

Cross-border Long Distance Walking Routes beyond tourism. Insights from an experience along the ancient via Egnatia

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Abstract

Long Distance Walking Routes (LDWR) are acknowledged as powerful drivers to boost the tourism economy. It is therefore important to investigate their impacts on local communities, including their social value, starting from the most recent academic debate, and giving a peculiar point of view through a case study analysis. This paper presents and discusses opportunities and criticalities of LDWR as tools for local development, through the experience of the potential revaluation of the historic route known by the name “Via Egnatia”. In particular, the authors analyse the case study according to the following discussion points: first, the historic, cultural and geographical significance of the Via

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Egnatia, a route that connected the Roman Empire of the East to the Roman Empire of the West, but also an Ottoman communication backbone and a current major migration itinerary; second, the fragmented state of recognition and preservation of the route due to different cognitive levels and interests, but also due to its cross-border significance; third, the development prospects of the route and the potential for the tourism economy of the territories crossed (i.e. approach the current underdeveloped rural and interior tourism versus coastal mass-tourism phenomena, recognize the archaeological and historic patterns of the route, debate the role of the religious sphere and enable the cross-border value); last, the results of the fieldwork conducted by the Cultural Association FuoriVia. The final aim of this work is to suggest approaches and guidelines to foster the positive externalities of slow and sustainable tourism on LDWR.

Keywords

Long Distance Walking Route; Local development; Via Egnatia; Cross-border; participatory planning

Introduction

Long Distance Walking Routes (LDWR) are increasingly becoming part of the academic and public debate. Several programs and projects are being developed at the European, national and local levels. On the one hand, they aim to develop the historic and scientific recognition of these itineraries; on the other hand, they seek to boost the tourism economy around these routes. Sustainability, reconnection with nature, and a desire for open-air activities after the outbreak of COVID-19, are among the most common

keywords associated with the effort to develop LDWR. However, where the exploitation of LDWR started a long time ago, they became subject to intensive tourism fluxes, similarly to other tourist hotspots and to other linear infrastructures, such as famous roads or even hiking trails. Overtourism along LDWR leads to deprivation of the economic tissue, tertiary monoculture, and depopulation of rural areas, as residential units are converted to host tourists (Milano et al., 2022). The world-famous “Camino de Santiago”, heading to Santiago de Compostela in Spain, is probably the most notable example. However, also less-known LDWR are experiencing post-COVID crowdedness and stress on local communities. Along the “Via degli Dei” between Bologna and Florence, in Italy, even local sports facilities have been converted to allow walkers to sleep, generating frustration among residents (Piacentini, 2022). In lieu of the risk of developing LDWR just to transform them into overcrowded local landmarks and mass-tourism phenomena, this paper explores alternative objectives of LDWR promotion, presenting the case study of Via Egnatia, a historically relevant route linking Durres (Albania) to Istanbul (Turkey) through North Macedonia and Greece and thus, during the Roman times, constituting the most prominent itinerary between Rome and the Orient capital, Constantinople. In particular, this article explores the potential of a methodology based on the “walkshop” approach to empower local communities and make them aware of the potential of the LDWR (Wickson et al., 2015). This is a method followed by FuoriVia (an Italian Cultural Association gathering several researchers with different backgrounds, in which the authors are actively involved) and developed during a 20+ experience of walking along several European LDWR, including the whole route from Rome to Istanbul. The major objective is to build a comprehensive (historic, environment/landscape, anthropological,

anthropic, geographic, and socioeconomic) framework in which to insert several bottom-up valorization measures and strategies, from the local level (e.g., maps, signage, local study groups), to the national level (e.g., online portals, nation-wide recognition and funding, cultural and natural patrimony protection), to the development of a transnational approach to LDWR (used to overcome nationalism, conflicts, and border barriers).

This paper is structured as follows: in Section 2 the role of LDWR is analysed within a “new” tourism economy, pushed by the slogan of sustainability but open to the risks of overtourism. In Section 3 The Via Egnatia is presented from a historical and social perspective. In Section 4 the methodology followed by FuoriVia along the via Egnatia is described, highlighting notable results and the most relevant axes of study and intervention. In Section 5 the potential of the transnational approach is discussed, along with FuoriVia’s approach to local and transnational development.. To conclude with, in Section 6 future perspectives and challenges are identified. dimensions of Via Egnatia in detail.

