

PLACE-BASED BRANDING THROUGH REGIONAL LABELS IN EUROPE'S PERIPHERIES: THE CASE OF THE BORSOD-TORNA-GÖMÖR BRAND, HUNGARY

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Abstract: Regional labels are promoted as tools of rural identity and place-based development, but their role in post-socialist peripheries remains underexplored. This article examines the Borsod–Torna–Gömör regional label in Northeast Hungary and its contribution to agrotourism. The study combines aggregated survey results covering 56 certified members with seven expert interviews and document analysis. The findings show that the label strengthens territorial identity, cooperation and quality signalling, while weak marketing, limited digital visibility and fragile institutional support constrain its wider impact. The case shows that regional labels can act as institutionalised instruments of place-based branding, but their resilience-building capacity remains conditional.

Keywords: regional label, place-based branding, territorial capital; institutional capacity, agrotourism, rural resilience, post-socialist periphery, Hungary

Abstract: A térségi védjegyek a vidéki identitás és a helyalapú fejlesztés eszközeként jelennek meg, de posztszocialista perifériákon betöltött szerepük kevésbé feltárt. A tanulmány az északkelet-magyarországi Borsod–Torna–Gömör térségi védjegyet vizsgálja az agroturizmus fejlesztése szempontjából. A kutatás az 56 tanúsított tagra kiterjedő aggregált kérdőíves eredményeket hét szakértői interjúval és dokumentumelemzéssel kapcsolja össze. Az eredmények szerint a védjegy erősíti a térségi identitást, az együttműködést és a minőségjelzést, de gyenge marketing, korlátozott digitális láthatóság és törékeny intézményi háttér szűkítik hatását.

Highlights

- The Borsod–Torna–Gömör label strengthens territorial identity and cooperation.
 - Regional labels can operate as institutionalised forms of place-based branding.
 - Weak marketing capacity and fragile coordination limit wider development impact.
 - Knowledge transfer, digitalisation and peer learning are key development pathways.
 - Resilience-building capacity in post-socialist rural peripheries remains conditional.
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1. Introduction

Rural regions on the geographical margins of Europe often struggle with persistent disadvantages. These include demographic decline, the outflow of younger generations, and limited local employment opportunities. The situation is particularly pressing in Central and

Eastern Europe (CEE), where many peripheral rural areas remain positioned at the edge of national development strategies and European cohesion policy debates (Rodríguez-Pose, 2013).

One response to these challenges has been the creation of regional labels and place-based branding initiatives. These instruments seek to reinforce territorial identity, valorise local products and services, and build connections between agriculture, tourism and local development (Kavaratzis, 2004; Anholt, 2010; Csurgó & Megyesi 2015). However, a regional label should not be understood simply as a logo or a promotional device. In this article, it is treated as an institutionalised form of place-based branding: a certification and quality-signalling mechanism that links local products, services and territorial narratives under a shared symbolic framework.

While many Western European examples of rural branding and local product labelling have been examined in the literature, less is known about how such initiatives function in post-socialist rural peripheries. In these contexts, branding initiatives often operate under more fragile institutional conditions, with weaker marketing capacity, project-based resources and less stable forms of cooperation (Müller, 2021). As a result, regional labels may strengthen identity and local cohesion, but still struggle to generate wider market visibility or durable development effects.

This paper examines the Borsod-Torna-Gömör regional label in Northeast Hungary. It asks: to what extent can a regional label support agrotourism development in a peripheral rural region, and under what institutional and organisational conditions can it move beyond symbolic recognition? To address this question, the study draws on aggregated survey results covering all certified members of the label network, seven expert interviews and document analysis.

The contribution of the article is twofold. Empirically, it provides evidence from a post-socialist rural periphery where local products, tourism services and territorial identity are connected through a regional certification system. Theoretically, it links the case to broader debates on rural place-based branding, institutional capacity, territorial capital and resilience (Gonda, Angler & Csóka, 2021; Bock, 2016). The article argues that regional labels can function as institutional infrastructures for rural development, but their impact depends on the organisational capacity, knowledge transfer and coordination mechanisms that allow symbolic value to become a practical development resource. In doing so, the article highlights both the promises and the structural limits of branding initiatives in the Central and Eastern European periphery.

2. Theoretical background

Territorial branding has become an important theme in discussions of rural and regional development. Much of the early debate focused on cities, but the logic of branding has gradually been applied to smaller regions and rural peripheries as well (Kavaratzis, 2004; Pike, 2009). Scholars agree that place brands are more than visual logos or slogans. They are symbolic frameworks that link identity, reputation and markets, and their meaning is continuously shaped through interactions between internal and external stakeholders (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). Anholt (2010) described place branding as “the management of place reputation”, stressing that

communities do not simply promote themselves but actively construct how they are perceived in wider networks. Szondi (2007) added that, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, where identity narratives were disrupted by regime change, branding can be a way of reconstructing local meaning.

