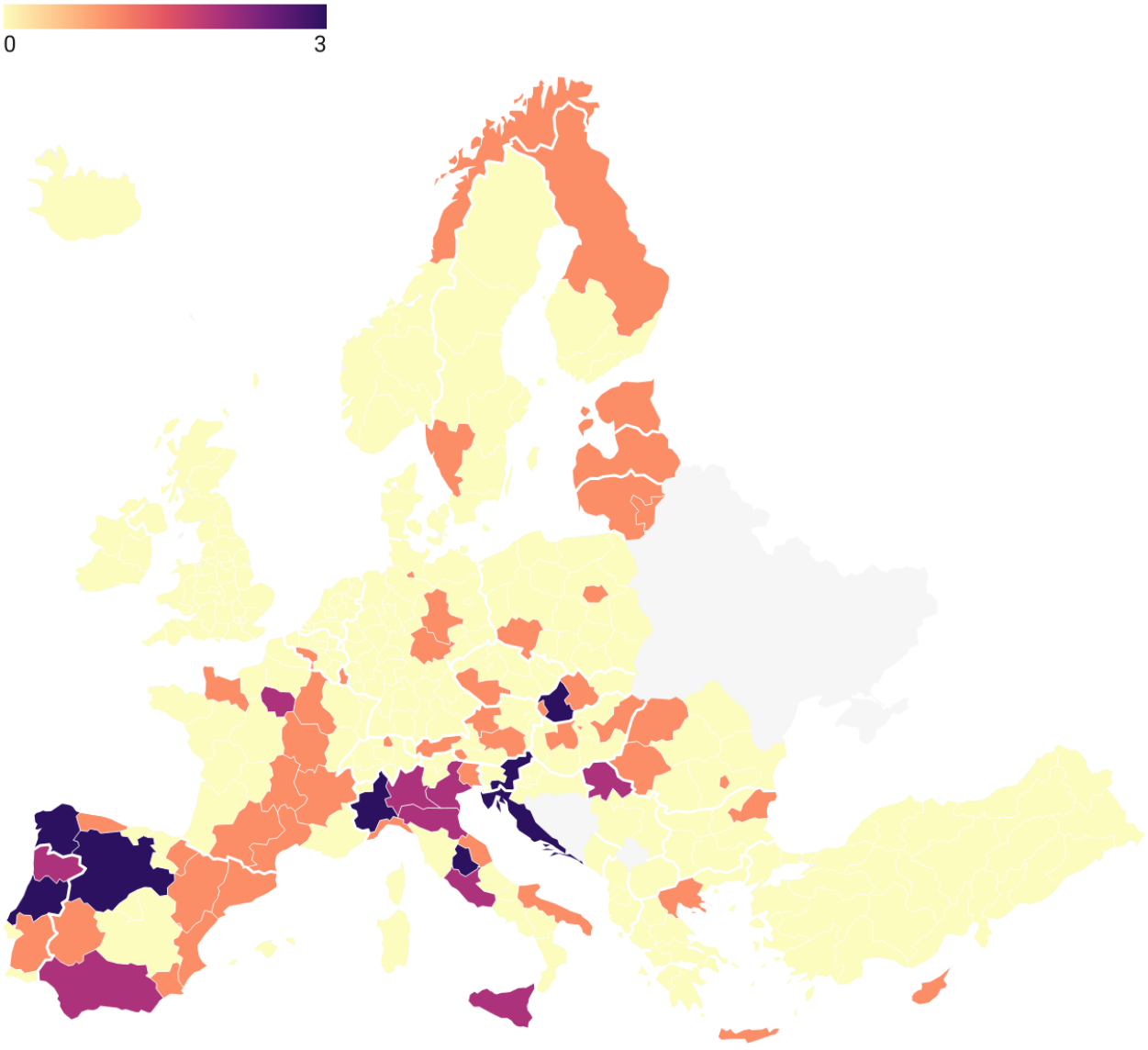
central and southern regions and Transdanubia in Hungary. In some cases, the absence is particularly marked in rural, peripheral, or post-industrial regions, areas that already struggle to access resources and recognition in other European programs.

Ukraine, despite being a large country (27 regions), has only four certifications distributed across Kyiv Oblast (UA10), Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast (UA21), Lviv Oblast (UA46), and Odesa Oblast (UA51), with no evidence of systematic involvement or project continuity. Azerbaijan also has only three certifications located in just two territorial unitstwo in Baku (AZ01) and one in Shaki-Zagatala (AZ08), suggesting concentration rather than territorial spread. As for Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, Lebanon, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the overall numbers are modest: in all cases, there are one or two itineraries, with an impact comparable to that of a single average region. These are therefore not negligible signs, but neither is there any structured participation. Kosovo, on the other hand, is a case of total absence, with no certifications or failed attempts, a factor that clearly distinguishes it even within this group of peripheral countries.

A reading of the map and data confirms a strong territorial asymmetry. The program appears to be dominated by a small group of regions with a high density of projects and stable access to the system. These are contrasted by numerous regions which, despite their cultural potential, appear only sporadically or are completely absent. At this stage, however, it is not yet possible to determine whether these imbalances are due to structural factors or contingent conditions. Visual and numerical evidence provides important insights, but only quantitative analysis will clarify whether there is a systematic relationship between success and the structural characteristics of regions, such as the quality of government.

Regions with Failed Certification Attempts for Cultural Routes

Number of cultural itinerary proposals submitted by each region that did not obtain official certification from the Council of Europe. Darker shades indicate a higher number of rejected attempts.



Created with Datawrapper

The second map shows the distribution of regions that have submitted one or more applications for certification by the Council of Europe but have not been recognized.[62] Unlike the previous map,

[62] Davide Pandiani, "Regions with Failed Certification Attempts for Cultural Routes," created with *Datawrapper*, June 14, 2025, https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/cbgFq/1/ (accessed June 15, 2025).

which covered the entire period since 1987, this map is based on data available only since 2015, due to lack of access to the programme's historical archives. This time limit has a direct impact on the figures: the values recorded are lower and should be read in proportion to the time frame considered.

