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## The Process of the Creation and Development of the *Romea Strata* European Cultural Route in Poland as a Tool Supporting Local Entrepreneurship and Cross-Sector Collaboration

**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to present the process of creating the *Romea Strata* European Cultural Route in Poland as an instrument supporting local entrepreneurship and cross-sectoral cooperation. *Romea Strata*, the youngest European Cultural Route, runs from Tallinn to Rome and already plays a significant role in European tourism space. The analysis covers the route's development process from the conceptual phase, through signage and infrastructure development, to stakeholder engagement and management mechanisms. The research methods applied in the article include a literature review, focus group discussions, field observations, exploratory hikes and in-depth interviews with local community representatives and route coordinators. The collected data allowed for the identification of stages in developing the route as a tourism product and patterns of cross-sectoral collaboration. The results indicate that a well-designed and effectively managed cultural route can stimulate local entrepreneurship, strengthen community identity and support the preservation of cultural heritage. The *Romea Strata* exemplifies a tourism product that integrates educational, academic and entrepreneurial initiatives, demonstrating how the process of creating a heritage-based product can contribute to sustainable regional development.

**Keywords:** cross-sectoral cooperation; cultural tourism; European Cultural Route; local entrepreneurship; *Romea Strata*; tourist product

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## Introduction

Tourism is, on the one hand, a social activity, understood in the context of leisure time, and on the other, an economic activity, understood as a form of business related to the provision

of services for tourists. The social context forms the demand side, while the economic context constitutes the supply side. Tourism becomes an increasingly important economic sector as the relevance and scope of leisure time continues to grow. For decades, it has been recognized as an effective policy tool for national and regional governments, enabling economic activation and helping to reduce disparities in socio-economic development (Balaguer, Cantavella-Jordá, 2002; Liu, Song, 2017; Tokarchuk et al., 2021).

Tourism is often seen not only as a key factor in the development of areas with evident tourism appeal, but also as a powerful catalyst for regions where tourism has not previously played a significant role, or was entirely absent. Tourism-related activities increasingly serve as a supplement or alternative to unprofitable agriculture, declining spa towns or post-industrial areas. As an “eco-friendly” and environmentally sustainable sector, tourism offers a viable development path in places where other strategies might be unfeasible or harmful due to ecological or socio-political constraints (Zdon-Korzeniowska, 2009).

In addition to stimulating the socio-economic development of towns and regions, tourism also contributes to the rediscovery and preservation of natural and cultural assets. In destinations rich in tangible and intangible cultural heritage, tourism plays a crucial role in safeguarding and promoting these resources, while also serving as an important source of support for cultural initiatives (Cerisola et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2023).

Heritage elements become, on the one hand, tourist attractions around which unique tourism products are developed, and on the other, markers of local identity and belonging. These features help local communities reinforce their cultural distinctiveness and social cohesion (Sharpley, 2015; Zdon-Korzeniowska, 2009). As Timothy (2014) emphasizes, cultural heritage is one of the most important tourism resources worldwide, and heritage tourism remains among the most popular forms of travel. Numerous studies highlight the growing role of cultural heritage in both tourism and regional socio-economic development (Berti, 2013; Boussaa, 2020; Cerisola et al., 2025; Čeginskas et al., 2025; Hayes & MacLeod, 2007; Lee et al., 2024; Qiu, 2023; Palmi et al., 2021; Sigley et al., 2024; Steriopoulos et al., 2023; Van der Zee et al., 2024).

The concept of creating place-based tourism products enables regions to unlock or enhance their development potential through tourism. The integration of tourism and cultural heritage often makes it possible to design globally unique tourism products that are deeply rooted in local context and identity.

This paper, based on nearly twenty years of scholarly research in the tourism space of cultural routes across Europe, aims to present the process of creating a tourism product in the form of the *Romea Strata* European Cultural Route as a tool for supporting local entrepreneurship.

The study thus contributes to the existing body of knowledge by offering theoretical, conceptual and practical frameworks that highlight the role of properly designed thematic cultural routes in supporting local entrepreneurial ecosystems.

## Research Methods

To achieve the research objectives, a multi-method approach was employed, combining qualitative techniques with the long-term field studies characteristic of socio-economic geography and cultural heritage research. These studies were conducted from 2006 to 2025 on selected sections of European Cultural Routes, including the *Camino de Santiago* in

16 European countries, the St. Olaf Route in Norway and Sweden, *Via Francigena* and *Via di Francesco* in Italy, and, since 2019, the *Romea Strata* in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Italy.

The study employed a combination of literature review and a case study approach. Case studies involved focus group discussions, structured and participant observation, exploratory field walks, and in-depth interviews with local stakeholders, including route coordinators, clergy involved along the paths, and residents of regions adjacent to the routes. Individual responses are not reported in detail; instead, the collected data were synthesized and aggregated to identify patterns and key elements in the creation of *Romea Strata* as a tourism product.

The literature review provided theoretical foundations for understanding cultural routes, religious tourism and the potential for local entrepreneurship development based on such routes. Focus group discussions with project partners and local stakeholders enabled the definition of shared visions, needs and barriers in the process of developing a tourism product. The authors' own experiences in designing, marking and coordinating sections of the *Camino de Santiago* in Poland also contributed to the identification of key stages in the creation of the *Romea Strata* as a tourism product.

The combination of these methods allowed for a comprehensive, multi-perspective analysis. This deliberately designed multi-method strategy functioned as a form of data triangulation, increasing the reliability and validity of the results. By comparing and cross-checking information from diverse sources, it was possible to construct a holistic view of the *Romea Strata* creation process and the mechanisms of cross-sector collaboration. Triangulation also facilitated a multi-dimensional understanding of the phenomenon, enhancing the academic value of the study and enabling the formulation of robust conclusions regarding the use of cultural routes as instruments supporting local entrepreneurship development.

### The Role of Tourism Product Development in Stimulating Local Entrepreneurship: review of the literature

As noted earlier, tourism is recognized as an effective tool for national and local government policies to stimulate socio-economic development and reduce developmental disparities between regions (Chudy-Hyski, 2009; Grabowska, 2013; Kachniewska et al., 2012; Milczarek, 2017; Mróz, 2017; Panasiuk, 2017; Zdon-Korzeniowska, 2009). The particular significance of tourism for the socio-economic activation of a region is especially evident in:

1. Job creation – Tourism plays a key role in fostering local entrepreneurship. The development of tourism products based on attractions such as trails, thematic tours, handicrafts, regional gastronomy and cultural and natural heritage sites enhances the attractiveness of the region, thus attracting tourists and visitors interested in the local tourism offer. This creates new jobs connected to servicing tourists. Employment in the tourism sector includes both direct positions in hotels, restaurants and guiding services as well as indirect roles related to logistics, transportation and retail. Consequently, the development of a destination's tourism offer generates demand for various services and products beyond strictly tourism-related ones. This phenomenon is known as the tourism multiplier effect (Derek, 2007) where one job in tourism generates three additional jobs in related sectors. Tourists also purchase goods and services in local retail outlets (e.g. grocery

stores, petrol stations), and use local transport, hairdressers, etc. Thus, tourism product development contributes to increased entrepreneurship and local community activation, moreover tourism stimulates the emergence of new business initiatives, innovations and infrastructure investments (Hall & Williams 2008).