In this article, place-based branding is understood as the broader process through which territorial identity, reputation and local assets are mobilised for development purposes (Kavaratzis, 2004; Anholt, 2010; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). A regional label is treated as one specific institutionalised form of this process: a certification and quality-signalling mechanism that connects local products, services and territorial narratives under a shared symbolic framework (Kašková & Chromý, 2014; Jadůňová et al., 2023). In this sense, the terms are not used interchangeably. Place-based branding provides the conceptual frame, while regional labels refer to the concrete organisational instruments through which branding is enacted in rural development practice (Donner et al., 2017; de San Eugenio-Vela & Barniol-Carcasona, 2015).

In rural contexts, the stakes are often higher than in cities. Rural regions rarely compete for global visibility, but they struggle with demographic decline, weak economies and limited institutional capacities. Rural place branding has therefore been discussed not only as a promotional activity, but also as a possible element of endogenous rural development. Domínguez García et al. (2013) emphasise the importance of developing an “inner brand” based on shared local narratives and territorial resources. Donner et al. (2017) further show that rural place branding can support endogenous development when it is embedded in local food and tourism networks, stakeholder cooperation and shared values. Similarly, de San Eugenio-Vela and Barniol-Carcasona (2015) argue that rural branding may contribute to local development by strengthening collective territorial identity and revalorising endogenous resources. Here, branding may help to reframe disadvantage into uniqueness: authenticity, tradition, landscapes and gastronomy can be turned into assets. The Italian Slow Food movement illustrates how local gastronomy and traditional food cultures can be mobilised through an internationally recognised movement while remaining rooted in place-based food practices and the valorisation of local food systems (Mayda, 2005; Fonte, 2008). Austria’s Vulcano ham producers combine farm visits, storytelling and events to create a brand that integrates food, tourism and education (www.vulcano.at³). In Hungary, the Éltető Balaton label shows how local products can be woven into tourism routes around Lake Balaton (Kovács & Nemes, 2019). These examples suggest that territorial labels are not only marketing tools but also vehicles for identity, cooperation and local development.

Comparable examples from post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe also show that regional labels can contribute to rural development and regional identity formation. In Czechia, regional product labelling schemes have been analysed as part of region formation and regional institutionalisation, linking certified products to territorial identity and the re-connection of production and consumption (Kašková & Chromý, 2014). In Slovakia, regional product labelling has been examined as a tool for supporting rural development, local producers, traditional

³ <http://www.vulcano.at/>. Retrieved May 16, 2026

products and regional tourism (Jadudová et al., 2023). These cases are particularly relevant for post-socialist rural contexts, where branding initiatives often operate under weaker institutional conditions and depend strongly on local coordination capacities.

Yet the question remains: can branding alone trigger development, or does it simply mirror existing strengths? Recent work on rural place branding processes stresses that branding outcomes depend on the type of place, the initiating actors, the support base, the purpose of branding and the target groups involved (Gulisova, 2021). Scholars therefore emphasise that labels cannot work in isolation; they require supportive institutions and stakeholder coordination. Healey (1998) described institutional capacity as the networks of trust, shared knowledge and collaboration that enable collective action. Amin and Thrift (1994) coined the term “institutional thickness” to capture the density of actors and relations needed for development. Without such depth, brands risk being empty shells. Rodríguez-Pose (2013) made the same point in a different register: institutions determine why some regions prosper while others decline.

This insight has practical consequences. In Western Europe, many branding initiatives have been supported by the EU’s LEADER programme, which provides funding and organisational structures. Müller (2021) shows how LEADER in North Rhine-Westphalia not only financed projects but also created new governance arenas where municipalities, producers and NGOs worked together. Labels could thrive because there was a web of cooperation sustaining them. In contrast, in weaker institutional contexts, labels often struggle to mobilise producers, coordinate marketing or maintain credibility (Braun, 2012; Lucarelli & Berg, 2011). This problem is especially relevant in peripheral rural regions, where project-based funding often creates short-term opportunities without necessarily building durable organisational capacity.

Territorial capital is particularly relevant for understanding the developmental role of regional labels because it shifts attention from promotion to the assets that branding seeks to mobilise. Camagni (2009) described territorial capital as the bundle of tangible and intangible resources that shape the potential of a place, including natural resources, cultural heritage, infrastructure, networks of trust and institutional arrangements. Capello (2014) further emphasised that such assets are highly place-specific and cannot simply be transferred or replicated elsewhere. In rural areas, this may include local food, craft traditions, landscapes, tourism services and forms of cooperation. Regional labels can make selected elements of this territorial capital visible, certify them and connect them to wider market and tourism narratives. Yet visibility is not the same as mobilisation. Peripheral regions often underuse their assets because of weak human capital, insufficient infrastructure, limited market access or lack of organisational capacity (Bock, 2016), while even rich local endowments may remain dormant without appropriate institutions (Rodríguez-Pose, 2013). A wine region may have centuries-old traditions, but without cooperative networks and marketing strategies these traditions do not necessarily become competitive advantages. The mobilisation of territorial capital therefore depends on coordination, institutional capacity and the ability to translate local distinctiveness into recognisable offers for visitors, consumers and external partners.