Long Distance Walking Routes: a new tourism economy

Slow tourism along LDWR is increasingly recognized as a niche of tourism that generates revenues of billions of dollars worldwide, with prevalence in Europe and other areas with strong pilgrimage traditions (Olsen and Timothy, 2018; Serdane et al., 2020). In this regard, “pilgrimage” is intended in its wider meaning, going well beyond the most common religious connotation, and including -in general- the experience of slow, active itineraries *en plein air* (Kato and Prognano, 2017). The sector has been expanding for several

years, but the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the following modifications in people's behavior and preferences has been observed to be a relevant driver for increased interest in LDWR (Everingham and Cassagne, 2020; Hall and Seyfi, 2020).

The increasing LDWR economy produces, according to scholars, two main categories of benefits: those directly related to tourist exploitation and services and those related to the improvement of the economic conditions of interested communities and, more in general, of their quality of life. The latter are also defined as "soft effects" (Stoffelen, 2018). Literature highlights the added value of the community development potential of LDWR; however, economic growth also is a primary aim of developing tourist trails (Timothy, 2014; Chaney, 2017). Well-established routes have the potential to stimulate income and jobs by networking a critical mass of businesses, services, and attractions, working synergically throughout the itinerary through complementary relationships (Timothy, 2011; Xu et al., 2016). The economic revitalization potential is even more relevant as it mostly interests rural and marginal areas, which experience positive externalities thanks to the promotion of the local product (including the land and landscapes themselves) and in the development of services and businesses (Trono and Oliva, 2013). Unlike more conventional types of tourisms, indeed, LDWR are experienced as a product themselves, establishing economic relations not only at the start and finish of the transport movement but throughout the entirety of the route (Fig. 1; Moscarelli, 2021).

The analysis of LDWR as products requires the capacity to identify the system from different perspectives: that of the context as a platform of resources, in which local communities plan and supply the value proposition with the participation of all stakeholders; the context as a relational

space filled by mechanisms of exchange, competition and cooperation that influence the behavior of the abovementioned communities and stakeholder; and the context as an approach and recipient of planning and management, with a series of development projects that will eventually modify the context itself and constitute the element for future planning and supplying of tourism goods and services (Trono and Castronuovo, 2018).

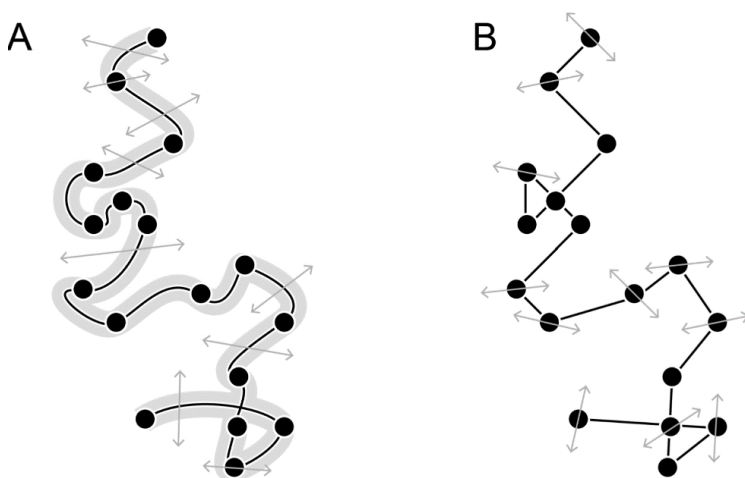


Figure 1 - Territorial relation along a slow tourism itinerary (A) and a fast tourism area (B) (Moscarelli, 2021)