2. Discovering, cultivating and protecting local heritage, as Iwanow (1999: 139) states, "heritage and tourism are inseparable. Heritage attracts tourists, and tourism in turn focuses attention on heritage". Tourism aids in discovering and cultivating a region's heritage and can become a means for its preservation and protection. Growing tourist interest encourages investments in monument conservation, tradition revitalization and environmental protection, contributing to their long-term safeguarding and sustainable development (Bramwell, Lane, 1993; Timothy, Boyd, 2003; Kato, Prozano, 2017).
3. Motivating local communities and authorities to discover, preserve, cultivate and promote their cultural and natural heritage. Tourism thus serves not only economic but also educational and cultural functions by raising social awareness about the value of local heritage. When local communities and governments recognize the value of their cultural and natural heritage, they are more willing to preserve and promote it, attracting even more tourists and creating a positive development cycle. According to Kornak and Rapacz (2001: 190), "tourists, and all those directly involved in tourism, especially tourism organizers and those responsible for spatial planning in tourist towns and regions, must be aware that a well-preserved natural environment and cultural heritage constitute invaluable assets for tourism".
4. Strengthening senses of pride, identity and belonging among local communities, tourism contributes to building and reinforcing local identity, which in turn activates community development and entrepreneurship (Bramwell, Lane, 2000; Kavaratzis, Ashworth, 2008; Raagmaa, 2002). By promoting local culture, traditions, history and natural values, residents feel pride in their heritage which encourages its protection and further development (Smith, 2006). Tourism products based on historical, natural or cultural heritage help express and emphasize local identity, supporting spatial policy development in these areas (Ashworth, 1994; Machowska, 2016). Karczewska (2002) argues that only the local community, being at the heart of the heritage, can "understand" and integrate it into tourism offerings, essential to mobilize it and transform it into a driver of local development. Therefore, it is crucial that residents can identify and recognize the unique value of their heritage. There is a strong relationship between local identity and entrepreneurship: when residents and local entrepreneurs identify strongly with local culture, traditions and values, they often create products and services reflecting the unique character of their place. This attracts tourists seeking authentic and unique experiences as entrepreneurship rooted in local identity strengthens and promotes that identity, fostering pride and social cohesion. Hence, entrepreneurship becomes a tool for preserving and promoting local culture, while strong local identity motivates entrepreneurs to develop innovative and authentic products and services.

The concept of developing tourism products for specific places is an approach enabling the use or stimulation of their development potential through tourism. This study focuses on the tourism product shaped as the European Cultural Route named *Romea Strata*. The analysis of the product creation process is based on the following assumptions, namely that it is a product which is:

- spatial: a comprehensive offer of a place integrated around a specific thematic axis,
- complex: including attractions, accommodation/food/guide services and accompanying infrastructure,
- multi-producer: requiring integration of activities by multiple entities co-creating the product (tourism businesses, local government authorities, local communities, local leaders, organizations supporting tourism development such as Regional and Local Tourism Organizations, research institutions, etc.),
- significantly supported/initiated/coordinated/supervised by the local government units (LGUs) through which it runs,

Based on regional tourist assets and attractions that are significant parts of the historical and cultural heritage of the place (heritage-tourism linkage) (Backhaus et al., 2022).

Developing tourism products based on local heritage (e.g. cultural routes) contributes to discovering, cultivating, preserving and protecting the heritage of the areas through which they pass, as well as to strengthening pride and identity among local communities. A strong local identity promotes entrepreneurship development, which in turn reinforces and promotes that identity, creating a beneficial cycle of socio-economic development for the region. Furthermore, the brand of the tourism product created can enhance the recognition and promotion of the places it traverses, becoming a driving force for their development.

Altkorn (1994) and Middleton (1996) emphasize the uniqueness and distinctiveness of a tourism product. Therefore, in a highly competitive tourism market, producers of tourism products (services and goods acquired by consumers during travel) strive to create entirely original and unique products while ensuring the highest quality (Kaczmarek et al., 2010).

The past two decades have seen significant transformations in the tourism and pilgrimage landscape of Europe, especially regarding the dynamic development of European Cultural Routes, including pilgrimage routes (Berti, 2013; Nilsson, 2016). The global success of the *Camino de Santiago* pilgrimage route – recognized in 1987 as the first Cultural Route of the Council of Europe – has stimulated the revival and development of other medieval pilgrimage routes, such as the *Via Francigena*, *St. Olaf's Way*, the *Route of Sts Cyril and Methodius*, *St. Martin's Way* and the *Romea Strata* (Beltramo, 2015; Jørgensen et al., 2020; Øian, 2019; Mróz, 2017; Palmi et al., 2021; Roszak, 2017; Tykarski & Mróz, 2024; Vistad et al., 2020).

### *Romea Strata*: from a Medieval Pilgrimage and Trade Route to a European Cultural Route

The *Romea Strata* European Cultural Route, which constitutes the subject of this analysis, is an international pilgrimage and cultural route. Historically, it follows a path established in the 13th century, linking the Baltic Sea regions and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland) through Czechia, Austria and the Alpine region to northeastern Italy, and ultimately to the tombs of the Apostles Saint Peter and Saint Paul in Rome (Mróz et al., 2025).

The term *strata* in Latin means “road”, referring to the network of roads in the Roman Empire that were constructed by layering different materials to ensure durability. The term *strata* also has symbolic and metaphorical significance. The *Romea Strata* encompasses many elements and “layers” that have developed over the millennium-long history of the

route, uniquely defining this trail. Since the 12th century, the *Romea Strata* has played an important commercial role, serving as a transport route for goods such as amber, salt, iron products, silk and furs from the Baltic countries to southern Europe (Associazione Europea Romea Strata, 2024; Mróz et al., 2025). The adjective *Romea* indicates the ultimate destination of this route: the Vatican Hill with St. Peter's Basilica and the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls along *Via Ostiense*. Since the martyrdom of the two apostles, the Eternal City has become one of the three *peregrinationes maiores* alongside Jerusalem and Santiago de Compostela (since the 9th century) (Manikowska, 2008).

For centuries, the *Romea Strata* has been a path of faith and culture that led pilgrims across Europe, allowing them to discover the richness of the geographical space along the way. Like other pilgrimage routes, it has always been a space for the pilgrim's "spiritual journey", a place for encounter and dialogue with God, as well as an encounter with one's "own heart", a journey "within oneself" (Tykarski & Mróz, 2024; Mróz, 2023a). The *Romea Strata* is a route rich in history, religious complexity and a space of experience for many generations of pilgrims (Rech, 2024).

The project to designate and mark the route was initiated by the European *Romea Strata* Association (*Associazione Europea Romea Strata* – AERS) based in Vicenza. The Association was established in 2018 by 30 founding members from Poland, Czechia, Austria and Italy. The historical premises and impetus for the project were presented in March 2013 during a academic seminar entitled "Pilgrimage Routes to Rome, Santiago and Jerusalem through Northeastern Italy," held in Vicenza.