Examples across Europe illustrate this. In France, regional brands such as “Vin de Bordeaux” have long mobilised cultural and natural assets into globally recognised products. In Portugal, thematic tourism routes integrate architecture, crafts and gastronomy to valorise local heritage (Novikova, 2021). In Hungary, the Vidék Minőség (Rural Quality) umbrella brand demonstrates how coordinated efforts can connect small producers into a national network with shared quality standards (Kovács & Nemes, 2019). These cases show that territorial capital can only be activated through deliberate institutional action.

Resilience adds a further dimension to the analysis of regional labels because it shifts attention from visibility and identity towards longer-term adaptive capacity. In rural development research, resilience is commonly understood as the ability of a system to absorb shocks, adapt to external pressures and reorganise under changing conditions. Rural studies usually distinguish between engineering resilience, which refers to returning to a previous equilibrium, ecological resilience, which focuses on absorbing disturbances without losing core functions, and evolutionary resilience, which emphasises adaptation and transformation over time (Davoudi et al., 2012; Christopherson et al., 2010). For the present study, the evolutionary interpretation is the most relevant. Regional labels are not expected simply to restore earlier rural economies; rather, their potential lies in their ability to support diversification, cooperation, knowledge transfer, and new forms of value creation in regions affected by depopulation, economic restructuring, and weak institutional capacity.

In post-socialist contexts, resilience has a double edge. Bock (2016) points to persistent vulnerabilities: outmigration, dependency on EU subsidies, and fragmentation of local institutions. Swain (2013) observed how rural communities in Central and Eastern Europe often rely on improvisation and “force-of-circumstance” entrepreneurship rather than systematic planning. At the same time, new alliances, NGOs and grassroots projects have emerged, showing that rural actors can adapt creatively when opportunities arise (Bock, 2016). This duality is important: post-socialist rural regions are not simply deficient versions of Western European cases, but places where weak institutional capacity, project dependency and local improvisation coexist.

This raises a critical question: can regional labels contribute to resilience, or do they simply repackage existing weaknesses? The available evidence suggests a more qualified answer. Regional labels can strengthen resilience-relevant capacities when they foster cooperation, encourage knowledge transfer, protect local know-how and connect producers to wider markets. However, they do so only when they operate not merely as visual identifiers, but as institutionalised tools of collective action. Interreg Europe’s policy evidence on regional branding shows that collective territorial brands can increase SME visibility and competitiveness by pooling resources, signalling local origin and quality, and linking local producers with tourism and regional development strategies (Interreg Europe, 2021). The Austrian GenussRegion, institutionalised through the AMA GENUSS REGION quality seal, illustrates this mechanism by linking regional origin, standardised quality and culinary identity across rural direct marketers, food manufacturers and gastronomy businesses, with external quality controls

(www.genussregionen.at⁴). Roostika's study (2019) of collective branding in the Batik Banyuripan SME cluster points to a similar mechanism at the producer level: collective brands can help small firms overcome the costs of individual branding, protect local names and products, establish quality standards, share knowledge and organise common marketing efforts. In this sense, regional labels may contribute to rural resilience by supporting diversification, cooperation, quality governance, knowledge sharing and the continuity of local productive traditions.

Yet this contribution should not be treated as automatic. Recent evidence on Italian inner areas shows that the relationship between place-based labels and economic resilience is mixed. Compagnucci, Faggian and Urso (2025) examine whether labels linked to agricultural quality, landscape protection and cultural heritage helped municipalities mitigate the effects of the 2008 Great Recession. Their results suggest a mixed and partly adverse relationship between place-branding factors and resilience patterns, rather than a straightforward positive effect. This suggests that labels may also reproduce existing inequalities when they are weakly connected to local production systems, captured by stronger actors, or disconnected from broader territorial strategies. Their resilience-building capacity, therefore, remains conditional on institutional support, active participation by local actors, and the ability to turn symbolic recognition into practical cooperation.

Taken together, the literature indicates that rural place branding, institutional capacity, territorial capital and resilience are interdependent rather than separate. In the framework used here, regional labels are understood as institutionalised instruments of place-based branding. Branding and identity make local assets visible and provide symbolic cohesion. Institutional capacity builds networks of trust and governance, while territorial capital represents the tangible and intangible resources of the region. Resilience emerges from the interaction of these dimensions, reflecting the adaptive capacity of peripheral rural areas. Figure 1 summarises this conceptual framework.