The territorial unit remains that of the NUTS2 regions, and the selection criterion includes only those that have acted as lead applicants, excluding regions that are simply involved in the network or crossed by it. This map also has some graphical limitations that prevent it from being viewed in its entirety. For technical reasons related to the construction of the map, the same regions that were excluded from the previous representation are not visible: Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Lebanon, Georgia, Moldova, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kosovo. However, as in the case of certifications, data is available for failed attempts in all these regions, with only Chrnivtsi Oblast (UA77) in Ukraine having submitted a rejected application, while the others have no known attempts. The data used to create the map was collected through a systematic consultation of the section of the programme's website dedicated to the list of candidates for each cycle.[63] The method of data collection and geographical attribution follows the same criteria adopted for the first map: direct analysis of the official websites of each itinerary, supplemented, where necessary, by direct contact with the responsible organizations in order to accurately locate the headquarters of the promoting entities. As with the first map, the second one is also fully accessible through the citation link and is interactive: users can zoom in and view the names of individual regions. The complete dataset can likewise be consulted by clicking the “get the data” button in the lower-left corner.

The data shows that the maximum number of unsuccessful attempts is 3 per region. The regions with the most failures are: Piedmont (ITC1), Umbria (ITI2); Galicia (ES11), Castile and León (ES41); Central Portugal (PT16), Jadranska Hrvatska (HR03); Western Slovakia (SK02), Eastern Slovenia (SI03). These cases are significant not only because of their frequency, but also because many of these regions also appear among those that have obtained a significant number of certifications. This is the case for Galicia (ES11), Piedmont (ITC1), Jadranska Hrvatska (HR03), Castile and León (ES41) and Central Portugal (PT16). This dual positioning suggests that, despite having demonstrated the ability to obtain recognition, these regions are not always able to repeat their

[63] Council of Europe, “About the Certification,” *Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe*, n.d., https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes/about-the-certification (accessed June 14, 2025).

success. This may depend on various factors, such as weak thematic proposals or changes in evaluation standards. This evidence reinforces the idea that certification is not automatic and that the system contains margins for effective selection. Even experienced actors can be rejected, indicating a certain level of quality control.

Alongside recurring cases, the map shows numerous regions that appear with one rejected application and are not among those certified. This applies to a wide range of regions, including: Jihozápad (CZ03), Észak-Alföld (HU32), West development region (RO42), Stredné Slovensko (SK03) and Vojvodina (RS12). These isolated participations, often in peripheral regions, suggest the existence of initial access barriers that are difficult to overcome. Not only do they have no certifications, but the only time they attempted to obtain one, they failed. The application process can require significant effort, but without an established network, administrative structures, and previous successful experience, it may not be possible to achieve a positive outcome. In the case of Ukraine, which had only one rejected application, the presence of some certified routes nevertheless demonstrates an attempt at active participation, despite political and institutional difficulties. On the contrary, countries such as Azerbaijan, Lebanon, Armenia, Bosnia, Moldova, Bulgaria, Georgia, the Czech Republic, and Kosovo do not appear at all or with at most one entry on the list of rejected applications, which further reinforces the idea that the certifications obtained over the years were only sporadic occurrences.

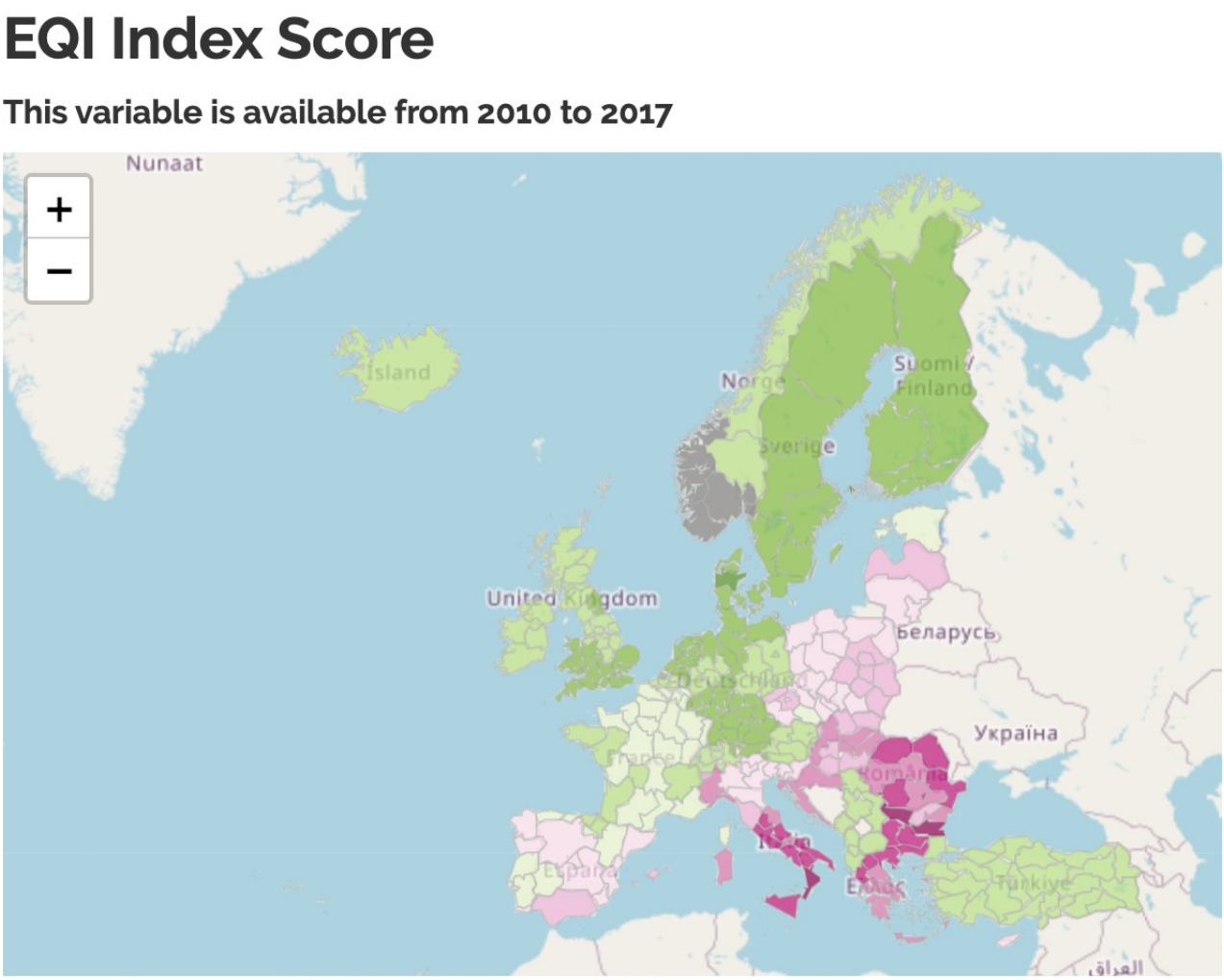
From a geographical point of view, failures are mainly concentrated in certain areas of western and southern Europe, but do not follow a uniform distribution. In particular, there have been numerous unsuccessful attempts in various regions of central and northern Italy: Piedmont (ITC1), Lombardy (ITC4), Umbria (ITI2), Lazio (ITI4), in central and southern France, and in almost all of Spain, with the exception of the two central regions (Comunidad de Madrid and Castilla-La Mancha). Furthermore, there are cases where individual regions show repeated participation but with uncertain outcomes, as is the case in parts of Croatia, Slovenia, and Slovakia. The phenomenon of rejections therefore appears to be distributed across the board, involving both high-profile central regions, such as Île-de-France (FR10), Budapest region (HU11), Luxembourg (LU00), and peripheral territories or those less well-endowed in terms of administrative resources.

