



CULTURAL ROUTES OF SOUTH EAST EUROPE

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The new vision of cultural heritage has focused attention on an emblematic element of the human environment in recent years: *Routes*, seen not only as means of communication and transport but also as a type of cultural value. The concept of *Routes* was advanced following the inscription of the *Route of Santiago de Compostela* on the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage List (1993), the Meeting of Experts in Madrid (1994), as well as the experience acquired by UNESCO on *Routes of Dialogue* during the World Decade for Cultural Development (1988–1997). This concept reflects the role of culture in promoting exchange, territorial cohesion and understanding between communities, as well as in their sustainable development.

On this basis and within the context of a permanent debate, the evolution of the concept of *Routes of Dialogue* has produced two key concepts: *cultural route* and *cultural corridor*. As a participant in this debate, I will try to compare the two.

Cultural routes have been attracting growing attention among various international actors over the last decade.

ICOMOS and its International Committee on Cultural Routes have made remarkable efforts to define the term: The Cultural Route is a *communication route, physically delimited, historic path; it deliberately served a concrete and peculiar purpose. Its existence and significance as a Cultural Route can only be explained by its use for this specific purpose – hence its historic functionality.* A Cultural Route includes *the tangible heritage assets related to its functionality as a historic route as well as the intangible heritage elements related to the historic function of the route itself.* In addition, the Cultural Route has a *dynamic character reflecting interactive movements of people and reciprocal exchanges.*

UNESCO, in turn, has included in the latest version of its *Operational Guidelines* the *Heritage Route* as a specific type of cultural value that *may be considered as a specific, dynamic type of cultural landscape.*

The Council of Europe is also developing a *Cultural Routes Programme*, identifying – with the assistance of the European Institute of Cultural Routes and in partnership with a number of European countries and local communities – a network of European cultural routes organized around a particular theme (such as the Route of Saint Martin, the Route of the Phoenicians, or the Route of the Olive Tree).

All definitions formulated by the various actors are based on common conceptual premises: the patrimonial character of cultural routes, their tangible and intangible aspects related to a specific *communication route*, natural context, purpose, function and theme. At the same time, every actor adds new values and accents to the content of the basic term. The time is now ripe for elaboration of a unified concept of cultural routes, taking into account all aspects of the term, in a genuine scientific debate that is free of bias and dogma. Incidentally, the *Route of Santiago de Compostela* perfectly meets the criteria in all noted definitions of various actors, and it could provide an excellent basis for consensus among them.

The term '*cultural corridor*' was coined in 1974 by the Romanian professor Razvan Theodorescu to characterize a specific phenomenon in South East Europe: the traditional territorial axes in the region along which cultural values, ideas, innovations, and so on, have been circulating in constant continuity of links, influences and interactions.

It is no accident that the concept of cultural corridors emerged in the context of South East Europe, a genuine crossroads of civilizations and religions over the centuries; a mediator between East and West, North and South; crisscrossed by territorial axes of age-old interactions.

In the year 2000 a group of experts from all countries of South East Europe, working in a network at the initiative of ICOMOS/Bulgaria, identified and mapped these cultural corridors in the region.



In May 2005 *Cultural Corridors of South East Europe* were discussed at a large-scale political and expert forum held in Varna, Bulgaria, with the participation of UNESCO, the Council of Europe, the European Union, and ICOMOS. In this connection UNESCO has elaborated a *Conceptual Framework* which links cultural corridors with *cultural routes*, noting their common basis.



Cultural routes and cultural corridors indeed have common conceptual roots – they are *Routes of Dialogue*, they have a patrimonial character, they attest to an exchange in space and time, and they demonstrate the role of culture in society. They are not simple communication or a *complete cultural and touristical product*. They are a type of heritage related to memory. Yet despite their common features, the two terms should not be regarded as synonymous.

Firstly, unlike cultural routes, cultural corridors cannot always be identified with a specific, physically delimited communication route with a preserved historic path. The cultural corridor is, rather, a historical vector, a territorial axis evolved in time, along which there has traditionally been movement and exchange. Cultural corridors normally emerge on the basis of an actual historical road. For example, the cultural corridors in South East Europe – such as Via Egnatia, Via Pontica, or the Istanbul–Edirne–Plovdiv–Sofia–Belgrade diagonal – originated from the ancient roads in the region. In the course of evolution, they gradually lost their original substance, the initial routes were



transformed, but the original territorial *vectors* of the ancient roads have nonetheless been preserved. The substance has disappeared but the continuity of the structure has survived. Just as in the evolution of a historical city its substance may be transformed but its urban fabric may be preserved as cultural heritage.