⁴ <https://www.genussregionen.at/en/about-us>. Retrieved May 16, 2026

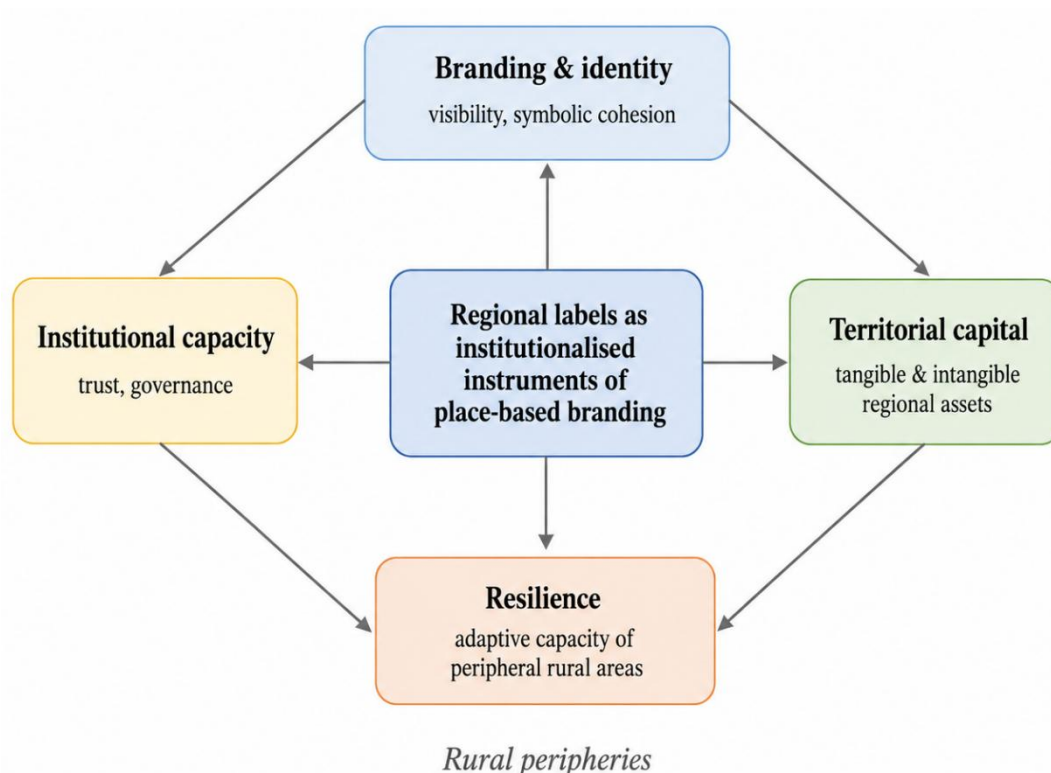


Figure 1. Regional labels as institutionalised instruments of place-based branding in rural peripheries.
Source: authors' own elaboration

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

The study employed a mixed-methods case study design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to capture both the structural characteristics of the label network and the perceptions of local and institutional actors. Mixed-methods research is particularly useful when numerical patterns need to be interpreted together with contextual and institutional explanations (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This approach is also well suited to peripheral rural regions, where official statistics are often scarce, fragmented or insufficient for understanding local development processes.

The empirical focus of the research is the Borsod-Torna-Gömör regional label in Northeast Hungary. The label is operated by the Borsod-Torna-Gömör Association, a LEADER Local Action Group that coordinates local development activities and manages the certification system connected to regional products and rural tourism services. At the time of the research, the label network included 56 certified members across two categories: Kiváló Tájtermék ("Excellent Regional Product") and Príma Porta ("Open Farm"). This clearly bounded membership made it possible to conduct a complete survey of the certified network. A fuller description of the region, the Local Action Group and the label system is provided in Section 4.

A comprehensive survey of all certified members of the Borsod-Torna-Gömör regional label provided an aggregated quantitative overview of members' characteristics, development

intentions, marketing practices, and cooperation patterns. Semi-structured expert interviews offered qualitative depth on governance, institutional capacity and agrotourism-related development opportunities. In addition, document analysis was carried out on the internal regulations, design manual and strategic plans of the Borsod-Torna-Gömör Association. The combination of these sources made it possible to triangulate aggregated member survey results with institutional and strategic perspectives. A detailed description of the region and the label system is provided in the following case study context section.

3.2 Data collection

The quantitative component consisted of a structured questionnaire distributed to all 56 certified producers and service providers listed in the database of the Borsod-Torna-Gömör Association. The population covered two categories: 26 holders of the Kiváló Tájtermék (“Excellent Regional Product”) label and 30 Príma Porta (“Open Farm”) tourism providers. All 56 questionnaires were returned, yielding full coverage of the certified membership. Given the small and clearly defined population, the survey can be treated as a complete enumeration of the label network rather than as a sample survey. The responses were processed and used in aggregated form; accordingly, the survey results are used for descriptive analysis and graphical presentation, not for respondent-level statistical modelling, relationship analysis or formal classification of members.

The questionnaire contained 19 questions divided into thematic blocks (Table 1). Most questions used closed formats, including categorical questions and Likert-type scales, while several items allowed open comments in order to capture individual perspectives. The survey was conducted between August and October 2024, in parallel with the preparation of the Local Development Strategy. This timing supported participation because certified members were already being contacted through the Local Action Group’s planning process, the survey topic was directly linked to ongoing strategic discussions, and respondents could see the practical relevance of providing information.