Another significant finding emerges when looking at the map of rejections. All regions of Ireland, the United Kingdom, Turkey, Montenegro, Albania, and Iceland, as well as a large portion of

Germany, Poland, Greece, Bulgaria, and western France, have never received a rejection. Cross-referencing these data with the certification map shows that in most cases these regions also have a very low number of certified pathways. The picture that emerges is one of limited, sporadic or even non-existent participation. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, as well as two Nordic regions (Nord-Norge in Norway and North and East Finland) have recorded some failed attempts. In relation to the number of certifications obtained, their participation appears modest but proportionate, consistent with the size and institutional capacity of these contexts. Although they do not show systemic involvement, they nevertheless represent cases of concrete and verifiable presence within the program.

Looking at the overlap between the two maps, there are cases where absence reinforces the impression of a lack of structural participation. This concerns, for example, some northern regions of Ireland, the east of the United Kingdom, central and northern Albania, central and northern Sweden, southwestern Norway, many areas of mainland Greece, eastern Slovakia, most of Romania, and almost all of Turkey. Again, this absence does not allow for definitive conclusions to be drawn, but it does indicate that these territories do not appear at any stage of the program, either among the certified or the rejected candidates. Whatever the reason, disinterest, misinformation, or objective difficulties, the result is de facto marginalization. A reading of the map of uncertified attempts therefore enriches what emerged in the first part of the analysis: recognition within the program is not uniform, but is characterized by selectivity and absences that, even if not always explainable, remain evident.

STATISTICAL CORRELATION AND STRUCTURAL BIASES



Source: European Quality of Government Index

Following the territorial analysis conducted in Phase 1, which highlighted concentrations and gaps in the distribution of certifications and failed attempts, Phase 2 focuses on the quantitative verification of a possible structural bias, analyzing the possible existence of a systematic relationship between the quality of government of a region and its ability to access the program. In other words, it tests whether regions with stronger institutional arrangements are more likely to obtain certification and, conversely, whether those with weaker administrative structures tend to remain excluded or accumulate failures. The verification was carried out by correlating a standardized governance quality index with data collected on the number of certifications obtained and unsuccessful attempts, region by region. The European Quality of Government Index (EQI) provided

by the Quality of Government Institute at the University of Gothenburg for 2017 was used to carry out this analysis.[64]

In this case too, the territorial unit used is that of the NUTS2 regions, in line with the previous stages of the analysis and with the structure of the program itself. The EQI index is a composite indicator widely recognized in the literature and designed to measure the quality of governance at the subnational level. It was developed by the QoG Institute at the University of Gothenburg and is updated periodically, combining objective data with subjective data collected through field surveys conducted directly among citizens. The European Quality of Government Index (EQI) map does not include regions in a number of countries which, despite being actively involved in the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes program, do not meet the EQI criteria. These include Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Iceland, Kosovo, Lebanon, Liechtenstein, Moldova, Montenegro, Norway, North Macedonia, Serbia, Switzerland, Turkey, and Ukraine. For these countries, a solution consistent with the EQI structure has been adopted: the use of the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) database, limited to the year 2017.[65]

In this case, four indicators used in the EQI were selected: Control of Corruption, Government Effectiveness, Rule of Law, and Voice & Accountability. The arithmetic mean of these four values produced a single aggregate score for each country, which was then assigned to all its NUTS2 regions. As a result, all regions within the same country share the same value, as the WGI does not provide disaggregated data at the subnational level. This simplification is necessary to ensure comparability between all regions considered and, although it does not fully reflect any differences within individual countries, it nevertheless allows for the analytical inclusion of those contexts that would otherwise be excluded. These are the values assigned to each of the countries excluded from EQI coverage but included in the analysis:

· Albania (AL00): –0.562

[64] Nicholas Charron, Victor Lapuente, and Paola Annoni, "Measuring Quality of Government in EU Regions across Space and Time," *Papers in Regional Science* 98, no. 5 (2019): 1926, https://doi.org/10.1111/pirs.12437; Quality of Government Institute, "EU Regional Data," *The QoG Institute*, n.d., https://eu-regional.qog.gu.se/ (accessed June 14, 2025

[65] World Bank, *Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) Dataset – 2017 Edition*, https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/#home (accessed June 15, 2025).

