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COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE
COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

Evaluation of the European Heritage Label Action 2018-2024

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1. Introduction

The European Heritage Label (EHL) was introduced in 2011 as a European Initiative, to increase the visibility of Europe's shared cultural heritage and promote a stronger sense of European identity. The initiative aimed to connect European audiences, especially young people, by encouraging an appreciation of both national and European values and history. A key aim of the EHL was to strengthen European identity by highlighting shared historical events and cultural values. By showcasing heritage sites of national and European significance, the initiative emphasised that European identity is shaped by both individual national histories and common European experiences. The EHL also aimed to promote intercultural dialogue, fostering respect for different cultures and creating a platform for mutual understanding. Another significant outcome of the EHL was to raise the profile of heritage sites that have shaped European history and culture. Many of these sites, often under-recognised in European cultural tourism, were expected to gain visibility, aiding their preservation and promoting them as educational platforms. The initiative also aimed to attract a broader audience, boosting local pride, tourism, and economies. The EHL focused on engaging young people through innovative educational resources, workshops, and exhibitions to help them better understand Europe's shared history and values. This provided young Europeans with a connection to their continent's rich heritage.

The evaluation of the EHL, based on feedback from stakeholders and desk research, assesses its progress during its second phase (2018-2024) and builds on previous evaluations. It aims to improve the initiative's effectiveness and impact. Following the European Commission's Better Regulation Guidelines, the evaluation examines five criteria: effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, EU added value, and relevance. **The findings will inform the future of the EHL, ensuring it remains a tool for preserving and highlighting Europe's shared history and values, while lessons learned will help refine the initiative for its next phase beyond 2025.**

The evaluation shows significant progress, particularly in raising the profile of sites and enhancing their European significance. The EHL has integrated well with other EU cultural heritage initiatives, despite challenges in defining European identity. The label has strengthened networks among heritage sites, enabling collaboration and knowledge exchange that national efforts alone could not achieve. It has also facilitated sites' access to EU funding.

The EHL has adapted to EU priorities such as sustainability, digital innovation, and inclusion. Progress has been made in improving accessibility and gender equality, although implementation has varied across sites. The evaluation highlights the need for clearer guidance and practical tools for sites to better integrate the European dimension. External factors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, disrupted the initiative but also encouraged innovation, particularly through digital engagement.

2. State of Development of the Action

Between 2018 and 2024, the European Heritage Label (EHL) expanded significantly, with the number of awarded sites reaching 67 in 2024. This growth, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, made the label more inclusive and highlighted a broader range of European histories and identities. The diversity of recognised heritage sites also increased, including underwater

archaeology sites like the Azores and intangible cultural heritage such as Zdravljica, representing the European Spring of Nations. Transnational projects like Cisterscapes, involving multiple countries, reflected a more interconnected approach to European heritage. Educational engagement and public outreach were strengthened, with many sites developing programmes focusing on themes like democracy and cultural diversity. For example, Seminaarinmäki Campus in Finland engaged over 8 000 students annually, while Ventotene in Italy hosted seminars on European Federalism. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted physical events but accelerated the shift to digital tools. Many sites pivoted to online tours and virtual workshops, maintaining public engagement while presenting challenges in accessibility and personal connection. The creation of the EHL Bureau in 2023 formalised the network of EHL sites, promoting collaboration, sharing best practices, and supporting smaller sites. This structure improved communication, capacity-building, and a shared identity among sites, while initiatives like European Heritage Days facilitated joint educational and cultural programmes.

3. Evaluation Findings: Successes and Challenges

The evaluation of the European Heritage Label (EHL) for the 2018-2024 period provided valuable insights into the initiative's effectiveness, challenges, and areas for future improvement. The evaluation focused on key criteria such as effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, EU added value, and relevance, identifying both successes and areas that require attention to enhance the programme's impact.

Effectiveness

The EHL has proven effective in several key areas, notably in raising the European profile of heritage sites. Over 60% of surveyed sites reported an increase in visitor numbers after receiving the label, which also led to greater local community involvement and a broader recognition of European significance. The label helped enhance local tourism and contributed to the local economy. Additionally, the EHL has had a positive educational impact, with many sites offering innovative programmes that connected visitors, especially younger generations, to shared European history and values through workshops, seminars, and digital tools like virtual tours and multimedia presentations. However, there were challenges. The concept of "European significance" proved difficult for many sites to clearly define and demonstrate. This issue was particularly apparent in cases where local or regional histories overlapped with broader European history, making it harder for sites to articulate their European relevance.