One of the key objectives set by the members of the *Romea Strata* European Association was to obtain the European Cultural Route certification from the Council of Europe under the name "*Romea Strata*". Other important goals of the association, in relation to the *Romea Strata*, include the promotion of sustainable and accessible tourism, the strengthening of cooperation and the exchange of experiences and best practices through the coordination of joint activities among partners and stakeholders along the route, and the support of interdisciplinary studies and research conducted under the established Academic Committee. Furthermore, the association aims to develop strategies for information exchange and promotion to safeguard shared European heritage, both tangible and intangible, as well as to organize educational and training events, cultural exchanges, and cross-cultural dialogue for young Europeans from diverse cultural and social backgrounds. The mission of AERS is to enhance and promote the *Romea Strata* by disseminating knowledge about its archaeological, artistic, architectural, literary and culinary heritage, while raising awareness of the historical significance of this ancient path within the context of European cultural heritage (Associazione Europea Romea Strata, 2024).

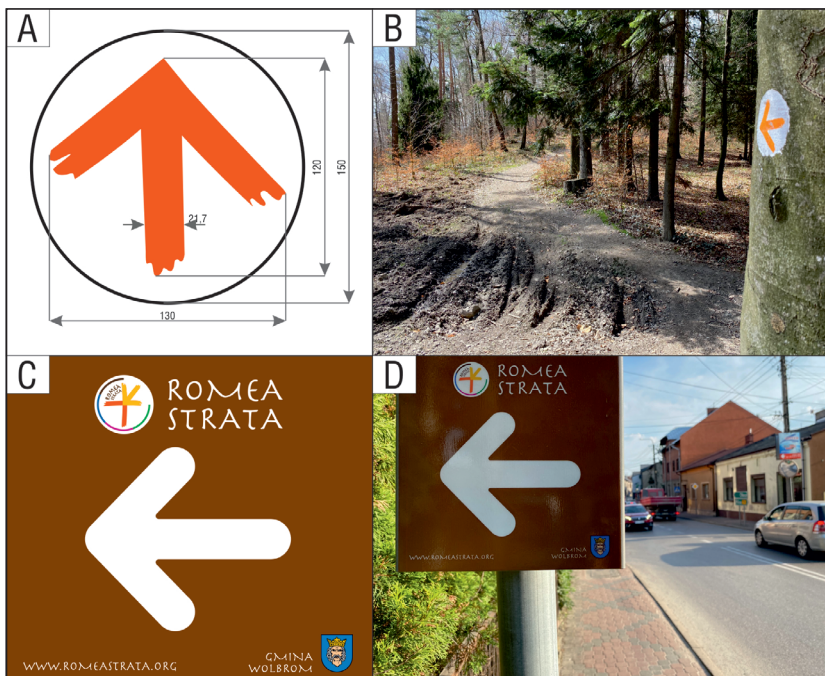
In 2019, the Council of the *Associazione Europea Romea Strata* decided to include the Pedagogical University of Krakow (currently the Commission of National Education University) as a founding member. Since then, university staff have maintained ongoing cooperation and consultations with the *Associazione Europea Romea Strata*. Currently, the European *Romea Strata* Association unites over 50 entities – organizations, associations, and dioceses of the Catholic Church from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czechia, Austria and Italy (Figure 1). The *Romea Strata* is marked using signs proposed by the authors of this work and approved by AERS (Figure 2).



Figure 1. The *Romea Strata* European Cultural Route in Europe

Source: <https://www.romeastrata.org/en/>.

Figure 2. A – basic route sign template indicating the *Romea Strata*; B (photo) – *Romea Strata* marking in the field (Wadowice municipality, Poland); C – road sign template placed on public roads indicating the *Romea Strata*; D (photo) – marking in the field in the municipality of Wolbrom (Poland)



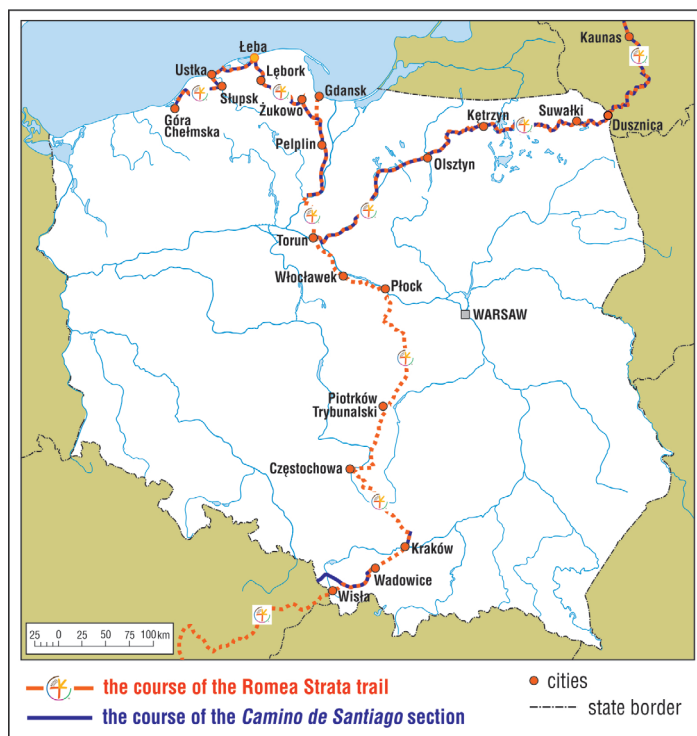
Source: authors.

A formal application for the certification of the *Romea Strata* as a “Cultural Route of the Council of Europe” was submitted by AERS on 27 July 2024. On 5–6 May 2025, the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe, during its sessions in Luxembourg, decided to award the *Romea Strata* the European Cultural Route certification (*Cultural Routes Newsroom...*, 2025; 2025, December 10).

The determination of the route of the *Romea Strata* in Poland (Figure 3) was based on the itineraries of pilgrims traveling to the Eternal City, contemporary scholarly research and cartographic collections. Of particular importance is the 15th-century map of routes to Rome, the *Romweg Karte*, published on the occasion of the Holy Year 1500, when thousands of pilgrims journeyed to Rome. The map (at approximately 1:5,600,000 scale) was created by the German astronomer and cartographer Erhard Etzlaub (1460–1532) depicting a network of pilgrimage routes leading to Rome from Poland (including Góra Chełmska, Gdańsk, Kraków, Poznań), Denmark, southern Sweden, Germany and France (Harvard University, Harvard Map Collection, Etzlaub1501; 2025, December 10).

Work on the concept and delineation of the route in Poland began in 2019, initiated by researchers from the Institute of Geography at the Pedagogical University of Kraków, within the framework of the “European Cultural Routes: History and Space” research team. The team proposed the route’s course (Figure 3), prepared a detailed description of its Polish section, and conducted an assessment of its tourism and cultural potential within the Małopolskie Voivodeship.

Figure 3. The course of the *Romea Strata* in Poland



Source: authors.



The collaboration initiated by the researchers with local government units along the proposed route, as well as with other entities capable of supporting the development of the studied routes – such as representatives of regional tourism organizations (e.g. the Małopolska Tourism Organization) and institutions including the John Paul II Institute for Intercultural Dialogue in Kraków – resulted in a series of working meetings. These meetings enabled a detailed refinement of the route's alignment and the designation of signage locations.