· Armenia (AM00): –0.793

· Azerbaijan (AZ00): –0.978

· Bosnia and Herzegovina (BA00): –0.913

· Switzerland (CH00): 1.832

· Georgia (GE00): –0.530

· Iceland (IS00): 1.610

· Lebanon (LB00): –0.729

· Liechtenstein (LI00): 1.520

· Moldova (MD00): –0.740

· Montenegro (ME00): –0.682

· North Macedonia (MK00): –0.495

· Norway (NO00): 1.955

· Serbia (RS00): –0.548

· Turkey (TR00): –0.625

· Ukraine (UA00): –0.762

· Kosovo (XK00): –0.660

The final dataset includes:

· Quality of government Index (EQI or WGI).

· Number of certifications obtained, for each NUTS2 region (or for national aggregates in WGI cases).

· Number of failed attempts (from 2015 onwards, the only period for which systematic data exist).

To test the hypothesis, the Pearson coefficient was used, which measures the linear correlation between two continuous variables. The relationships tested are:

· Quality of Government Index ↔ Number of certifications

· Quality of Government Index ↔ Number of failed attempts

The calculation was performed on all available regions, including those with proxy scores derived from the WGI. The results are summarized in the following table:

Correlation Tested	Pearson's r	Interpretation
Government Index vs Certified	-0.073	Very weak, not significant
Government Index vs Failed	-0.158	Weak, but partially significant (negative)

Sample table: dataset structure:

Region Code	Governance Index	Certified Routes	Failed Attempts
ITI4	-1.53	12	2
ES21	0.652	4	0
LB00	-0.729	1	0
FR10	0.498	10	2

The correlation between the quality of government and certifications obtained is very weak and not statistically significant. The correlation between the quality of government and failures is weak but partially significant: it suggests that regions with weaker governance tend to fail more often. The quantitative analysis conducted in Phase 2 produced two statistically significant results: the absence of a significant correlation between the quality of government and the number of certifications obtained (r = –0.073), and a weak but partially significant negative correlation between the quality of government and the number of rejected applications (r = –0.158). These results require a complex, multi-level interpretation of the data, avoiding hasty conclusions but also highlighting patterns which, although weak, suggest the presence of implicit institutional selection mechanisms.

In several cases, the data consistently show that regions with inefficient governments (EQI or WGI) are unable to gain stable access to the Cultural Routes program or accumulate failed applications. Among the most emblematic cases: Calabria (ITF6), with a very low EQI value (-2.183), obtained only

one certification and no failures. Its almost total absence from the program is indicative of a systemic difficulty in activation. Severen tsentralen (BG31) in Bulgaria, with a very negative EQI (-2.264), has only one certification and no rejections, probably indicating minimal and marginal access. Western Slovakia (SK02), with an EQI of -1.013, obtained three certifications but as many as three rejections, which is an anomaly compared to other European contexts. The situation is clearer for regions that are completely excluded or rejected: Kosovo (XK00) negative quality of government (–0.66), no certifications and no failed applications and it is completely absent from the program, suggesting possible structural exclusion. Lebanon (LB00), negative quality of government (–0.729), has only one certification and no rejections, but ranks among the marginally present countries, with no continuity or significant recognition. These examples indicate that, even when there is cultural or thematic interest, governance can influence the ability to transform a project idea into an effective application.

Some regions deserve special attention due to their total absence: they do not appear on either the certification or rejection maps. These include, for example, NL11, NL21 and NL23, all with a very high EQI (above 1.3), as well as UKD4, UKC1, UKF1 and UKK3 in the United Kingdom, which also have positive indicators. Their absence is particularly significant because it shows that even territories with good levels of governance can be completely disconnected from transnational cultural planning dynamics. The situation is different in other contexts: many regions in Greece, Romania, Poland, Albania and Turkey share governance levels below the European average and, at the same time, a total absence of participation. Here, the suspicion of possible structural exclusion is more pronounced. The combined absence of results and attempts, in light of the EQI values, raises questions about deeper barriers to access, which will be further explored in the qualitative and final phase. Even countries such as Montenegro, North Macedonia or Moldova have not recorded any failed applications. However, these regions have obtained 3, 3 and 2 certifications respectively, a sign that in some contexts, even with low quality of government, the absence of failures does not imply exclusion, but rather a very careful selection of proposals.

Some regions with moderately low levels of governance showed high and consistent participation, demonstrating that governance is not the only determining factor. Among the most significant cases: Piedmont (ITC1), EQI (–1.19) has 8 certifications but also 3 rejected applications. It shows great activity, despite encountering some difficulties in obtaining approval. It is a case that is neither among the excluded nor among the favorites, but shows institutional resilience capable of

compensating for structural weaknesses. Coastal Croatia (HR03), EQI (–1.156) has 7 certifications and 3 failures. Here too, participation is strong but not always effective. Despite being penalized at the institutional level, it manages to join the program, probably thanks to strong cultural themes and established networks. Northern Portugal (PT11), quality of government just below zero (–0.063), 8 certifications and 2 failed attempts. This shows that even regions with a borderline EQI can achieve an important position.

The reverse case, regions with a good quality of government but little presence or failures, offers a useful perspective for avoiding deterministic interpretations. Some examples: Eastern Finland (FI1D), high EQI (1.442) but only 2 certifications and 1 rejection. Luxembourg (LU00), high EQI (1.2), only 3 certifications and 1 failure. These examples show that success it's not automatically guaranteed and the quality of government can be one of many factors at play. Failure in regions with high EQI may depend on proposals that are poorly suited to the language of the program, thematic weakness or an underestimation of the informal dynamics that often accompany decision-making processes at the international level.