The qualitative component consisted of seven semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders selected through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling was used because the aim was not statistical representativeness, but the inclusion of actors with direct knowledge of the label, agrotourism and local development processes (Patton, 2015). Participants included local mayors, leaders of civil associations, representatives of national agrotourism organisations, and experienced producers or service providers certified under the Borsod-Torna-Gömör label. Interviews were carried out in October 2024, both online and face-to-face, and followed a flexible interview guide. Each interview lasted 45–75 minutes.

Table 1. Main thematic blocks of data collection. Source: authors' own compilation

Data source	Respondents /material	Time of collection	Main thematic blocks	Data format	Analytical role
Structured questionnaire	56 certified members of the Borsod-Torna-Gömör regional label	August-October 2024	Enterprise profile; label category; development plans; marketing channels; cooperation networks; perceived challenges and opportunities	Aggregated survey results based on closed questions, categorical variables, Likert-type items and open comments	Descriptive overview of the full certified membership; basis for figures and summary tables
Semi-structured interviews	7 institutional and local stakeholders	October 2024	Branding and agrotourism; institutional strengths and weaknesses; governance challenges; training needs; future development options	Semi-structured interview guide; open-ended responses	Interpretation of institutional context, governance capacity and development constraints
Document analysis	Internal regulations, design manual and strategic documents of the label system	2024	Certification rules; visual identity; strategic objectives; organisational background	Qualitative document review	Contextualisation of the label as an institutionalised place-based branding instrument

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Table 2. Expert interviewees: institutional background and experience. Source: authors' own compilation

Code	Organisation	Field of activity	Agrotourism / label connection and expertise	Position / institutional role	Professional experience
I1	Active and Ecotourism Development Centre (Nonprofit Ltd.)	National agrotourism	National Agrotourism Strategy programme leader	Programme leader; Head of Department	6 years
I2	National Association of Small-scale Producers and Service Providers	Agrotourism	Small-scale producer regulations; guest table programme; experience host programme; honey tasting	Expert	15 years
I3	Association for the Living Balaton Uplands	Local label and rural development	Éltető label and LEADER programme	Project manager; Head of Local Action Group Office	15 years
I4	Municipality of Boldva	Local government and local product production	Public works programme and local product production	Mayor	7 years
I5	Association "Treasures of Borsod-Torna-Gömör"	Local product label and event organisation	Operator of the Borsod-Torna-Gömör regional label and head of local civil organisations	President	10 years
I6	Hadobás Pál Cultural Centre, Library and Public Museum, Edelény	Culture, education and event organisation	Local programme organisation and cultural development	Director	45 years
I7	"Flavours of Trizs" Social Cooperative / Municipality of Trizs	Local product production	Head of one of the most significant local product enterprises in the region	Managing director; Mayor	35 years

Note: Each row refers to one interviewee. Where two positions or institutional roles are listed, they refer to the same person holding multiple roles.

The selection of interviewees focused on three types of expertise: actors with direct responsibility for enhancing the touristic attractiveness of their municipality; experts engaged in national-level agrotourism development and the promotion of rural tourism activities; and local actors personally involved in the production of regional products or the provision of tourism services. Thematic coding was applied to identify recurrent patterns across the different institutional perspectives, particularly in relation to institutional capacity, cooperation, marketing constraints and future development pathways (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.3 Analytical framework

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data followed an interpretative mixed-methods logic. First, descriptive analysis of the aggregated survey results provided a systematic overview of development intentions, marketing use, cooperation patterns and perceived challenges among certified members. Second, qualitative interview data were coded thematically to reveal the institutional and governance conditions behind these patterns. Third, document analysis helped contextualise the label system as an institutionalised form of place-based branding, especially through its certification rules, design manual and strategic documents (Bowen, 2009).

The final synthesis connected the empirical findings to the conceptual dimensions introduced in the theoretical framework: place-based branding, institutional capacity, territorial capital and resilience. This approach enabled moving beyond a simple description of aggregated member responses and interpreting how the regional label operates as a development instrument in a peripheral rural context, without treating the survey material as a basis for respondent-level modelling or formal typology-building.

3.4 Justification

This research design is appropriate for analysing regional labels in rural peripheries for three reasons. First, the complete survey provides full-coverage aggregated evidence on the certified membership, which is especially important in small rural networks where the population of relevant actors is limited. Second, expert interviews provide insights into institutional dynamics, governance constraints and cooperation problems that are often invisible in survey aggregates or official statistics. Third, document analysis enables an understanding of the formal rules and strategic objectives of the label system.

By combining these sources, the methodology captures both the measurable aggregate characteristics of the label network and the institutional conditions that shape its operation. This is particularly important in post-socialist rural contexts, where development initiatives often depend on fragile institutional capacities, project-based resources and the active involvement of a small number of local actors (Jeney & Varga, 2016). The design therefore supports the article's aim: to analyse how a regional label functions as an institutionalised form of place-based branding in a peripheral rural region.