In addition, comprehensive content for information boards and detailed guidelines for field marking were prepared, including signage to be placed at key sites along the route. As a result of these initiatives, the first sections of the *Romea Strata* in Poland were signposted within the Małopolskie Voivodeship. Between 2023 and 2025, the route was marked across the municipalities of Wolbrom, Trzyciąż, Iwanowice, Michałowice, Mogilany, Skawina and the town and municipality of Wadowice.

Currently, activities within the Małopolskie Voivodeship focus on the activation of local partners, the organization of academic seminars, and ongoing coordination and promotional processes.

### Stages in the Development of the Romea Strata European Cultural Route in Poland as a Heritage-Based Tourism Product

Cultural routes based on local heritage represent one of the most dynamic forms of contemporary cultural tourism development. They combine the dual functions of heritage protection and interpretation with the creation of innovative tourism products. An example of such an initiative is the *Romea Strata* European Cultural Route, which in Poland extends from the Lithuanian–Polish border at Dusznica to the Czech border. Its concept aligns with the idea of integrating tangible and intangible cultural heritage with the contemporary experience of pilgrimage and cultural tourism.

The process of developing the route in Poland was complex, initiated and coordinated primarily by researchers from the Commission of National Education University in Kraków. The initial activities were carried out in a dispersed and intuitive manner, which highlighted the need for their systematization and structural organization. As a result, drawing upon the relevant literature, as well as over two decades of research and practical experience related to the development of the *Camino de Santiago* routes in Poland, a logical model was developed to describe the process of creating a tourism product in the form of a cultural route.

In the course of research and fieldwork, a data triangulation approach was applied, combining the analysis of source materials (itineraries, historical maps and parish registers), participant observations and interviews with local stakeholders – representatives of local governments, parishes, tourism organizations and residents. The integration of these three types of data enabled a comprehensive understanding of the route development process, verification of the proposed itinerary, and identification of key heritage points. The results of the analysis confirmed that combining academic, local and practical perspectives enhances the credibility and validity of the findings and provides a deeper understanding of the complexity of the process.

As a result, four main stages of the construction and development of the *Romea Strata* in Poland were identified, each accompanied by academic, educational and practical activities:

### Stage I: Developing the Concept and Assessing the Route's Potential

- Defining the route of the cultural trail, i.e. the physical pathway within its geographical space. Decisions regarding the course of the route should be verified through triangulation of data derived from historical literature, interviews with local stakeholders and field observations. This process also enables the identification of key sites and heritage features along the route.
- Establishing cooperation and conducting consultations with local landholders and communities (including local government units, residents, parishes, religious congregations, sanctuaries, pilgrimage houses, local action groups, regional and local tourism organizations, entrepreneurs, associations and forest districts) concerning the route's course, key sites, signage system and the acquisition of official permits for installing waymarking. These activities take into account safety, convenience and accessibility for diverse user groups such as walkers, cyclists, horse riders, kayakers, families with children, the elderly and those with disabilities.
- Identifying key sites along the route, primarily on the basis of historical sources related to pilgrimages to Rome (including itineraries, maps, travel journals, old trade routes, parish and hospital registers, the network of parishes dedicated to Sts Peter and Paul, monasteries, pilgrimage-related sites, historic hospitals and shelters, monuments, iconography and local legends).
- Identifying additional sites that are formally included as part of the route.
- Designating potential rest stops and tourist information points.
- Developing an evaluation framework and conducting an analysis of the pilgrimage, tourism and cultural potential of the route.
- Designing the templates for the main trail marker and road signage, to be used for the physical marking of the route in the field.
- Preparing a template for information boards to be installed along the *Romea Strata*.

### Stage II: Route Signposting and Development of Tourism Infrastructure

- Implementing physical signposting of the route in the field, taking into account the safety and convenience of movement for both tourists and pilgrims.
- Designing and installing information boards about the *Romea Strata*, providing historical, cultural, and practical guidance for users.
- Developing and expanding small-scale tourism infrastructure along the route, including rest areas for tourists and pilgrims equipped with covered shelters and 'gazebo's, free-standing tables and benches, combined table-benches, ecological toilets (portable or dry types), drinking water taps, bicycle stands, waste bins, recycling containers, stamp boxes for pilgrim passports and visitor books, as well as cycling service points.
- At this stage, field observations and user feedback from those testing specific route sections should be incorporated to adjust and refine the infrastructure in accordance with actual user needs and patterns of route use.

### Stage III: Promoting the *Romea Strata*

- creating a website and conducting promotional activities in media (social media, press, radio, television);
- preparing promotional and informational materials such as maps, brochures, pilgrim passports, guides, T-shirts, patches, thermoses, mugs;

- designing and implementing a mobile app supporting route users;
- cooperating with local governments, local church authorities, local, regional and sectoral organizations, and tourist information points;
- organizing rallies, trips and promotional pilgrimages;
- organizing conferences, seminars and lectures of academic and popularizing character;
- participating in tourist and cultural fairs as a form of broad promotion;
- developing a system for rewarding route participants, e.g. through: certificates of route completion and tourist or pilgrim badges (similar to receiving the Compostela for completing the *Camino de Santiago*);
- activities aimed at including the *Romea Strata* on the list of European Cultural Routes.

#### Stage IV: Coordination and management

- establishing a *Romea Strata* Route Program Council at the regional level. The council will be responsible for the development and coordination of the route in the given area. Its members should include representatives of the voivodeship, all counties, municipalities and parishes through which the route passes, as well as representatives of local churches, academic communities, tourism organizations and associations, forest districts and protected areas, local action groups, regional and local tourist organizations and local entrepreneurs;
- designating entities and persons responsible for route management along with defining their scope of competence and responsibility;
- organizing a guiding service system for tourists and pilgrims;
- implementing a system of continuous quality control of route signage and informational infrastructure, e.g. by appointing volunteer groups – “route guardians” – who will take care of particular sections in the region;
- monitoring tourist and pilgrimage ‘traffic’ – both quantitative and qualitative (e.g. satisfaction surveys, motivation and user needs assessments).

The stages outlined above were subsequently broken down into detailed tasks, with the assignment of entities responsible for their implementation. A classification of task types was also introduced: scientific (S), educational (E) and practical (P). This allowed for easier identification of individuals or entities who could perform the task – for example, E tasks could involve student participation, while P tasks indicate that the work must be outsourced or require hiring someone. S tasks denote potential fields for academic exploration and research.

Table 1 presents a summary of the stages in the development of the *Romea Strata* in Poland, along with activities carried out in the academic, educational and practical domains. The purpose of the table is to demonstrate how the theoretical concept of the route has been operationalized in practice and to enable an analysis of the alignment between the planned framework and actual activities. This approach allows for an assessment of the degree of implementation and the effectiveness of the process of creating a tourism product based on local heritage.