At the same time however, the correlation observed (r= –0.158) between quality of government and rejections is not strong, but sufficient to reveal a trend: regions with weak institutions struggle more to gain recognition. Furthermore, the most significant finding is the absence of attempts: in many cases, territories that would theoretically be eligible to apply do not participate at all. This lack of participation is, in fact, a form of systemic exclusion, which reinforces territorial inequalities instead of compensating for them. Overall, the analysis confirms that the quality of government affects the possibility of accessing and remaining in the program, but not in a deterministic way. Not all regions with low EQI fail, and not all those with high EQI succeed. However, the most institutionally fragile regions are the same ones that participate less frequently, fail more often and are completely absent. This suggests the existence, albeit in a mild form, of hidden barriers to access, linked to administrative capacity, relational capital, and the ability to navigate formally open but in reality non-neutral selection mechanisms.

QUALITATIVE COMPARISON

After analyzing the geographical distribution of certified and non-certified itineraries and comparing these data with the quality of government index, this third phase completes the picture with a qualitative analysis. The aim is to investigate in depth the mechanisms that lead to the success or

failure of certification applications in the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes programme. Through the analysis of two itineraries, one certified and one rejected in the 2023/2024 cycle, the evaluation logic, the room for maneuver of the actors involved, and the way in which factors such as project design, organizational structures, and narrative capacity can determine the outcome, are explored.

The selection of cases follows the principle of maximum contrast: one itinerary promoted in a region with a proven track record of success, and one developed in a context that has accumulated a significant number of failures. The two projects examined are The European Leonardo Da Vinci Ways (certified in 2023/24) and Via Querinissima (rejected in the same cycle). Both are presented as transnational networks consistent with the founding principles of the program, but they were received in opposite ways. The analysis therefore allows for a more precise identification of the determining factors in the evaluation, integrating the structural plan with the procedural one.

The itinerary dedicated to Leonardo da Vinci is promoted by a network based in Vinci (Tuscany, Italy), with the support of cultural and administrative bodies in Centre Val de Loire (France), Eastern Slovenia (Slovenia) and Instanbul (Turkey). The aim of the route is to retrace, through a coherent series of stages, the life and works of the famous artist-scientist, presenting him as a symbolic figure of European humanistic and scientific interdisciplinarity. The independent evaluation report gives an overall impression of strong adherence to the program criteria. The project shows excellent narrative coherence, with a clear and cross-cutting theme, capable of connecting different territories through the figure of Leonardo. The proposed activities are not limited to tourism promotion but include educational, research, and intangible heritage enhancement initiatives. The attached documentation is detailed and well structured, with credible management plans, measurable objectives, and realistic timelines.[66]

A significant aspect is the quality of the transnational network involved. The partners not only cover several countries geographically, but also demonstrate active and differentiated roles. The itinerary is not presented as an aggregation of disparate members, but as a cohesive project with a clear division of tasks. The presence of effective internal governance, with well-defined decision-making bodies and proven participatory procedures, is also highlighted. This structural solidity is reinforced by the promoting team's ability to mobilize institutional resources and build synergies with cultural

[66] Cantoni, Lorenzo. *European Leonardo da Vinci Ways: Independent Expert Report. Certification Cycle 2023–2024*. Council of Europe. n.d. https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes/candidate-networks-2023-2024 (accessed June 13, 2025).

entities rooted in the territories involved. Finally, the language of the application appears perfectly calibrated: references to the mission of the Council of Europe are consistent and coherent, and the founding values of the program (diversity, dialogue, cooperation) are credibly integrated into the project. The evaluation report does not identify any significant critical issues, other than the hope that the planned activities will actually be implemented within the specified time frame.

All this suggests that the success of the itinerary depends not only on the cultural value of the theme, but also, and perhaps above all, on the ability to respond in a timely and convincing manner to the expectations, even implicit ones, of the program. In this sense, project expertise and familiarity with institutional standards represent a decisive competitive advantage.

The application for the “Via Querinissima” itinerary was submitted by a cultural association based at the Regional Council of Veneto. The partner organizations collaborating in the coordination of the route are located in West Sweden (Sweden), Crete region (Greece), Galicia (Spain), and Northern Norway (Norway). The project aims to reconstruct Pietro Querini's journey in the 15th century, following the sea and land routes that connected the Mediterranean with Scandinavia. On the surface, the theme lends itself to a narrative consistent with the program's objectives: intercultural dialogue, exchange between distant geographical areas, and the enhancement of a shared memory. However, the application did not obtain certification. The reasons for the rejection are contained in the official letter sent to the itinerary manager by the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe.

Three main areas of concern emerge from the communication. Firstly, there is a certain weakness in thematic coherence. The itinerary still appears fragmented, with a narrative identity that is not sufficiently developed. There is no clear thread running through it and the link between the various sites involved is not always well argued. Secondly, although geographically extensive, the network of partners is considered to be poorly balanced: the initiative appears to be heavily focused on Italy, and in particular on the Veneto region, with weaker participation from other countries. Finally, there is a lack of project documentation, which is considered to be poorly structured compared to the required standards, particularly with regard to the management plan, internal governance, and sustainability measures.

These findings highlight a procedural weakness. Although not explicitly mentioned, the lack of a stable institutional framework and previous experience in coordinating international networks

seems to have had a negative impact. The language used in the application is also less effective: the appeal to European values is present but less integrated into the project structure. There is no strategic narrative capable of translating general principles into concrete and measurable activities. Overall, the application appears to be the result of a thematically valid initiative, but one that is not fully structured from a technical and organizational point of view. The contrast with the Tuscan case is clear and reinforces the hypothesis that success does not depend exclusively on the cultural merit of the idea, but on the ability to package it according to precise institutional criteria.