Measuring the value of LDWR is complex, despite selected indicators, such as regularity of use (seasonalization), presence of religious, cultural, and artistic elements, etc., can be quantified in the process. This is due to two reasons: first, similarly to other experiential products, LDWR are affected by subjective norms, fashions, and trends; second, the social value generated by the itinerary is -in general terms- more relevant than individual benefits. The LDWR is, in this sense, a collective ritual of social, formative and epistemological experience, which adds to the intrinsic

tourism value of the itinerary (Trono and Castronuovo, 2018). Benefits in terms of social/community development, thus, are the main turnaround of LDWR development, offering a stable, long-term development prospect able to retain the attractiveness and competitiveness of peripheral areas and, meanwhile, to relieve tourism pressure on overexploited landmarks by redistributing benefits and interest along the itinerary or a branch of itineraries within a given region, in a virtuous circle where the itinerary promotes the region and vice versa (Tatangelo, 1999; Trono and Castronuovo, 2018). LDWR can be not only powerful tools to control local attractiveness and development, but also address the development towards a local-based approach, favoring sustainable businesses and enterprises focusing on local products, leveraging on the general high awareness of pilgrims towards tourism opportunities that promote lower-impact lifestyle and sustainability (Kato and Prozano, 2017). LDWR, then, thanks to their ability to attract selected high-quality users and to the fact that they are experienced on foot, are generally considered to be “sustainable” tourism options.

This, however, can be put at risk by overexploitation and mass-oriented approaches, such as the use of disposable cutlery, sheets and other appliances by businesses and retailers serving walkers, or by unawareness in dietary choices along the route, just to mention a few. Moreover, reaching the departure and arrival points of LDWR often impacts the environment noticeably. According to Campos et al. (2022) the topic of environmental awareness of LDWR experience will be increasingly relevant in research and practice in the field, and more opportunities for sustainability-oriented local development will arise in the upcoming years.

The social value of LDWR lies specifically in their ability to aggregate attractive factors that, singularly, would be

irrelevant, uninteresting, and unable to induce visitors and tourists to invest time and money in the experience. The route then becomes a systemic process involving multiple communities and stakeholders and able to enhance local peculiarities while linking territories and sustaining creative and innovative processes (Trono and Oliva, 2013). LDWR are often found to prompt measures to protect or recover the landscape and its key natural and anthropic features and to favor the consolidation of existing enterprises as well as, as seen, the development of innovative market segments. Overall, LDWR have a positive impact on the quality of life and development of rural or marginalized communities (Pourtaheri et al., 2012). Moreover, LDWR can boost social cohesion among different groups, communities, and stakeholders. In cross-border and/or mixed territories, this can bring to region-wide economic, social and even geopolitical benefits, although the process of starting and enhancing virtuous trends in cross-border areas is at times complex and strewn with ambitious challenges.

In light of the complexity of the topics touched by the debate on LDWR and because of the various externalities that can derive from the development of LDWR as a mainstream form of tourism, an appropriate methodology should be identified to study LDWR and approach their development. This paper emphasizes the potential of LDWR in acting as crucial drivers for sustainability-oriented local development in cross-border and/or mixed territories. The article develops a methodological framework by analyzing a bottom-up experience undertaken by the Italian Cultural Association FuoriVia along the ancient Via Egnatia.

Via Egnatia: a historic and socioeconomic framework

The Via Egnatia has been chosen as a case study because of its long and multifaceted history, and of the role that has

played on the regions through thousands of years, even if it is not known in the mainstream culture. Therefore it is important to focus on the history of the road, before describing and analysing the case study.

Via Egnatia is not simply a segment of an ancient infrastructural network. Built in 146 BC by Gnaeus Egnatius, the road is the material evidence of the territorialization of the Roman political project in Eastern Europe and in the Balkans.

The road played a central role in the struggle for the control of the Mediterranean that took place in the 2nd century BC. With the end of the Macedonian wars (214-148 BC) and the victory over Carthage in the Third Punic War (149-146 BC), Rome confirmed its hegemony in the area (Dexter, 2015). After the foundation of the Roman province of Macedonia, military presence had to be reinforced and Via Egnatia became an essential tool of romanization and administration of the newly annexed territories. Starting from Apollonia, and successively from Dyrrachium (Deniaux, 1999) [1], the road followed the ancient transhumance paths that were used in the area since the Neolithic time (Fasolo, 2005). Going along the Skumbini river valley, Via Egnatia went inland connecting the Adriatic shores to Masio Scampa (modern Elbasan) and Lychnidos (Ohrid). Continuing along the Ohrid Lake shores toward Heraklia Linkestis (Bitola), the road passed through Vegoritis Lake area and went to Edessa, reaching the geographical border between upper and lower Macedonia. From the Edessa cliffs, Via Egnatia went downhill to Pella, the ancient capital of Alexander the Great. From Thessalonica across Chortiatis Mountains, the itinerary passed the southern shores of Koroneia and Volvi Lakes, reaching Rentina pass and the Strymonic gulf. After that, the road reached Amphipolis continuing toward the Paggeio Mountain to Philippi and Neapolis (Kavala). Despite the lack of archeological findings in this area, scholars have