The evaluation recommended that the European Commission provide clearer guidelines and examples to help applicants understand how to demonstrate European significance. It was also suggested that the Commission consider introducing a two-step selection process: one focusing on verifying European significance, and the second on evaluating project proposals and operational plans. This approach would streamline applications and ensure only sites with clear European connections are selected.

Efficiency

The operational efficiency of the EHL was generally high, but the evaluation highlighted areas where improvements could reduce administrative burdens. The two-step selection process, involving both national pre-selection and EU-level selection, was seen as somewhat redundant, especially when sites did not meet the European significance criterion. Streamlining this into a

single-step process would improve efficiency by reducing duplication. Furthermore, the complexity of administrative tasks, including reporting requirements and monitoring of sites, was identified as an area needing refinement. The monitoring system functions more as a performance review than a comprehensive evaluation, and there was a call for clearer guidelines and common indicators for site assessments. Additionally, the national quotas for site submissions, limiting each Member State to one site per selection year, were initially useful but have become restrictive as more countries express interest.

The evaluation recommended reassessing these quotas to accommodate the growing number of heritage sites seeking recognition, thus ensuring the programme's expansion aligns with its increasing ambitions.

Coherence

The EHL is distinct within the EU cultural policy landscape due to its focus on the symbolic value of heritage sites and their role in fostering European identity and unity. Unlike other EU programmes like UNESCO World Heritage or the European Heritage Days, which focus on tangible heritage or cultural preservation, the EHL highlights the historical and symbolic significance of sites in promoting shared European values. This unique focus reinforces the EU's integration project and strengthens the narrative of European unity. However, there are overlaps with other EU initiatives, such as the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes, which also aim to promote European heritage. While the EHL focuses on European integration, the evaluation pointed out the risk of fragmentation among EU cultural programmes.

It was suggested that stronger synergies could be developed between the EHL and other EU actions, such as Erasmus+ and the Europe for Citizens programme, to foster cross-programme collaboration and maximise the impact of the label. The evaluation also noted that the EHL could better align with EU priorities, such as sustainability and digital innovation. As the EU increasingly prioritises these areas, the EHL has the opportunity to promote green heritage practices and digital accessibility. Sites are already adopting sustainable practices, such as energy-efficient technologies and sustainable tourism initiatives, but these efforts need to be more fully integrated into the broader EU agenda. The evaluation also recommended that the EHL be more closely integrated into EU cultural diplomacy efforts. By showcasing Europe's diverse heritage globally, the EHL could strengthen the EU's cultural diplomacy and promote European values worldwide.

EU Added Value

The EHL has created a pan-European network of heritage sites that share common goals and engage in collaborative activities. The creation of the EHL Bureau in 2023 has strengthened these networks by providing logistical, financial, and promotional support. The label has facilitated joint projects, including exhibitions, educational programmes, and shared cultural initiatives, which have fostered cross-border partnerships and exchanges of best practices.

Another key added value is access to EU funding. The EHL serves as a mark of credibility, making sites eligible for funding from programmes like Creative Europe, Erasmus+, and CERV. This has enabled sites to pursue projects related to cultural preservation, youth engagement, and intercultural dialogue. However, the evaluation pointed out that smaller sites often struggle to access these funds due to complex application procedures and limited administrative capacity. Despite the EHL's successes at the EU level, its visibility at the

national level remains limited. Some sites reported that the EHL was not sufficiently promoted within their local communities, and the broader public remained unaware of its significance. To address this, the evaluation recommended launching national-level awareness campaigns to increase the profile of EHL sites and the initiative overall.