A comparison of the two cases highlights some points of contact but, above all, significant divergences along three main axes: narrative construction, networking capacity, and organizational structure. As far as the network is concerned, both itineraries involve several countries, but with different results. The Leonardo project network is well distributed, with active and functional multilateral governance. In contrast, the Querinissima network appears to be more centered on Veneto, Italy and less cohesive in the distribution of tasks. From a narrative point of view, both itineraries are based on symbolic historical figures capable of evoking cultural bridges between different areas of Europe. However, while the Leonardo case presents a well-defined and universally recognized narrative, Via Querinissima still needs more work in terms of cohesion between stages, language, and objectives. Familiarity with the narrative tools required for certification plays a fundamental role here.

However, the most significant element concerns internal organization and project management skills. The Tuscan application demonstrates a stable structure, with clear roles, verifiable objectives, and solid documentation. The Veneto itinerary, on the other hand, suffers from a certain institutional immaturity, with a management structure that still needs to be consolidated and documentation that is lacking in some key sections. Implicitly, what emerges is the ability, or lack thereof, to adapt to the institutional logic of the program. Thanks to its experience, the presence of established cultural structures, and a refined project language, Tuscany is able to speak the language of Europe. Veneto, despite having equivalent cultural resources, struggles to build a proposal that is in line with procedural expectations.

The two cases analyzed confirm, within the limits of a qualitative analysis, the hypothesis that administrative capacity, project competence, and narrative awareness are decisive in the certification process. The cultural value of the itinerary is certainly a necessary element, but it is not

sufficient. What makes the difference is the ability to transform an idea into a formally flawless proposal that is consistent with the criteria, both explicit and implicit, established by the program. The Tuscan case shows how a solid institutional context can facilitate the success of even a complex initiative by mobilizing resources and skills to support the application. The Veneto case, on the other hand, shows that even culturally valid ideas can encounter obstacles if they are not accompanied by adequate planning and organizational tools. In this sense, the differences between the two regions do not only concern the projects presented, but reflect broader local governance structures that influence the ability to participate in European circuits.

Finally, this qualitative phase reinforces the evidence that emerged in phase 2: disparities in access to certification do not stem solely from cultural selectivity, but from structural dynamics that reward those who are able to conform to the formal logic of the program. The selection of itineraries, although based on meritocratic principles, ends up reflecting and reproducing inequalities in the distribution of institutional and planning skills in Europe.

CRITICAL DISCUSSION

The analysis conducted in the three empirical phases has made it possible to construct a detailed picture of how the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes programme actually works, highlighting both its ambitious values and the explicit or implicit selection dynamics that influence its outcomes. This section aims to critically reorganize the results that emerged throughout the entire process, with the goal of offering a cross-sectional reading of the mechanisms that determine access to and permanence within the programme. The first part of the analysis clearly revealed the structure of the programme: an initiative open to all European entities, based on explicitly value-based criteria, such as intercultural dialogue, territorial cohesion, and shared memory. A detailed reconstruction of the certification process revealed a multi-level system in which the evaluation of applications is entrusted to a mix of technical and executive bodies, within a process that combines peer review, periodic monitoring, and documentary checks. On the surface, the system does not appear to have any formal barriers to entry: any transnational network that meets the minimum requirements (including: at least three member countries, a shared European theme, a coherent activity plan, etc.) can apply and receive certification.

However, analysis of how this system works has revealed the existence of functional selectivity, which is not codified in the regulations but emerges in practice. The technical complexity of the procedure, the need to articulate a coherent narrative, to build solid partnerships, and to master the institutional language of the Council of Europe seem to constitute, rather than criteria of cultural merit, real thresholds of accessibility. In other words, certification tends to reward not only the intrinsic value of the thematic proposal, but also its adherence to a precise procedural model, which is not always explicitly stated but which imposes itself as an "implicit standard" of the programme.

The next phase of the analysis introduced the territorial dimension, revealing that, despite the rhetoric of inclusiveness, the distribution of certifications is far from homogeneous. The maps constructed showed the presence of significant concentrations in certain areas (central-northern Italy, France, northern Spain and Portugal), compared to large portions of Europe where certifications are absent or extremely sporadic. In some cases, these are areas that have never participated in the program; in others, they are territories that have submitted applications but have not been approved. The distinction between absence and rejection was a key point of the analysis: while absence may depend on multiple factors (lack of knowledge of the program, different local priorities, lack of technical capabilities), formal rejection is an unequivocal fact. The rejection maps, although based on data available only since 2015, have made it possible to identify a second level of inequality: not only do some areas not participate, but among those that do, not all have the same chances of success. The case of Umbria (ITI2), for example, with three rejections out of five attempts, suggests that even formally structured regions can encounter significant obstacles.

The correlation phase between quality of government (measured through the EQI) and the distribution of itineraries provided an initial quantitative test of the central hypothesis of the research. Although the results did not lead to a strong correlation between EQI and the number of certifications, they did show a statistically partially significant relationship between regions with low quality of government and the frequency of rejections. An important element should be added to this observation: the presence of territories with a good quality of government but no certifications, and vice versa. These exceptions suggested the need to complement the structural approach with a process perspective, capable of investigating the concrete construction of the application, the mobilization of networks, and the ability to align the narrative with the values promoted by the Council of Europe.

The third phase of the analysis allowed to examine these processes in detail by comparing two recent itineraries: one certified (Le Vie di Leonardo da Vinci) and the other rejected (Via Querinissima). Despite common elements (transnational structure, European thematic anchorage, local institutional support), the two cases showed profound differences in terms of design, narrative, and internal coherence. In the case of the certified itinerary, the independent evaluation report highlighted its organizational strength, the clarity of its thematic identity, the communicative effectiveness of the dossier, and its strong capacity for interconnection with already established networks.[67] The itinerary not only met the criteria but seemed to anticipate expectations, using language fully compatible with the vision of the Council of Europe. In other words, success did not depend solely on the theme (Leonardo da Vinci as a European symbol) but also on the promoter's ability to build a project that spoke the language of the institution, facilitating its legitimization.

