

## PRESS RELEASE 2

### CROCUS Research Delivers Insights into Cultural and Creative Tourism in Rural and Remote Cross-Border Areas

**Bergamo, October 2025** – The Horizon Europe project **CROCUS – Cross-Border Cultural and Creative Tourism in Rural and Remote Areas** has published its first synthesis report, coordinated by the **Zangador Research Institute (Bulgaria)**. The research provides a comprehensive analysis of the socio-economic, environmental, and cultural contexts of eight cross-border Living Labs across Europe, setting the foundation for the development of innovative and sustainable business models for cultural and creative tourism.

### An Unprecedented Survey Across Eight European Rural and Remote Cross-border Areas

The WP4 report gathers findings from **eight Living Lab areas** located across 14 countries, from Scandinavia to the Balkans, and from the Alps to the Black Sea. A total of **2,138 participants** contributed to the research, including **1,048 local residents**, **233 tourism business representatives**, and **731 visitors**, complemented by **126 in-depth interviews** with key stakeholders.

### Summing up findings, Stan Ivanov, CEO of Zangador Institute, says:

“This report represents one of the most extensive empirical studies on cultural and creative tourism in rural and remote areas ever conducted in Europe.

Through eight Living Labs and the participation of **over 2,100 respondents**, we have captured the heartbeat of Europe’s rural territories: their resilience, creativity, and desire for sustainable development.

The findings confirm that **cultural heritage is a cornerstone of community identity and a key driver of local economies**, while also highlighting the need for inclusive governance and balance between growth and preservation.

These insights will serve as a solid evidence base for CROCUS partners as we move toward co-creating innovative, sustainable business models that connect people, places, and culture across borders.”

— **Stan Ivanov**, CEO, *Zangador Research Institute*

### Key Findings

The report identifies common challenges and opportunities shared by cross-border and rural areas in Europe:

- **Demographics:** Populations are aging and declining, with low density threatening long-term economic sustainability.
- **Economy:** The Living Labs show diverse local economies, traditionally based on agriculture, forestry, and light industry, now increasingly turning toward services and tourism.
- **Cultural heritage:** Tangible and intangible heritage – from gastronomy and crafts to historical architecture and festivals – is recognised as the core asset for CCT development across all areas.
- **Tourism as a driver of vitality:** Tourism is universally perceived as crucial to local and regional economies. It provides strong incentives for preserving local culture and traditions and enhances quality of life through improved local services.

- **Challenges:** Concerns remain about traffic congestion, over-commercialisation of cultural heritage, and carrying capacity issues during peak seasons. Perceptions of tourism's environmental impacts are ambivalent, with both positive and negative views expressed.
- **Community well-being:** Residents demonstrate strong place attachment and moderate-to-high satisfaction with their local quality of life.
- **Governance and participation:** Stakeholders call for stronger public support and promotion of tourism, along with inclusive strategies for community participation.
- **Gender differences:** The report highlights gendered perceptions across residents, businesses, and visitors, with women generally showing stronger emotional attachment to place, greater recognition of tourism's economic benefits, and higher satisfaction with destinations.

## Foundations for Future Action

The findings of the report will inform the next steps in CROCUS, where partners will design and prototype **sustainable and inclusive cultural and creative tourism business models** tailored to each Living Lab area. These models will guide future collaboration, strengthen community participation, and encourage responsible cross-border tourism practices.

## About CROCUS

**CROCUS (Cross-Border Cultural and Creative Tourism in Rural and Remote Areas)** is a Horizon Europe project (Grant Agreement No. 101132454) funded under the call **HORIZON-CL2-2023-HERITAGE-01**. The project runs from **April 2024 to March 2027** and brings together universities, research institutes, and tourism stakeholders from across Europe to foster sustainable and inclusive cultural tourism in less-populated regions.

For more information about the project and the living lab areas: [www.crocus-project.eu](http://www.crocus-project.eu)  
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