Table 1. Stages of the process and scope of activities for the development of the *Romea Strata* in Poland, categorized by type of activity and responsible entities

Stages	Task to be performed	Type: N – scientific E – educational P – practical	Responsible entity/possible executor
<b>Stage I</b> <b>Development of the concept and assessment of the potential of the Romea Strata route</b>			
1. Development of the route of the Romea Strata	1.1. Determination of the detailed route of the Romea Strata in Poland – the physical path in the geographical space.	N/P	UKEN RT, ST, LGU
	1.2. Collection and recording of the GPS track of the Romea Strata in Poland (for walking, cycling and horseback routes)	P	UKEN RT, ST
	1.3. Creation of a list of voivodeships, municipalities and parishes through which the Romea Strata passes in Poland, including contact details	P	UKEN RT, ST, LGU
2. Initiating and establishing cooperation with local governments through which the Romea Strata route passes, as well as with other entities (e.g. parishes, local entrepreneurs, forest districts, pilgrim houses, sanctuaries)	2.1. Preparing a list of entities to be invited to co-create the Romea Strata route offer (local government units, associations, local action groups, regional and local tourism organizations; parishes, religious orders, pilgrim houses, local entrepreneurs, forest districts, etc.), along with specifying tasks/areas of their competence and scope of cooperation	P	UKEN RT, ST
	2.2. Preparing a template letter/invitation to be sent to entities co-creating the Romea Strata route offer	P	UKEN RT
	2.3. Sending letters/invitations to initiate cooperation	P	UKEN RT, AERS
	2.4. Organizing a seminar/meeting to initiate cooperation with local government officials/ representatives of voivodeships and municipalities, as well as local entrepreneurs – e.g. online, with participation of AERS representatives from Italy, presenting the benefits of creating cultural routes, and actions taken so far (promotional pilgrimages, website, thematic events, newsletter, other promotional activities)	P	UKEN RT, AERS, LGU, LE
	<b>2.5. Official signing of cooperation agreements between interested entities and AERS, and strengthening domestic collaboration with the Research Team “European Cultural Routes – Space and History” as well as other members of AERS Poland</b>	P	UKEN RT, AERS, LGU, LE
	2.6. Establishing contact/cooperation with the management of forest districts through which the Romea Strata route passes and obtaining consent for the marking action	P	UKEN RT, AERS, FD

3. Identification / Inventory of the Pilgrimage and Tourist Potential of the Romea Strata Trail	3.1. Inventory/listing of key sites formally included in the Romea Strata (sites, churches, and monasteries historically connected with pilgrimage to Rome) within respective municipalities	P/E	UKEN RT, ST, PAR, MON, SAN
	3.2. Inventory/listing of other sites, as well as what is of value to tourists and attractions on the Romea Strata (chapels, art monuments, memorial sites, etc.), including potential rest points and tourist information locations	P/E	UKEN RT, ST
	3.3. Inventory/listing and verification of accommodation facilities (e.g. pilgrim houses, lodging at parishes or monasteries – verified through initial contact)	P/E	UKEN RT, ST
	3.4. Inventory of catering facilities/food retail points and possibly other amenities	P/E	UKEN RT, ST
4. Valorization and Analysis of the Pilgrimage and Tourist-Cultural Potential of the Romea Strata Trail	4.1. Preparation of a database in Excel containing all detailed information about Romea Strata according to AERS guidelines	P/E	UKEN RT, ST, AERS
	4.2. Preparation of short descriptions of the inventoried sites, tourist values, and attractions, as well as trail sections, following the AERS template for the website (www.romeastrata.org)	P/E	UKEN RT, ST
	4.3. Preparation of a scholarly paper titled: “Valorization and Analysis of the Pilgrimage and Tourist-Cultural Potential of the Romea Strata Trail in the Małopolska Region”	N	UKEN RT
<b>Stage II</b> <b>Trail Marking and Development of Tourist Infrastructure</b>			
1. Trail marking on the ground	1.1. Identification of locations where signs/ markings for the Romea Strata trail should be placed (especially path signs) and determination of their quantity	P	UKEN RT, ST, LGU
	1.2. Preparation of a cost estimate and securing funding sources for the Romea Strata trail signs	P/E	UKEN RT, ST
	1.3. Marking the trail on-site, taking into account the safety and comfort of tourists and pilgrims	P/E	UKEN RT, ST, LGU
	1.4. Production and installation of informational boards about the Romea Strata trail	P/E	UKEN RT, ST,
	1.5. Verification/inspection of the completed task	P/E	UKEN RT, ST
2. Development of tourist infrastructure	2.1. Analysis and determination of the need for so-called small tourist infrastructure (rest areas for tourists and pilgrims, including tourist shelters, standalone tables and benches, bench-tables; bike racks, trash bins, waste containers, cyclist service points, toilets, drinking water taps)	P/E	UKEN RT, ST, LGU, LE, PAR, MON, SAN
	2.2. Establishing cooperation with municipalities in this area, including seeking funding sources	P	UKEN RT, LGU
	2.3. Construction and expansion of small infrastructure	P/E	UKEN RT, ST, LGU, LE, PAR, MON, SAN

3. Website administration	3.1. Transfer of translated data to AERS for the website	P	UKEN RT, ST, AERS
	3.2. Taking over the rights to coordinate and update information on the Polish section of the website <a href="http://www.romeastrata.org">www.romeastrata.org</a>	P	UKEN RT
	3.3. Ongoing administration of the website/Polish section and updating information – cooperation and contact with AERS in this regard	P	UKEN RT
<b>Stage III</b> <b>Promotion of the Trail</b>			
1. Development of a Promotion Strategy	1.1. Defining the promotion goals, target audiences, promotional tools, and partners for collaboration in this area	P/E	UKEN RT, ST, LGU
	1.2. Preparing promotional and educational materials (guidebooks, maps and brochures), QR codes in multiple language versions and their distribution	P/E	UKEN RT, ST, LGU
	1.3. Designing and implementing a mobile application to support trail users	P/E	UKEN RT, ST, LGU
	1.4. Promoting the Romea Strata trail through press, television, and social media (Facebook, X, Instagram, etc.)	P/E	UKEN RT, ST
	1.5. Collaborating on trail promotion with local governments, church authorities, and other entities operating in the municipality to promote the area	P	UKEN RT, ST, LGU, LE, PAR, MON, SAN
	1.6. Documenting and verifying media information about the project, the trail, and the European Romea Strata Association	P	UKEN RT, ST
2. Preparation of the Pilgrim Passport	2.1. Translation of the Italian version of the passport into Polish	P/E	UKEN RT, ST
	2.2. Cost estimation and identification of funding sources	P	UKEN RT
	2.3. Printing of pilgrim passport	P	UKEN RT, ST
	2.4. Designing and producing the stamp for the passport	P	UKEN RT, ST
	2.5. Identifying and organizing locations where pilgrims can receive the stamp	P/E	UKEN RT, ST
	2.6. Determining potential places for pilgrims to collect passports and methods for distributing passports to these locations	P/E	UKEN RT, ST
3. Other Information Activities about the Romea Strata Trail	3.1. Inventory of tourist information points or organizations/parishes to which information about the Romea Strata trail should be directed	P/E	UKEN RT, ST
	3.2. Establishing cooperation with the above entities and creating a contact list	P	UKEN RT
	3.3. Preparation of materials and information to be distributed to these information points	P	UKEN RT, ST
	3.4. Promotion of the trail at tourism and cultural fairs	P/E	UKEN RT, ST
	3.5. Organization of weekend pilgrimages, hikes, and rallies along the trail	P	LGU, LE, PAR, MON, SAN