In the case of Via Querinissima, on the contrary, the EPA letter highlighted recurring critical issues: from the lack of solidity of the transnational network to the vagueness of the activity plan, from the weakness of the narrative to the fragmentation of the planned activities. Rather than a lack of cultural value, what emerged was a disconnect between the proposal and the certifying body's evaluation framework. The application was not sufficiently aligned with the implicit criteria of the program, although it was not without meaning or potential.

A cross-cutting consideration emerges from a comprehensive reading of the three phases: although the Cultural Routes program is intended as a tool for cultural enhancement, it tends to reward skills that belong more to the sphere of institutional planning than to the strictly cultural sphere. Elements such as the ability to write a coherent application file, mastery of European terminology, experience in managing international networks, and knowledge of precedents become determining factors for success. These are not shortcuts, but de facto requirements, often inaccessible to territories that are less structured or less integrated into European circuits. The narrative dimension, the way in which a theme is represented, linked to European values, and projected into a transnational dimension, also plays a key role. In this sense, the construction of the dossier is not only an administrative exercise but also a performative act: the promoter does not present a simple project but a vision of heritage in line with the expectations of the certifying body.

[67] Cantoni, *European Leonardo da Vinci Ways: Independent Expert Report*.

What emerges from the evidence gathered is not so much a formally exclusive system as a mechanism that requires implicit conditions for access. The lack of such requirements is never explicitly stated as a cause of exclusion, but it translates into rejection, marginalization, or chronic absences. In this sense, regional governance, understood as a synthesis of technical capacity, administrative stability, and relational density, seems to be a de facto prerequisite for recognition. The maps confirm that these filters operate across the board: they do not spare even regions with a good quality of government, nor do they affect only the most fragile contexts. The underlying selective logic does not follow a mechanical distribution along clear geographical or institutional lines, but is based on implicit criteria that reward those who know how to interpret the language and expectations of the program. The picture that emerges from a cross-reading of European regions is neither homogeneous nor balanced. Some areas seem to be able to speak the language of European cultural legitimacy with ease; others, despite their potential, struggle to translate it into projects consistent with the logic of the program. This heterogeneity is not only geographical, but also narrative and systemic. And while the stated objective of the program is to build a shared cultural identity, it is clear that this identity is articulated through filters and selections, often invisible, that deserve to be recognized, analyzed, and critically questioned.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this research was to verify whether the certification process for the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes programme was effectively accessible to all territorial areas analyzed, or whether it reproduced forms of selectivity similar to those observed in other supranational recognition mechanisms in the cultural and economic fields, such as the UNESCO World Heritage List and the allocation of European structural funds.[68] The research question was therefore structured around an attempt to understand whether the process under consideration reproduces structural biases similar to those documented in these two reference programmes, influencing in a more or less evident way access to certification and, consequently, to the visibility, prestige and opportunities that it entails. *"Does the certification process of the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes programme reproduce structural biases similar to those observed in the UNESCO World Heritage certification process and the EU Structural Funds allocation process?"*

[68] Milio, 2007. "Can Administrative Capacity Explain Differences in Regional Performances?"429-42; Meskell, "Transacting UNESCO World Heritage," 3–21

To address this question, a three-stage methodology was adopted: a territorial analysis, a statistical verification of the correlations between quality of government and certification distribution, and finally a qualitative survey of two selected itineraries. This methodological triangulation made it possible to combine different approaches, spatial, quantitative, and process-based, thus offering a more complete view of the dynamics at play. For the first time, the spotlight has been turned on a case that has been little explored and researched, and critical attention has been focused not on the program itself, but on its certification mechanism, an aspect that has so far remained off the radar of academic literature.

The main results of the analysis offer a complex picture, suggesting the presence of certain dynamics comparable, albeit not identical, to those found in the cases of UNESCO and structural funds.[69] On the one hand, no statistically significant correlation emerged between the quality of government and the number of certifications obtained. This suggests that having solid administrative structures does not automatically guarantee success within the programme. On the other hand, the correlation between low quality of government and the number of rejected applications, although weak, was found to be partially significant. This highlights a tendency for regions that are less well equipped from an institutional point of view to be more vulnerable to failure. Added to this is the most important and at the same time most subtle finding to emerge from the research: absence. Most of the regions that do not appear either among those certified or among those with failed attempts represent a grey area of the programme, which could indicate a form of systemic exclusion, not linked to a lack of willingness to participate, but to a structural difficulty in taking action in a context that requires technical skills, project experience and the ability to build relational networks.

The qualitative analysis then made it possible to examine the dynamics that can determine the approval or rejection of applications. A comparison between the certified itinerary “Le Vie di Leonardo Da Vinci” and the rejected itinerary “Via Querinissima” highlighted how, beyond the intrinsic cultural value of the theme, it was aspects of design, organization, and narrative that made the difference. In the first case, the application was presented as a mature project, with a large, well-distributed transnational network, language perfectly in tune with that of the Council of

[69] Dotti, 2015. “Unwritten Factors Affecting Structural Funds: The Influence of Regional Political Behaviours on the Implementation of EU Cohesion Policy,” 530–50; Meskell, 2015. “Transacting UNESCO World Heritage: Gifts and Exchanges on a Global Stage.”

Europe, and strong thematic coherence. In the second case, on the contrary, critical issues emerged related to the structure of the network, the weakness of the management plan, and a less calibrated narrative. The positive or negative outcome is therefore not solely attributable to the cultural quality of the idea, but also to the ability to translate it into a formally flawless proposal that complies with the criteria, even implicit ones, that guide the assessment.

These results allow to answer the research question in nuanced terms. There is no evidence of an absolute and systemic structural bias in the sense of deliberate and predefined exclusion. However, some structural conditions can be identified that increase or reduce the chances of success. Project experience, administrative capacity, familiarity with institutional languages, and access to transnational networks are factors that, although not formally required, constitute decisive competitive advantages. In this sense, equitable access to the program is challenged by functional selectivity based on skills that not all territories possess to the same extent. It is therefore fair to say that the certification process, although based on merit criteria, tends to reward contexts that already have resources and know-how, thus risking the reproduction of territorial inequalities.