recently confirmed that the original itinerary ran through Thrace, providing an essential infrastructure for the Roman conquest of the region between the 2nd and the 1st centuries BC (Lolos, 2007; Walbank, 2002) [2]. In fact, from Neapolis the road continued its course to Traianoupolis (Alexandroupoli), Pheres and Kypsela (Ipsala) and ended in the Bosphorus Strait (Fig. 2).



Figure 2 - The main stations of the Via Egnatia (Chiara Costantini, 2019)

The construction of Via Egnatia was initially driven by military purposes, but the need of political stabilization changed the role of this infrastructure. The road became the main commercial axis of the region, developing an inland trading system from the Adriatic Sea to the northern shores of the Aegean Sea. Thanks to the connection with Via Appia and Via Appia-Traiana, commodities could be sent to Rome from the most remote areas of the Empire. Via Egnatia fostered social and cultural interactions, contributing to the expansion of ideas and religions. Many preachers travelled along the road like Saint-Paul, who passed through Kavala, Amphipolis and Thessaloniki during his second missionary journeys in 49 AD (Freed, 2014; Bakirtzis and Koester, 2009). Lastly, the development of Via Egnatia had a direct impact on the spatial planning of rural and urban areas of

the provinces it crossed (Lolos, 2007). New flourishing cities emerged along its course, whereas the surrounding landscape was shaped by anthropic activities. The strategic importance of this communication axis was confirmed also in the early Byzantine period, after the fall of the Western Roman Empire (Herrin, 2016; Kaplan, 2016). The Byzantine chroniclers and hagiographic sources show that, after the foundation of Constantinople, governors, diplomats, and imperial officials travelled along the Via Egnatia, before the road was brought back to its original military use during the Crusades (Belke, 2000). The rise to power of the Ottoman empire disrupted the geopolitical stability of the region. Nevertheless, Via Egnatia remained the major axis of the Ottoman trade network toward the European continent. In this period, the road drove a new wave of urbanization. The foundation of new cities and villages and the construction of new facilities (such as bridges, caravansaries, fountains, mosques, hammam and imarets) in the existing settlements, fostered the architectural “Ottomanization” of the area (Ameen, 2020; Skiadaressis, 2023). Furthermore, Via Egnatia became a vector of Islamisation thanks to the multiplication of pilgrimage itineraries around holy places, mausolea, religious and charitable institutions (Demetriades, 2002; Castellan, 2002; Elsie, 2019).

Despite being one of the most important roads since Roman times to the late Ottoman period, scholars nowadays report lack of sufficient knowledge on the road’s history (Fasolo, 2009). Via Egnatia is mentioned in ancient sources, especially by Polibo and Strabo, who gave a description of the ancient itinerary (Collart, 1935). The details of the road extension and the distance between the different stages are indicated in the *itineraria* [3] edited between the 3rd and 4th centuries. The Peutingerian table is also a fundamental source to understand the course of Via Egnatia as this 13th century road map is the only existing document that

represents the state-run road network of the Roman Empire (Fig. 3).