Relevance

The relevance of the EHL remains high, particularly as the EU places increasing importance on sustainability, digital innovation, and inclusivity. Many EHL sites have integrated sustainability into their operations, adopting green practices and eco-friendly projects that align with the EU's environmental goals. The EHL's alignment with the New European Agenda for Culture further reinforces its relevance in promoting social cohesion, economic development, and democratic engagement. Digital innovation is another area where the EHL has demonstrated its relevance. Many sites have embraced digital platforms, offering virtual tours and online resources to engage with a wider audience. However, there are disparities in how well sites have implemented digital tools, with smaller sites facing greater challenges. The evaluation recommended that the Commission continue to support sites in developing digital resources and ensuring that these tools are accessible to all audiences, including those with disabilities. The EHL also continues to be highly relevant in fostering social cohesion and inclusion, especially in a Europe facing challenges such as migration and discrimination. Sites that incorporate social inclusion into their programmes report positive outcomes in reaching underrepresented groups and fostering intercultural dialogue.

However, the evaluation noted that the implementation of inclusivity measures varied widely across sites, and recommended that the Commission promote programmes that focus on inclusivity and social cohesion across the network.

4. Conclusions and Lessons Learned

The evaluation of the European Heritage Label (EHL) for the 2018-2024 period highlighted both successes and challenges, offering key lessons for its future. The findings will guide the EHL into its next phase, ensuring its continued success and relevance in a changing cultural and political landscape.

Strengthening the European Significance Criterion: A major conclusion from the evaluation was the challenge in defining "European significance." While the EHL has effectively highlighted heritage sites that represent European values, many sites struggled to clearly demonstrate how their heritage connects to the broader European narrative. The evaluation recommended clearer guidance for applicants and national coordinators, including practical examples and workshops. A key recommendation was to introduce a two-step selection process: the first stage would assess European significance, ensuring only sites with a clear European connection proceed to the second stage, which would focus on project proposals or operational plans.

Enhancing Digital Engagement and Accessibility: The evaluation also underscored the growing importance of digital engagement, particularly for younger, tech-savvy audiences. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the shift towards digital platforms, yet the implementation of digital tools was uneven across sites. Some sites successfully developed high-quality digital experiences, while others lacked resources. The evaluation called for the European Commission to support the creation of inclusive, accessible digital content, including training programmes for site managers and funding opportunities for digital tools. Ensuring that digital

resources are accessible to all audiences, including those with disabilities, was a key recommendation.

Supporting Smaller Sites and Ensuring Equity: Another critical finding was the imbalance between larger and smaller sites, particularly in rural areas, which often faced financial and administrative challenges. The evaluation suggested capacity-building programmes and mentorship schemes to support smaller sites, helping them improve their operations and visibility. The imbalance in the distribution of EHL sites, with larger countries having more sites, highlighted the need for more targeted efforts to ensure that all EU Member States, especially those with fewer resources, can participate fully.

Improving Feedback Mechanisms and the Selection Process: The evaluation found inefficiencies in the current feedback mechanisms, particularly for unsuccessful applicants. Many sites reported receiving limited or insufficient feedback, making it difficult to improve future applications. The evaluation recommended providing more detailed, personalised feedback to help sites better understand their shortcomings and improve their proposals. Additionally, the two-step selection process could help improve the efficiency and quality of the selection process.

Sustainability and Future Growth: As the number of EHL sites grows, the evaluation stressed the need for a more sustainable framework to manage the expanding network. Simplifying the governance structure and ensuring adequate resources were seen as crucial for long-term success. The legal framework could also be adjusted to allow greater flexibility in site selection, removing the one-site-per-country rule to encourage more Member States to participate. The evaluation also recommended stronger monitoring mechanisms to track the long-term impact of the initiative.

Synergies with Other EU Programmes: The evaluation identified opportunities for greater synergy with other EU programmes like Creative Europe, Erasmus+, and Europe for Citizens. By aligning the EHL more closely with these initiatives, the European Commission could create a unified strategy for promoting European cultural heritage, strengthening the connections between heritage sites and broader cultural, educational, and social initiatives across the EU.

In conclusion, the evaluation of the EHL provides crucial insights into the programme's progress and potential. While the EHL has made significant strides in enhancing the visibility of European heritage and promoting intercultural dialogue, challenges remain in defining European significance, digital engagement, and equity across the network. By refining the selection process, enhancing digital tools, and supporting smaller sites, the EHL can continue to thrive and play a key role in preserving and promoting Europe's shared heritage and values.