The hypotheses formulated at the beginning of the research are partially confirmed. The first hypothesis, concerning the uneven geographical distribution of certifications, is fully confirmed by the data. The map drawn up in the first phase clearly showed a high concentration of certified itineraries in certain areas of Western Europe, particularly in central and northern Italy, France, northern Spain and Portugal, compared to large areas of Central and Eastern Europe, which are almost completely absent. The geographical asymmetry observed is neither random nor marginal: it suggests the existence of unequal access to the program, probably linked to differences in the institutional capacity, planning, and networking of the regions involved. This reinforces the idea that, although formally open to all, the program tends to be more easily accessible to areas with a strong administrative tradition and greater familiarity with European instruments.

If the first hypothesis finds a solid confirmation, the second cannot be considered fully validated to the same extent. It has been cautiously confirmed that there is a relationship between weak quality of government and the probability of failure. However, the absence of a significant correlation between quality of government and certifications indicates that the picture is more complex: in some cases, regions with medium-low EQI manage to access the program thanks to the strength of their thematic proposal or the effectiveness of their partnership. In others, regions with high EQIs

remain on the sidelines, probably due to a lack of interest or difficulties in building a project compatible with the program's institutional expectations. In any case, the discriminating factor is not only quality of government measured in technical terms, but a broader combination of institutional, narrative, and relational capacities.

As regards the reliability of the results, a balanced assessment is needed. On the one hand, the analysis was based on a comprehensive database of certifications since 1987 and rejections since 2015. The sources used, including EQI data from the Quality of Government Institute and official program documents, are recognized at the academic and institutional level. In addition, triangulation between maps, statistical correlations, and case studies allowed for cross-checking of results. On the other hand, certain methodological limitations cannot be ignored and should be highlighted.

The first limitation concerns the partial availability of data on rejected applications. Despite repeated attempts to obtain complete data through the Cultural Routes Institute based in Luxembourg, it was not possible to access documentation relating to years prior to 2015. The official archive holds this information, but for organizational reasons related to staffing and logistical availability, it was not possible to prepare the requested material. This absence has inevitably narrowed the time frame of the analysis of rejections, preventing a complete historical overview. However, the post-2015 data set has nevertheless proved sufficient to reveal significant trends, providing a solid empirical basis. The second limitation relates to the time coverage of the EQI indicators, which are only available from 2010 onwards. The program, on the other hand, has been active since 1987. This time lag was managed by assuming relative stability in the quality of government over the medium term, an assumption supported by the fact that the EQI tends to vary slowly over time. This is, however, a necessary simplification, which allows the analytical model to be applied consistently without aspiring to absolute precision.

Another limitation, inherent in the type of analysis, concerns the difficulty of distinguishing with certainty the reasons why some regions do not participate in the program at all. Absence may depend on multiple factors: lack of interest, poor knowledge of the initiative, structural barriers, or inability to submit a competitive project. Only a specific qualitative survey, for example, with interviews with potential promoters, could better clarify these dynamics. In this study, we chose not

to speculate on reasons, but to record absences as possible signs of institutional disconnection or implicit marginalization.

Despite these limitations, the research achieved its objective: to fill a gap in the literature and bring to light an aspect of the Cultural Routes program that has never been analyzed in depth. It has been shown that, although the program presents itself as inclusive and based on values of cooperation and pluralism, its certification mechanism can, even unintentionally, produce selective effects, effectively excluding those who are less equipped to deal with a highly institutionalized system. This observation has important implications for the broader academic debate. First, it confirms the hypothesis already discussed in the literature that cultural recognition mechanisms and cohesion policies, even when built on principles of equity, end up reflecting and reproducing pre-existing inequalities. The concepts of technical capacity, relational capital and linguistic adaptation to European norms, emerge as a key categories for understanding who has access to these instruments and who remains excluded. Secondly, it is shown that even apparently neutral instruments such as cultural certifications can be read as selective mechanisms capable of guiding the dynamics of visibility and symbolic legitimation in Europe.

This study also opens up new avenues of research. A first possible line of investigation could involve a qualitative analysis of the reasons why some territories do not participate in the programme. It would be useful to investigate whether this absence is a conscious choice or the result of systemic exclusion. Another interesting possibility would be to broaden the range of factors analyzed: rather than focusing solely on the quality of government, future research could integrate additional variables, such as the technical capabilities, economic resources or relational capital of the regions, thus offering a more nuanced view of inequalities in access. Such an approach, although more complex, would allow for the construction of a broader explanatory model that could be compared with findings from other supranational contexts. Finally, a further research perspective could be comparative: extending the analysis model to other similar European programmes to verify whether the dynamics observed are specific to the Council of Europe or reflect more general trends in cultural governance mechanisms.

Last but not least, it should be remembered that the work carried out represents a first attempt at a critical systematization of a topic that has been neglected until now. As such, it does not claim to exhaust the complexity of the phenomenon, but to lay the foundations for a broader and more

informed reflection. The very fact that the certification mechanism of the Cultural Routes program has never been the subject of scientific study is a gap that this research has helped to fill, at least in part. In the future, it will be essential for academia to pay greater attention to this type of instrument, which operates at the crossroads between cultural policies, institutional governance, and territorial cohesion.

In conclusion, this thesis has shown that the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes certification system, while based on shared values and noble objectives, is not immune to selective dynamics. Access to certification is not distributed neutrally, but is conditioned by a series of structural and procedural factors that favor those who already possess skills, resources, and connections. If the ambition is to build a more cohesive Europe, including on a cultural level, then it will be necessary to question more and more deeply the written and unwritten rules that determine who can be part of this shared narrative and who, instead, remains on the margins.

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