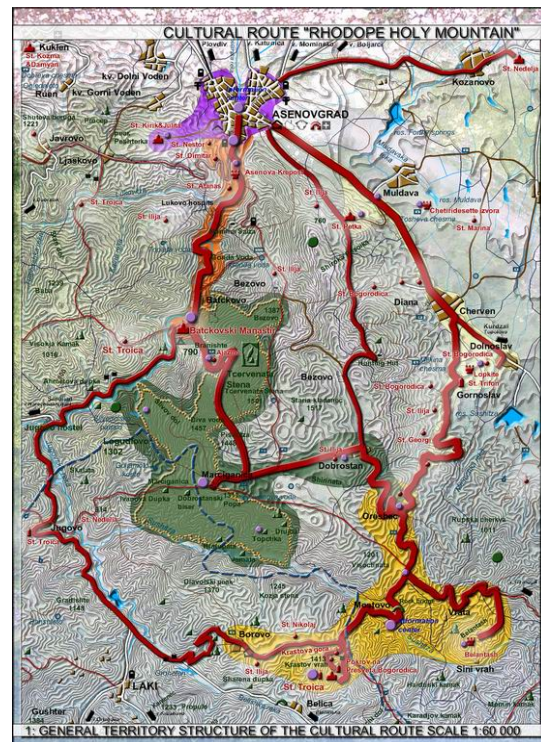
Secondly, unlike cultural routes, cultural corridors should not be associated only with a single identified purpose, a single function or a single theme. Cultural corridors are polyfunctional, polythematic, multidimensional. Over the centuries, the historical vector will have served many purposes related to exchange and dialogue.

Thirdly, owing to the above, cultural corridors integrate into their historical aura different kinds of values that are related to their different functions, purposes, and themes. The UNESCO *Conceptual Framework* notes that of great importance in cultural corridors are the *associative and intangible aspects* which attest to the traditions of exchange, movement and dialogue even when the actual initial historic road has disappeared.

Fourthly, compared with cultural routes cultural corridors are more closely connected with the contemporary processes of exchange, creation, intercultural mediations and development in permanent continuity. The UNESCO *Conceptual Framework* notes the role of cultural corridors in *bringing down the barriers of culture by placing it at the heart of current exchanges and the processes of development* as well as in developing *innovative cultural tourism*. Incidentally, the Regional Forum in Varna has shown this clearly. By a special Declaration of the Forum, the heads of State in the region assumed specific commitments on concerted action regarding common cultural corridors and cultural heritage related to them (*Varna Declaration, 2005*).

I hope that the points discussed above will be an – albeit modest – contribution to the general debate on the *route* and its categories. I firmly believe that this debate must be free, democratic and open, without ‘off-limit territories’ and raised barriers around particular terms and concepts. We have seen how rapidly the concept of cultural heritage has evolved in recent years. Could anyone have foreseen the concepts of the historical city, of cultural landscape or route fifty years ago? This evolution is highly instructive. An adequate approach to cultural heritage, to culture at large, excludes dogmatism in any form. Precisely in this sense the UNESCO *Conceptual Framework* proposes a *broader approach to Corridors and Routes*, which excludes *restrictive definitions*. Almost ten years ago, the experts in Madrid likewise proposed that the concept of Route be *open, evolving and dynamic in character*.

Cultural routes and cultural corridors should not be viewed in opposition to each other – they are mutually complementary within the framework of the common network of *Routes of Dialogue*, reflecting the wealth of exchange between communities, nations and cultures. For example, one of the cultural corridors in South East Europe between Greece, Bulgaria and Romania links a network of pilgrimage routes and agglomerations of Orthodox monasteries. It also includes the *Bachkovo cultural route* in Bulgaria, an authentic pilgrimage route that has preserved its permanent religious functions to this very day. In this way the cultural route with its itinerary, monastery, churches and chapels related to its own historical function logically complements the cultural corridor within the framework of an integrated system.



In this particular case, the system is part of the common network of cultural corridors/routes of South East Europe. This regional framework is open to the European network of cultural corridors/routes identified by the Council of Europe in recent years. In a broader context, on a global scale, this European network is open to the world network of cultural corridors/routes including the Silk Route, the Inca Route, etc.



These are levels in the global macrostructure of the *Routes of Dialogue* or the cultural routes of Humanity. Their identification, preservation, sustainable use and promotion is an inspiring goal.