4. Case study context: the Borsod-Torna-Gömör region

The Borsod-Torna-Gömör (BTG) region lies in Northeast Hungary, directly along the Slovak–Hungarian border. The area is linked to the historical county territories of Borsod, Torna and Gömör, whose settlement and institutional relations were significantly reshaped by the border changes following the Treaty of Trianon in 1920. Today, the region covered by the Borsod-Torna-Gömör Local Action Group includes 77 settlements across the Edelény, Kazincbarcika, Miskolc and Putnok districts (Figure 2). Its settlement structure is highly fragmented and dominated by small villages, many of them with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants.

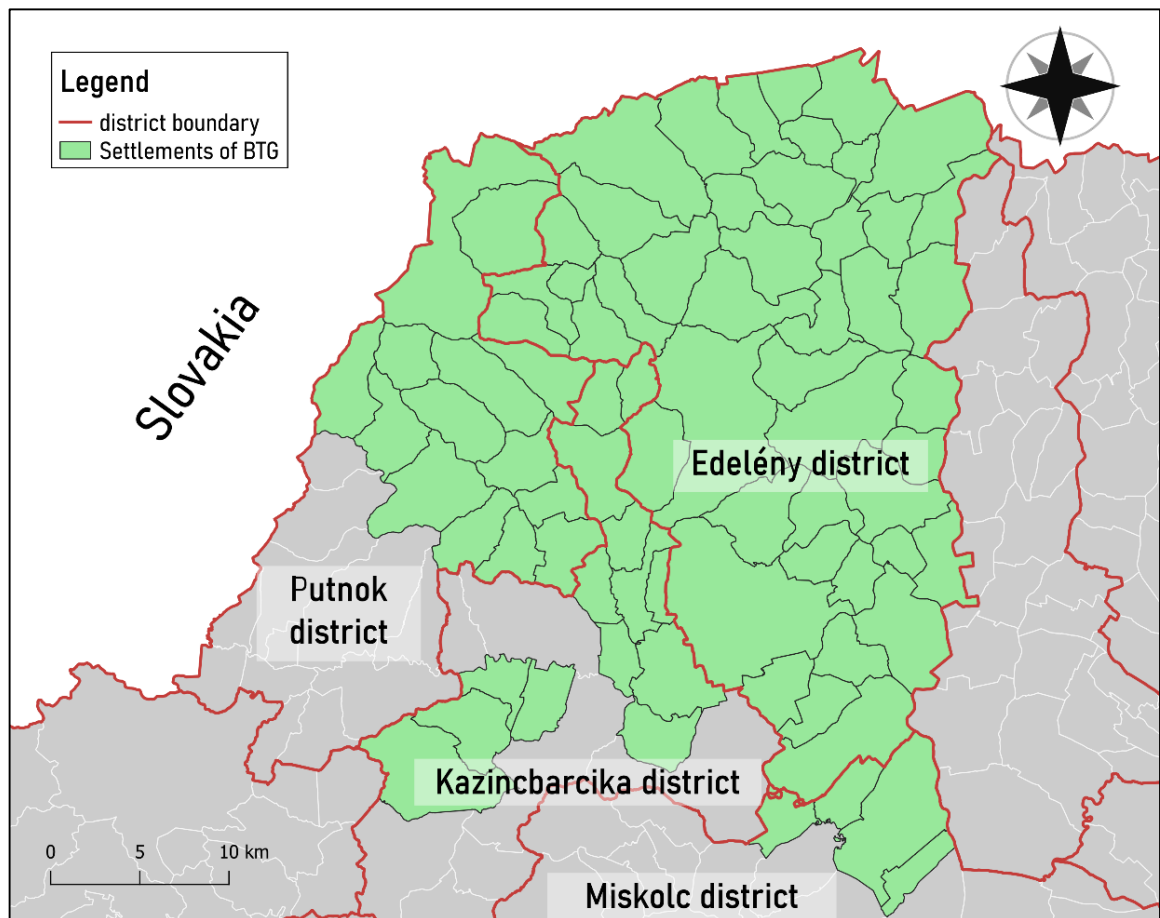


Figure 2. Settlements of the Borsod-Torna-Gömör LEADER Local Action Group (LAG). Source: authors' own elaboration

Socio-economic indicators reflect long-term peripheralisation. The total population of the area is around 85,000, but it has been steadily decreasing for three decades. Youth outmigration is particularly severe: census data indicate that the proportion of residents under 30 has fallen below 25%, while the share of people above 60 already exceeds one third. Unemployment rates are consistently higher than the Hungarian average, and local incomes remain among the lowest in the country (KSH, 2023). The collapse of coal mining and heavy industry in the 1990s left a legacy of weak employment opportunities and dependence on public works programmes.

Service provision is also uneven: many villages have limited access to healthcare, cultural institutions or reliable public transport.