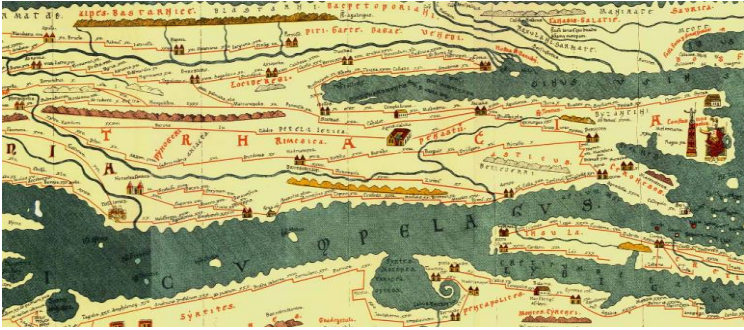


Figure 3 - An extract of the Tabula Peutingeriana

Beside these sources, many other documents give us information about the state of Via Egnatia over the centuries. We can mention diary of Lorenzo Bernardo who travelled along the Via Egnatia to arrest the Venitian bailo of Constantinople Girolamo Lippomano in 1591 (Cavazza, 1881). For the ottoman period, we can either cite Evliya Çelebi's book of travels (Seyahatnâme) (Çelebi, 2010). In his book, the famous Turkish traveler describes in detail the cities, the villages, and the landscape of the road in the 17th century. The existing knowledge on the Via Egnatia relies also on the archeological findings that have shed light on the road construction and renovation as well as its exact itinerary. Nevertheless, in the countries crossed by the Via Egnatia the national discourse and the heritage preservation policies have had a strong impact on the research programs in the last decades (Payot, 2010). For these reasons, Via Egnatia is still an open field of studies and the Italian Cultural Association FuoriVia has considered it worthy to give its contribution.

FuoriVia's “walkshop” approach: an application to the Via Egnatia

FuoriVia is an Italian cultural association whose members are professors and researchers with different backgrounds, but also students of history, urban and regional planning, and landscape architecture, as well as people who simply have a passion for walking. Historic and cultural routes are the object of its desk and on-field research; FuoriVia research methods include analysing maps and studying socio-cultural relations in the area of interest by using the “Walkshop” approach (Wickson et al., 2015), carrying out the research on site by walking, analyzing, and promoting activities together with the participation of local administrations, universities and research centers, associations, citizens and other key stakeholders.

FuoriVia was founded in 2016 with the aim of carrying on the important activity of planning cultural routes, which was originally promoted in the traveling laboratory “Landscape ecology” directed by professor Virginio Bettini at the Università Iuav di Venezia (Venice, Italy). During this experience, many cultural routes have been walked and explored by students throughout Europe, such as Santiago de Compostela (from 2000 to 2006), the Via Francigena (Rome- Canterbury, from 2007 to 2012), the Via Appia Traiana or “South Francigena” in Southern Italy (from 2013 to 2014) and the Via Egnatia (Durrës-Istanbul, from 2015 to 2019) (Fig. 4).

FuoriVia's project on the Via Egnatia was called “FuoriVia Egnatia 2015 – 2019” (FVE). In line with the association's goals, FVE aimed to promote strategic planning for the preservation, valorisation, and regeneration of Via Egnatia as a historic cultural route, adopting a participative, bottom-up, inclusive planning and cultural development approach.

systemized in FVE.

The Via Egnatia is less known compared to other LDWR that have been redeveloped so far. Its historic and cultural role seem to have been forgotten and its own existence is often disregarded. For this reason, the ancient route has now disappeared in many sections: in some regions, modern infrastructures retrace the path of Egnatia, like the trans-European motorway that takes, not randomly, the name of Egnatia Odos (www.egnatia.eu). In particular, the historical and geographical reconstruction of the Turkish section of the ancient route is difficult, now overgrown by new anthropic layers. As a research and valorisation approach, FVE abandoned the more strictly philological route and rather identified the best solutions for the contemporary walking experience. From road safety to historic and landscape value, to logistical aspects (e.g., the presence of water, accommodation, and other supplies), FuoriVia's approach has sought the most pleasant and, at the same time, scientifically and culturally relevant route rather than following the ancient Via Egnatia from a strictly geographical perspective. This "unorthodox" approach allowed to fully unlock and exploit an incredible cultural and social legacy: walking these spaces and encountering local communities gave a unique opportunity to redefine the physical route along the lines of the contemporary shape of the society that inherits the heritage/legacy of ancient Via Egnatia.

Walking is a fundamental aspect of FuoriVia's method: according to Somoza Medina et al. (2022), walking is the best way to observe the landscape, to engage with the environment. When walking, people's gaze can contemplate the horizon and question each substantial element, *communitas* is created with fellow walkers and locals, and physical and mental health are improved. Walking, something inherent to the human being as a bipedal animal,

has become in the present a social and cultural act. The landscape contemplated when walking is full of meanings, unlike what happens when we cross a territory in a vehicle, and the landscape becomes a transit point, a transitional area between the place of departure and the place of arrival.