4. Organization of a Academic and Popularization Conference (Session)	4.1. Defining the purpose and venue of the conference, preparing a list of guests and speakers	N/P	UKEN RT, ST, LGU
	4.2. Preparing and sending invitations and promoting the conference	P	UKEN RT, ST, LGU
	4.3. Taking preparatory actions for the conference (registration of participants, preparation of the venue and possible catering, etc.), including drafting the program	N/P	UKEN RT, ST, LGU
5. Actions to include the Romea Strata Trail on the List of European Cultural Routes	5. This stage is carried out by all AERS partners from 7 countries, culminating in the awarding of the “Council of Europe Cultural Route Romea Strata” certificate by the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe in Luxembourg on May 6	P	AERS
<b>Stage IV Coordination and Management</b>			
1. Organization of the Form, Rules and Scope of Cooperation for Managing the Polish Section of the Romea Strata Trail	1.1. Establishment of the Program Council for the Romea Strata Trail in Poland	P	UKEN RT, ST, LGU
	1.2. Definition of entities/persons involved in managing the Romea Strata Trail, including their competencies, tasks, and responsibilities.	N/P	UKEN RT, ST
2. Development Directions for the Romea Strata Trail in Poland	2.1. Organization of meetings/conferences/academic seminars related to the Romea Strata Trail	N/E/P	UKEN RT, ST, LGU
	2.2. Development of the trail – creation of so-called “branches” and new sections of the Romea Strata Trail	N/E/P	UKEN RT, ST, LGU
	2.3. Preparation of guiding services	N/E/P	UKEN RT, ST, LGU, L/RTO
3. Control/Monitoring	3.1. Continuous inspection of the trail signage and information boards for the Romea Strata Trail	E/N	UKEN RT, ST, LGU
	3.2. Monitoring/studying tourist and pilgrimage traffic along the Romea Strata Trail	E/N	UKEN RT, ST, LGU

Source: own study.

The presented stages in the development of the *Romea Strata* European Cultural Route in Poland represent the outcome of a multi-stage research process that combined the analysis of historical sources, field observations, and consultations with local stakeholders. The applied methodology enabled the verification of theoretical assumptions regarding the creation of tourism products based on local heritage through their empirical reference to the specific case of the *Romea Strata*. The results of this analysis thus provide a foundation for further research on the effectiveness of implementing cultural routes and their impact on local development and contemporary forms of pilgrimage.

### Directions for Development, Cross-Sectoral Cooperation and Good Practices for the *Romea Strata* European Cultural Route

The development of the *Romea Strata* European Cultural Route requires integrated actions and close collaboration among multiple stakeholders, including local government units, academic institutions, non-governmental organizations, entrepreneurs and local communities. This collaboration appears to be more effective when the involved parties recognize the benefits derived from both the existence of the route and the cooperation itself.

The effective design of tourism products along the route relies on the coordination of development activities, support for educational and promotional initiatives, and the establishment of cross-sectoral cooperation mechanisms. An important source of inspiration is the experience of the *Camino de Santiago* in Poland, where the Development Chapters of the *Camino de Santiago* and the Jacobean Parliament integrate *Jakubowe* brotherhoods, parishes, local governments and non-governmental organizations, thereby fostering the development of tourism products and local entrepreneurship (Mróz, 2019).

Collaboration and coordination among different stakeholder groups form the foundation for the effective development of place-based tourism products. The process of initiating, sustaining and organizing cooperation among stakeholders within the *Romea Strata* involved numerous individual meetings and academic seminars, to which representatives of the relevant entities were invited. Individual meetings focused on discussions and problem-solving concerning the detailed route, agreement on possibilities, principles and scope of cooperation, and the acquisition of funding sources. Academic seminars, on the other hand, served as a platform for the exchange of knowledge and experience and provided an opportunity for structured discussions regarding proposed solutions related to the route's development and future growth.

One of the main challenges associated with pilgrimage along the *Romea Strata* in Poland remains the insufficient tourist infrastructure. There is a lack of networks of hostels for pilgrims and resting places (so-called small-scale tourist infrastructure) along individual sections. The construction of commercial *albergues* in Poland is practically impossible for economic reasons; therefore, it is recommended to utilize existing parish, farm or volunteer fire brigade buildings (OSP) as adapted accommodation facilities, equipped with basic hygienic and sanitary amenities, as is the case in Olsztyn, Pałacznica and Sanka (Mróz, 2019).

The implementation of a network of pilgrim-friendly houses, where participants could obtain accommodation upon presenting a Pilgrim Passport, remains a challenge that requires long-term support from local communities and institutions. The restoration of church-related buildings into lodging and catering facilities, as in Sułoszowa, Szczaworyż, Sączów or Ostell Sigerico, represents a practical example of adapting proven European solutions to local conditions.

The authors' experiences from nearly twenty years of field research – exploratory pilgrimages covering over 12,000 km of cultural routes in Europe also allow for particular attention to be paid to the expansion of small-scale tourist infrastructure along the route. On each of the 25–30 sections of the walking trail, it is recommended to install covered shelters and tourist 'gazebos', tables and benches, ecological toilets such as TOI TOI or dry toilets, drinking water taps, bicycle racks, rubbish bins and waste containers. Examples of such good practices can be found primarily along the *Camino de Santiago* in Spain and France, as well as on *St. Olaf's Way* in Norway.

A key element in the development of the *Romea Strata* European Cultural Route is the exchange of experiences and cultural values among pilgrims, tourists and local communities. The engagement of residents in tourism services not only fosters economic development but also strengthens local identity rooted in the heritage of the route. For any route to develop dynamically, it must be recognized and accepted by the communities through which it passes. Therefore, raising awareness of the route's existence and significance among residents, landowners, and hosts along the path is crucial. Their involvement, hospitality and sense of shared responsibility for the site's heritage create the unique atmosphere and authenticity of the route. It is equally important that local communities identify with the *Romea Strata* and perceive it as part of their cultural heritage.

In this context, valuable examples of good practice can be observed on the *Camino de Santiago* in Spain, Portugal and France, as well as on the Italian routes of *Via di Francesco* and *Via Francigena*, where residents mark the spaces of their private properties with pilgrimage symbols such as scallop shells, wayfinding signs or other pilgrim attributes. Such forms of engagement are not merely symbolic; they also have social and educational significance as they strengthen the sense of community around the idea of pilgrimage, increase the route's visibility within the cultural landscape, and consolidate its enduring presence in local consciousness.

The development of the route requires active local entrepreneurship, including the expansion of accommodation and catering facilities, the establishment of points of sale for local food products and handicrafts (e.g. jewelry, ceramics, clothing), the development of transport services, and the organization of cultural events such as local festivals, fairs or concerts. Equally important are ecological initiatives supporting so-called "eco-pilgrimage". European examples show that local communities and former pilgrims operate accommodation facilities in the form of *albergue donativo*, which combine lodging with workshops on sustainable living, as well as food outlets collaborating with local producers and artisans. Networks of points of sale for local products exist on many sections of the *Camino de Santiago* in France, Spain and Portugal, as well as along the *Via Francigena* in Italy.