Despite these difficulties, the region retains significant territorial assets that can serve as a basis for rural development. Natural resources include the karst landscapes of Aggtelek and Jósvaló, including the UNESCO World Heritage cave system, as well as extensive forests and river valleys that support nature-based tourism. Cultural heritage is also rich: folk traditions, religious monuments and historic mining towns provide potential for heritage tourism. Local gastronomy – including honey, cheese, wine and traditional pastries – strengthens the region's identity, while handicraft producers maintain skills such as pottery and weaving. These resources form the territorial capital upon which branding and tourism strategies can be built, although their mobilisation depends on institutional coordination and market visibility.

Institutionally, the Borsod-Torna-Gömör Local Action Group was founded in 2007 within the framework of the EU's LEADER programme. Its objective was to design and implement an integrated local development strategy by bringing together municipalities, civil associations, local enterprises and community actors. In this sense, the Local Action Group created an institutional platform for cooperation in a fragmented rural area. One of its flagship initiatives was the creation of the Borsod-Torna-Gömör regional label, developed as both a quality assurance tool and a place-based branding instrument. The label was designed to connect local products and rural tourism services under a common territorial identity and visual framework.

The regional label is divided into two categories. The Kiváló Tájtermék ("Excellent Regional Product") certifies food and craft producers, such as winemakers, beekeepers and traditional artisans. The Príma Porta ("Open Farm") category targets rural tourism providers offering accommodation, catering or experience-based services, including farm visits and local food-related activities. Certification is governed by an Arculati Kézikönyv (Design Manual), which sets quality criteria and regulates the use of the logo. In practice, certification involves application, evaluation by the Local Action Group committee and continued compliance with the label's requirements. The certified membership includes food producers, craft producers, guesthouse owners, tourism providers and cultural organisations, linking agricultural production, local services and rural tourism within a single territorial framework.

The significance of the Borsod-Torna-Gömör label therefore lies not only in its role as a certification scheme, but also in its institutional reach. By integrating producers and tourism providers, it offers a local mechanism through which territorial identity, quality signalling and rural development ambitions can be connected. At the same time, it operates in a region marked by demographic decline, fragmented settlements, weak market access and limited institutional resources. This makes the case particularly suitable for examining how regional labels function as institutionalised instruments of place-based branding in post-socialist rural peripheries.

For this article, the case is used to examine how the dimensions identified in the conceptual framework – place-based branding, institutional capacity, territorial capital and resilience – interact in a disadvantaged rural context. The Borsod-Torna-Gömör label mobilises local assets

and identity, but it also reveals the structural constraints that shape place-based development in peripheral regions. Its value as a case therefore lies precisely in this tension: it is neither a simple success story nor a failed branding initiative, but an example of how rural labels may create symbolic and institutional foundations for development while remaining dependent on fragile local capacities.

5. Results

Evidence from the aggregated survey results covering all 56 certified members and seven expert interviews points to an ambivalent role of the Borsod–Torna–Gömör regional label in agrotourism development. The label contributes to territorial identity, quality signalling and cooperation among producers and service providers, but its developmental impact is constrained by weak marketing capacity, demographic pressures and fragile institutional support. The findings are organised into three analytical dimensions. Current contributions refer to the functions that the label already performs within the network, especially in relation to territorial identity, quality signalling and cooperation. Constraints capture the structural and organisational factors that limit the label’s wider developmental impact, including weak marketing capacity, demographic pressures and fragile institutional support. Future development pathways refer to those areas where members and stakeholders identify scope for strengthening the label, particularly through knowledge transfer, digitalisation and inter-regional learning. Table 3 provides an overview of these findings and indicates the structure of the results section.

Table 3. Overview of main empirical findings on the Borsod-Torna-Gömör regional label. Source: authors’ own compilation based on expert interviews and questionnaires

Analytical dimension	Key findings	Analytical interpretation
Current contributions	Strengthens territorial identity; supports quality signalling; fosters cooperation among producers and service providers.	The label is strongest as an internal identity and cooperation framework.
Constraints	Weak marketing capacity; limited digital visibility; demographic pressures; fragile institutional support.	Symbolic cohesion does not automatically translate into external market recognition or wider developmental impact.
Future development pathways	Training; digitalisation; inter-regional learning; stronger institutional coordination.	The label’s future role depends on whether symbolic value can be supported by organisational capacity and knowledge transfer.

5.1 Current contributions: identity, quality signalling and cooperation

Survey and interview evidence indicate that the Borsod-Torna-Gömör label is widely recognised by certified members as a source of territorial identity and cohesion. Members do not see the label only as a logo, but also as a sign that their products and services belong to a broader regional narrative. Several interviewees expressed the view that the label helps local actors appear as part of a region rather than as isolated villages (I1, I3, I4, I5, I7). In this sense, the label fulfils one of the basic functions of place-based branding: it makes local assets visible through a shared territorial frame.