More technically, the methodology of FVE, built on the work of Professor Bettini and on previous experiences within FuoriVia, aims at highlighting the potential of LDWR to act as drivers for local development. The base research goal in the case of FVE was that of understanding what the Via Egnatia was in the past, what is today, and what latent potential is hidden, from the numerous perspectives discussed here, in this little-known LDWR. A following step, then, was that of understanding which method to unlock the potential could be pursued on-site during the project and, autonomously, by local residents and stakeholders, after FuoriVia's walk in the area.

The analysis was based on four parameters:

1. Research (state of the art of the research on the historic route);
2. Policies (study of the current public policies and territorial strategies, and possible future developments);
3. Collective memory (understanding the knowledge and perception of the historic route within the local communities);
4. Touristic (analysis of the touristic facilities, knowledge and perception of the historic route and the slow tourism model among the tourism and visitors).

The field research was organized through teams working during the trip, divided generally into three main thematic areas:

1. The new Via Egnatia path, whose objective is to gain a general vision of the path, through the study of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT analysis) based on mapping the track and possible alternatives,

reporting general facilities, reporting through videos, photos and other multimedia and social media tools;

2. Via Egnatia landscape, whose objective is to investigate landscape, environmental and ecological features, and interaction of natural and anthropic elements, based on analysing landscape characteristics and transitions, tracking the anthropic impact on Egnatia landscape, reporting through videos, photos and other multimedia and social media tools;

3. Historic and cultural heritage, whose objective is to analyse and integrate historic, archaeological, architectural and cultural sites as well as immaterial heritage along the new Via Egnatia route, based on mapping and describing the main elements of interests, collecting interviews on knowledge and perception of Via Egnatia within the local communities, reporting through videos, photos and other multimedia and social media tools.

Usually, in each leg of the field research and in each stopover, more specific thematic researches were implemented together with local stakeholders and communities. Context-specific and theme-specific work has demonstrated effective to raise consciousness and diffuse knowledge -both among FVE group and within local communities- on the historic role of Via Egnatia in the area and of the various stimuli for making the route central in today's local life.

FVE project outcomes, like the information gathered, the mapping, the relationships, and collaborations, but also travel stories, are the basis of an ongoing communication and dissemination project, including general articles as well as academic contributions, such as the present article and storytelling through social media (e.g., Instagram page @gofuorivia) and a dedicated blog (<https://medium.com/meta-podia-με-τα-πόδια>). Moreover, FuoriVia produced interactive maps and GIS-based maps

(Fig. 5), including GPS tracks of the walked itinerary, that are publicly available upon request (for non-market uses only).

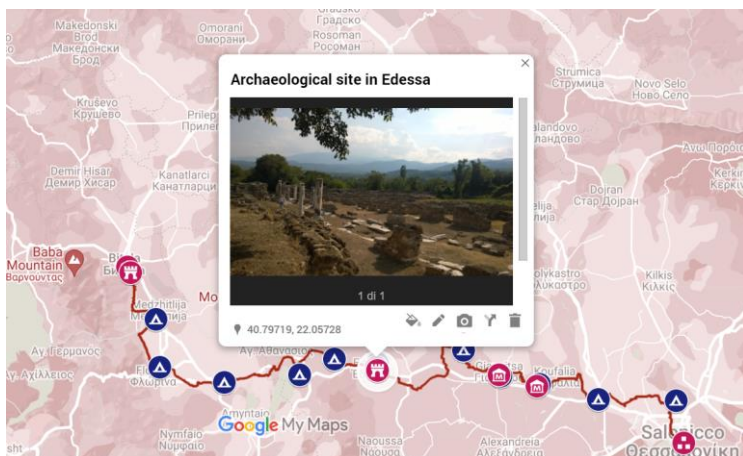


Figure 5 - Example of an interactive output of FVE (Author's elaboration)

FVE, in short, is a hands-on method to empower local social and economic development. As such, its goals and potential contributions on-site go well beyond the restricted field of the tourism economy. In Section 5 the potential of LDWR for sustainable development in a wider sense is explored, considering the economic, social and cross-border dimensions of Via Egnatia in detail.