Among good practices that could be adapted to support the development of *Romea Strata* in Poland, the introduction of a local certification or pilgrim badge has been proposed, similar to those implemented on other European cultural routes, such as the *Compostela* in Santiago de Compostela, the *Testimonium* in Rome or the *Olavsbreve* in Trondheim. Such initiatives not only increase the attractiveness and prestige of the route but also strengthen participants' identification with the idea of pilgrimage and the route itself. Implementing a certification system could serve as an effective tool for building the *Romea Strata* brand, fostering stakeholder integration and promoting local entrepreneurship. This initiative could be complemented by the creation of a series of collectable stamps featuring the logos of key sites along the route, which pilgrims could keep in their Pilgrim Passports as a form

of personal documentation of their journey. Solutions of this kind, widely applied on the *Camino de Santiago*, *Via Francigena*, *Via di Francesco* and *St. Olaf's Way*, constitute not only an emotional component of the participants' experience but also an effective promotional tool for the places and communities located along the route.

Simultaneously, it is important to emphasize the diverse motivations for travelling and pilgrimage, which form the foundation of the religious and cultural dimensions of the *Romea Strata*. For some participants, the route may represent a journey of self-discovery; for others, a spiritual encounter with God; while for more, it provides an opportunity to explore the cultural, historical and natural heritage of the regions through which the route passes, or to engage in active recreation and seek authentic experiences. In this context, highlighting the significance of both tangible and intangible heritage – such as sacred monuments, cultural landscapes, local traditions and narratives – is particularly important, as these elements shape the unique identity of the *Romea Strata* and reinforce its significance as a European Cultural Route.

An important direction for the development of the *Romea Strata* is to foster interest in walking and pilgrimage among children and young people, both at school and university. This younger generation, raised in an environment of mobility and cultural openness, can become a key link in the process of revitalizing and sustaining the significance of the route. Engaging young people in activities related to the conservation, restoration and promotion of the *Romea Strata* – for example, through educational projects, volunteering, field actions, competitions or themed events – not only supports heritage protection but also fosters prosocial attitudes and cultural identity (cf. Mróz, 2023b).

An essential component of this process is the integration of pilgrimage and cultural heritage topics into educational curricula, particularly within religious studies, geography and history classes. Complementing formal education, innovative forms of non-formal learning – such as workshops, field games, mobile applications or multimedia guides – it can attractively convey the concept of the pilgrimage route and its associated spiritual and cultural values. Active participation of children and youth along the route not only ensures its long-term sustainability but also represents an investment in the future of the *Romea Strata* as a living, dynamic and socially embedded European Cultural Route.

Local government units, through which the route passes, play a crucial role in shaping spatially oriented tourism products such as the *Romea Strata* Cultural Route. These authorities can significantly influence the route's development and promotion through both informational activities and the coordination of local tourism initiatives. Systematic promotion of the route on municipal websites, social media, and at fairs and tourism events is of key importance, as it increases awareness of its existence among both local residents and potential tourists.

At the same time, it is crucial to emphasize the benefits that the route brings to the local territorial units it traverses. These benefits may include not only the promotion of towns, municipalities or villages but also the enhancement of the status of religious and cultural sites located along the route. Engaging local communities and involving them in the life of the route fosters a sense of pride and identification with the trail, potentially transforming residents into ambassadors of the *Romea Strata*. In this context, it is valuable to create "branches" of the route leading to local attractions, regional products or culinary specialties, which further enrich the tourism offer and increase community engagement. Simultaneously, the development of the route is supported by artistic and thematic initiatives, such

as murals, outdoor installations, exhibitions and pilgrim hostels that incorporate elements of art, reflection and sacred iconography.

Local government units can also strengthen the development of the route through membership in the *Associazione Europea Romea Strata* (AERS), which allows the placement of the route's logo on local products and creates mutual promotional benefits. Additionally, important support for tourists includes pilgrim boxes with stamps and registration notebooks, as well as the use of local tourist information points for distributing leaflets, pilgrim passports and other informational materials. Establishing contacts and cooperation with foreign associations and entities managing European Cultural Routes is also essential, as it facilitates the exchange of experiences and the implementation of proven solutions.

Furthermore, local authorities' activities may include organizing educational and promotional events, such as the *Romea Strata Week*, conducted in schools as part of religious studies, history, geography or natural science classes, which promotes the engagement of young people and familiarizes them with the cultural values of the route. Cooperation with local entrepreneurs may also involve offering discounts in facilities located along the trail, thereby increasing the route's attractiveness. The continuation of academic seminars and monitoring of tourist and pilgrim flows along *Romea Strata* segments allows promotional and investment activities to be adjusted in real time, ensuring coherent development of the route at the regional level.

An important direction for development is also found in the digitalization and technological innovation of cultural tourism. Numerous examples of mobile applications exist for other international pilgrimage routes. These applications provide GPS maps, track available accommodation and allow real-time sharing of experiences. The creation of virtual guides, interactive maps and educational materials enhances the accessibility of the route, as do digital GIS systems that enable the continuous updating of information about infrastructure and the history of sites.

## Discussion

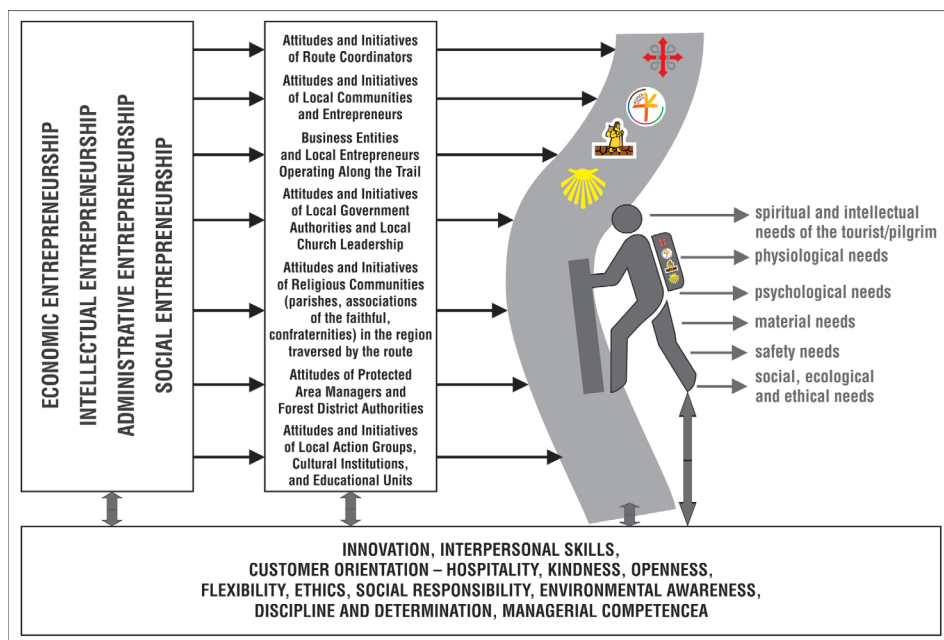
The continued development of the *Romea Strata* European Cultural Route requires the active involvement of local stakeholders, effective dialogue between public and private sectors, cross-sectoral collaboration and the implementation of a coherent and sustainable marketing and management strategy. This authentic and attractive tourism product has the potential to evolve into a platform for socio-economic development, merging cultural tradition with modern approaches to heritage and tourism management.