LDWR besides tourism economy: sustainable development and cross-border social development

The potential of LDWR to develop and shape tourism in unexploited areas is a relevant aspect of their value, but only one side of a multifaceted, complex phenomenon. Indeed, LDWR are a “network of networks”, complex systems

where stakeholders produce formal and informal agreements and foster synergic interactions. In LDWR development and management, communities become protagonists, fully in charge of the successful development of the route. More prominently, communities take control of the social and economic networks that characterize the areas crossed by the LDWR and that, subsequently, rely on the route itself (Trono and Oliva, 2013). Especially when multiple governance levels, institutions, social groups and economic interests are touched by LDWR, a solid governance and management of the route is needed. LDWR are often intrinsically cross-border, cross-societal networks. The cross-border aspect can be a key to the development of integrated dialogue among different cultures and national interests, especially in times and geographical areas of geopolitical troubles. Yet, a constant, well-managed planning effort is needed to ensure the exploitation of LDWR's cross-border potential, ensuring creativeness and competitiveness of the network. Despite LDWR often laying upon challenging and stressful geopolitical and social environments, slow/experiential tourism is considered by scholars as one of the most successful ways of establishing worthwhile cross-border contacts (Deppish, 2012). LDWR, taking the inheritance of (often disused) historic or existing transport infrastructures, intrinsically offer the opportunity for cross-border cooperation, leading to enhancing cross-border mobility and development opportunities not only for visitors but also locals. The focus, thus, should not be on the cross-border development of the LDWR in itself, but on the exploitation of the LDWR to enhance new territorial, societal and economic development opportunities, as discussed, among others, by Stoffelen and Vanneste (2017). Via Egnatia is a significant case study within the cross-border development of LDWR. It crosses four European countries (Albania, North Macedonia, Greece and Turkey), of which

only one belongs to the EU. North Macedonia, Greece, and Turkey experience relevant national identity conflicts (peaking with the long-lasting conflict over the name “Macedonia”, see e.g., Drezov, 1999; Maatsch and Kurpiel, 2021) and poor diplomatic relations, exacerbated by recent global phenomena, such as mass emigrations, financial crises, and different political position with respect to the conflict in Ukraine (Wilks, 2022). The non-permeable borders, from a political and physical perspective (with difficulties in crossing on foot, something that is not possible for instance between Greece and Turkey), reflect wider-scale issues in political and strategic cooperation. Meanwhile, the Via Egnatia unfolds through an incredibly rich cultural and historic heritage, that -given its history- is all in all consistent and coherent from Durres to Istanbul. In a sense, the contemporary conflicts over the historic inheritance (e.g., that of Alexander the Great) can be seen as a linking element, a latent opportunity to function as a *trait d'union* for the consistent, coherent development of the Via Egnatia as a modern times LDWR.

FuoriVia’s approach within FVE focused on the respectful raise of local and transnational awareness on the potential of the common historic and political background and heritage, contributing to the bottom-up attempt to play with local identities seeking a shared heritage. Via Egnatia as a LDWR has been, in this regard, the “on-field” pretext to stress the potential of multi-governance, multilayer cooperation. On a different level, FVE has worked on the actual development of the LDWR, debating together with local communities environmental, infrastructural, economic, and practical aspects of the existing route as well as future perspectives, as discussed in the previous Section. Workshops (both on-site and at Iuav University of Venice), together with two international congresses (Venice, 10 -11 May 2017 and 20-21 September 2021), have been carried out to promote

participated planning and, in a wider sense, the inheritance of Prof. Bettini's approach (previous Section), at both an institutional level (including the institutional recognition of Via Egnatia as a LDWR) and "hands-on" (including signage, GPS tracking, infrastructuralisation, etc.). FVE actively included around 90 institutional stakeholders (from the Albanian agency for coastal management to the Italian consulate in Istanbul, to the Archeological Museum in Pella, to the National Institute and Museum in Bitola, to the Aristoteles University in Thessaloniki). Moreover, FVE involved all municipal authorities in villages, towns and cities where the group stopped overnight. In several cases, workshops and project activities have been carried out (e.g., in Edessa) and representatives of local communities and institutions have walked with the group for one or more days (e.g., around Giannitsa). Several other stakeholders, including the Police, local associations with common goals to those of FuoriVia, and interested citizens, participated in the practical happening of FVE, implicitly -and sometimes inadvertently- contributing to the intrinsic awareness-raising process on the role of Via Egnatia as a local development driver.