The needs of tourists and pilgrims walking the route, ranging from the physiological and material to the spiritual and intellectual, serve as the foundation for organizing tourism spaces and activities around the route. These needs are both addressed and co-created by local communities, which thereby assume co-responsibility as hosts of the route's space (Figure 4). Entrepreneurial attitudes and grassroots initiatives by caretakers of the route, local governments, communities, businesses, NGOs, academics, cultural institutions, and – given the religious character of the route – church institutions such as parishes, monasteries and confraternities, all play a critical role. Their engagement translates into the development of real tourism functions: accommodation and food services, small-scale tourism infrastructure, educational offerings, tourist information points and the promotion of local heritage.

Importantly, the aim is not merely to build infrastructure but to activate a network of interdependencies and collaborations that can catalyze regional development. Notable examples of such successful integration include the *Camino de Santiago* in Galicia, *St. Olaf's Way* in Norway and the *Via Francigena* in Italy – routes that have effectively combined heritage protection with local entrepreneurship, job creation and the reinforcement of cultural identity.

Expanding the stakeholder network to include youth associations (e.g. scouts, religious youth groups), senior clubs, parishes and local action groups is particularly important. Involving a broad range of actors promotes integrated action and may support diverse tourism forms, not only cultural, religious, and active tourism, but also educational and heritage-based tourism, thus strengthening the regional development potential of areas traversed by the *Romea Strata*. Each stakeholder group plays a unique role: offering tourist/pilgrim services, providing spiritual care, expanding tourism infrastructure, delivering education, managing space and organizing events.

Figure 4. Model of interactions between pilgrim/tourist needs and local entrepreneurship and community engagement in the development of the *Romea Strata*



Source: authors.

The development of the *Romea Strata* is not feasible without the activation of human and social capital. Interpersonal skills, entrepreneurship, innovation, hospitality, openness, adaptability, and ecological awareness on the part of both route coordinators and local communities, are not only implementation tools but essential conditions for the sustainability and resilience of the entire initiative (see Figure 4). Equally important is the leadership within local communities and entrepreneurial networks, their personal qualities and the ability to collaborate internally and externally (Mróz, 2018).



Tourism planners and developers must strive to optimize the well-being of local communities while minimizing social, environmental and economic costs (Sharpley, 2015).

The process of developing the *Romea Strata* outlined in this article has served as the foundation for planning and organizing efforts to establish the route's presence in Poland. It facilitated the identification, coordination and implementation of activities that resulted in marking and signposting the route in the Małopolska Voivodeship. An added value was the initiation of cooperation with municipalities along the route. However, not all local governments demonstrated equal commitment. Their level of interest largely depended on the leadership's attitudes and the perceived benefits of tourism development.

Thus, there is a clear need for broader promotion of the *Romea Strata*, particularly to showcase potential benefits for local development. As part of the route's development, annual academic seminars have been organized, serving as platforms for knowledge exchange, experience sharing and deepening cooperation with municipalities and other stakeholders, as well as instruments for promoting the route.

Despite these successes, significant barriers were encountered, particularly regarding funding and coordination. There were notable challenges in securing financial resources for key activities, such as valorization and waymarking. Especially difficult was obtaining funding for the route at national or regional scales.

The second major challenge identified during the development process was coordinating the route's development and management. It is critical to designate a coordinating body. Initially, the research team at the Pedagogical University of Krakow served this function in Poland, but due to its primarily academic and educational mandate, it lacked the full competencies (in practical terms) to manage the initiative. During seminars and stakeholder discussions, several organizations were proposed as potential coordinators, including the Małopolska Tourist Organization, the Central Mountain Tourism Center in Kraków and the John Paul II Intercultural Dialogue Institute. Other suggestions included forming a dedicated association or a municipal alliance for *Romea Strata*.

## Conclusions

In summary, the process of developing the *Romea Strata* European Cultural Route in the context of local entrepreneurship highlights that it is a tourism product based on place-based heritage. As such, it contributes to the discovery, cultivation, preservation and protection of the heritage of the sites along its route. This, in turn, strengthens the sense of identity among local communities. A strong local identity fosters entrepreneurship, while entrepreneurship, in turn, reinforces and promotes this identity, creating a positive cycle of socio-economic development within the region.

Moreover, the *Romea Strata* brand can enhance the visibility and promotion of the regions and municipalities along its path, thereby amplifying the effects of promotional activities carried out by local entrepreneurs.

The process of developing the *Romea Strata* in Poland, as presented in this study, has provided a foundation for planning and organizing activities aimed at creating the route's offering. It has enabled more effective identification, coordination and implementation of activities, resulting in the delineation and marking of the route in the Małopolska region. An additional value of these efforts has been the initiation of cooperation with the municipalities through which the route passes. As experience has shown, not all local governments

responded with the same level of engagement. Interest and involvement largely depend on the commitment of local authorities and their recognition of the benefits associated with tourism development in their municipality. Therefore, there is a need for broader promotion of the route, particularly with regard to demonstrating the potential benefits of developing its offerings in a given area.

Annual academic seminars are organized as part of the activities related to the creation of the *Romea Strata*, serving as a platform for knowledge exchange, sharing experience, fostering deeper collaboration with municipalities and other stakeholders, and simultaneously promoting the route.

During the implementation of activities defined within the process of developing the *Romea Strata* as a tourism product, significant limitations and barriers were encountered, primarily related to financing and coordination. Obtaining funds for specific activities, such as heritage valorization or route marking, proved challenging. Securing financial resources for the entire route at national or regional levels was particularly difficult.

Another key challenge identified in the development of the *Romea Strata* was the coordination of activities related to its growth and management, necessitating the identification of a central coordinating entity. Initially, this role in Poland was undertaken by the research team at the University of the Commission of National Education in Kraków. However, due to the team's primarily academic and educational objectives, it did not possess the full competencies to act as a coordinating body. During discussions held at seminars and meetings, potential coordinating entities were proposed, including the Małopolska Tourist Organization, the Central Mountain Tourism Center in Kraków and the John Paul II Institute of Intercultural Dialogue in Kraków. Proposals also included establishing dedicated entities, such as an association or a municipal agreement under the *Romea Strata* umbrella.

The *Romea Strata* European Cultural Route is a tourism product targeting a broad audience of domestic and international tourists and pilgrims of all ages, interested in cultural, religious and active tourism, who wish to embark on a pilgrimage to Rome. In the coming years, the number of participants on this route is expected to increase due to factors such as the celebration of the Jubilee Year in 2025 in the Catholic Church, the award of the Council of Europe's Cultural Route certification to the *Romea Strata*, the revival of pilgrimages along medieval routes, and the phenomenon of "caminoization" (Margry, 2015; Mróz, 2025).

If managed and promoted effectively, the cultural heritage of the *Romea Strata* can serve as a catalyst for local transformations, not only by attracting tourists but primarily through the activation of local communities, the development of micro-entrepreneurship, and the creation of networks of trust, knowledge and action. In the long term, this may lead to a sustainable improvement in residents' quality of life and the balanced development of the regions they inhabit.

The development of the *Romea Strata* requires close cooperation among municipalities, local communities, academic institutions, NGOs and entrepreneurs. Key areas of investment include lodging and gastronomic infrastructure, small-scale tourist infrastructure and support for local entrepreneurship. Engaging residents in the maintenance, marking and promotion of the route strengthens identification and its recognition within the cultural landscape. The involvement of school and university students in educational activities, practical projects and volunteer work is particularly important for ensuring the sustainability and development of the *Romea Strata* as a living, socially embedded European Cultural Route.

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