FVE 2015-2019 has produced some practical results (e.g., publicly available GPS tracks of a safe but historically meaningful walking itinerary) as discussed in the previous section, but mostly contributed to unveiling opportunities. Although cross-border development in Eastern Europe is still a challenge, FVE intended to stress the latent potential of the geopolitical and historic context of Via Egnatia. Several local efforts have followed FuoriVia's project throughout the route: in Edessa and Thessaloniki, tourist-oriented signs and posts have been placed to inform about the Via Egnatia and its main landmarks (Fig. 6); the same has also been done in several locations in Albania and North Macedonia (Harrison, 2018).



Figure 6 - Example of recent sign scattered along Via Egnatia (Authors' own photograph, January 2023)

Although some initiatives did already exist prior to FuoriVia's project (among the most notable, an archeology-oriented EU-funded project; EC, 2017), FVE and other activities held on Via Egnatia in recent years, including several scientific congresses, have favored a thriving debate and the launch of several valorization and study projects, as well as the start of the process of recognition as historic route by the Governments of Albania and North Macedonia and the inclusion of Via Egnatia in cultural manifestos (Ungaro, 2023). The path to the development of Via Egnatia towards a recognized transcontinental LDWR seems traced: more institutional and bottom-up efforts are needed to valorize the first tiles laid by FuoriVia and its partners. In this regard, a symbolic but relevant step forward was marked in March 2023, when Via Egnatia Foundation published the second and final part of their walkers' guide, covering the section between Thessaloniki and Istanbul (van Attekum and de Bruin, 2023).

Conclusions

LDWR are spatial and relational networks whose utility goes well beyond the single dimension of linear infrastructures. Lately, the interest for such routes has been growing even faster in Europe as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, several relevant LDWR are yet to be discovered by the public and, mostly, by political and economic stakeholders of interested territories. Several scholars have recently highlighted the potential of LDWR with particular regard to tourism, often exploring the link with the concepts of sustainability, slow life, and individual and collective consciousness. FuoriVia, as discussed in this paper, has been working to link these aspects to those of territorial planning, stressing the latent potential of LDWR as drivers for local developments rather than touristic exploitation uniquely. In this vision, walking tourism is a fundamental tile of a wider approach to bottom-up, community-based redevelopment of the economy and societies within the transnational context, physically and symbolically represented by the LDWR. Via Egnatia, as we saw, is a great case study, being mostly undiscovered and crossing countries and areas with several political, identity and economic issues but, at the same time, being unfolded upon a shared layer of historic and traditional elements constituting an overwhelmingly rich shared patrimony and inheritance. FuoriVia's method aims at empowering communities by providing historic, planning, geographical and social elements to be activated within a common valorization strategy, both on-site, at the governance level, and in the academic context. This approach is slow and requires constant hands-on commitment, patient network construction, and identification of possible funding opportunities to hold the local and transnational dimensions, as well as the tourism and societal tiles. Preliminary results

from FVE 2015-2019 project are encouraging: initiatives along Via Egnatia are now more frequent, and an effort is being made throughout the four interested countries to recognize the route as an official LDWR, on the one side, and to build a physical and digital walking infrastructure on the other side. The main concern for the future, as well as the main area of attention and further research, remains that of being able to identify, develop and activate the best possible drivers to make the Via Egnatia and LDWR more in general instruments of ethical, responsible, and effective local development. FuoriVia's walking and study method works in this direction, in strong contrast to further replicas of a mass-tourism oriented model already developed for other walking routes, which has led to considerable and not always desirable consequences in terms of social acceptability.

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- [1] Considered as one of the important military ports of the Adriatic Sea, Apollonia was the starting point of the road during the 2nd century BC. With the raising importance of the port of Dyrrachium (Durrës, Albania) the latter has become the new starting point of Via Egnatia.
- [2] Early studies based on ancient sources advanced the hypothesis that the road was designed in different periods. The segment from Apollonia to Thessaloniki during the Gnaeus Egnatius and an extension to the Bosphorus shore under Trajan rule. Recently discovered archeological evidence has confirmed that the road was designed in its entirety.
- [3] We refer to the Itinerarium Antonini and the Itinerarium Burdigalense, also known as the Jerusalem itinerary.