The label is also seen as a potential quality signal. Aggregated survey results indicate that certification is associated with authenticity and reliability in the eyes of members. This quality-signalling function is also reflected in the visible use of the label: *Príma Porta* providers display the label through signboards and local product shelves defined in the Design Manual, while *Kiváló Tájtermék* holders use the label logo on product packaging (Figure 3). These practices show that the label is not only a formal certification, but also part of the visual and material infrastructure through which local products and rural tourism services are presented to visitors.

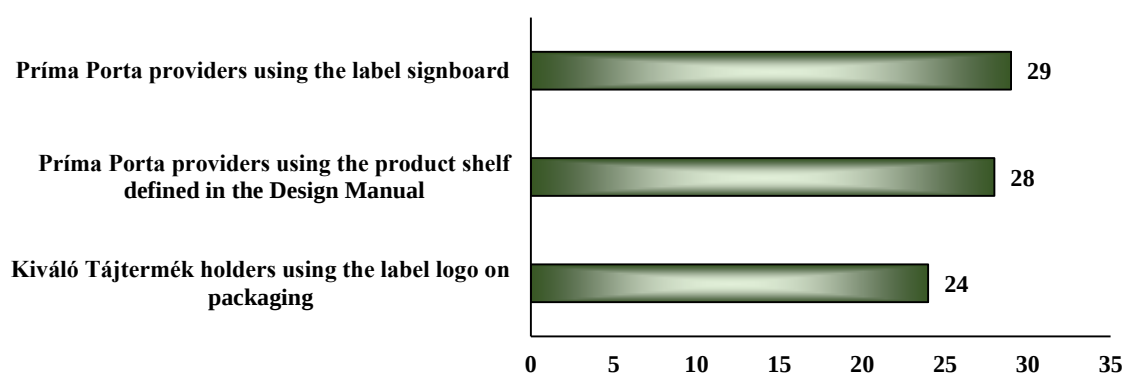


Figure 3. Visible use of the Borsod–Torna–Gömör label among certified members. Source: own survey data

However, this quality-signalling role remains only partly realised. The meaning of the label is clearer inside the network than outside it, and its recognition among wider consumer and visitor groups remains limited. This gap between internal quality signalling and external recognition is important because it shows that certification alone does not automatically create market visibility (I2, I5, I6).

Cooperation is the area where the label has the clearest current role. Certified members reported cooperation both within the label network and with other local actors in the region. As Figure 4 shows, cooperation with certified local service providers, with other local actors operating in the region, and with certified local producers or craftspeople all appear as relevant forms of connection. These relationships create horizontal links among producers and service providers as well as vertical links between local products, accommodation, catering and visitor experiences.

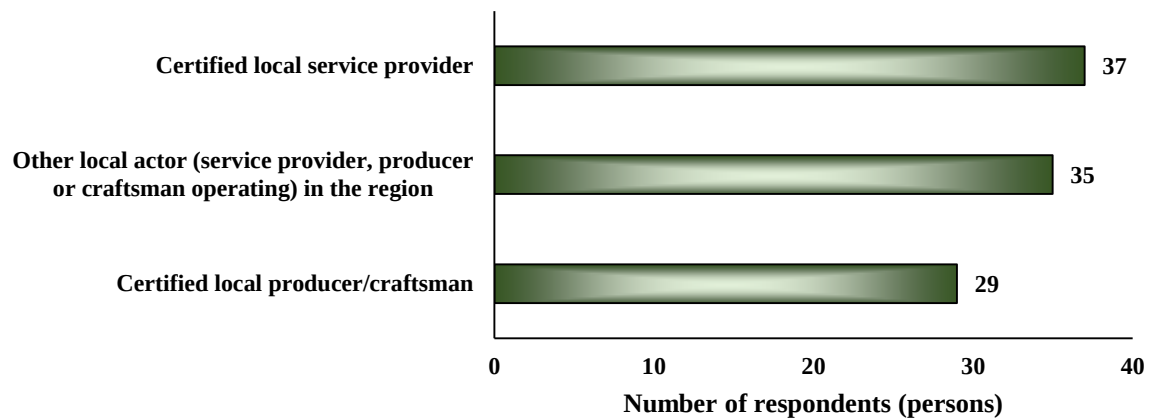


Figure 4. Forms of cooperation within and around the Borsod-Torna-Gömör regional label. Source: own aggregated survey data

Interview evidence supports this pattern. Stakeholders repeatedly stressed that individual producers and tourism providers have limited capacity to attract visitors alone, and that the region needs combined offers linking products, accommodation, gastronomy and local experiences (I1, I2, I3, I5, I6). The label therefore works not only as a sign of origin or quality, but also as a framework for everyday cooperation. Its strongest current contribution lies in internal cohesion: it helps actors recognise each other, refer visitors to each other and appear under a shared territorial identity (I3, I4, I5, I7).

At the same time, these current contributions are stronger inside the certified network than in the external market environment. The label provides a shared symbolic and cooperative framework, but its wider developmental effect depends on whether this internal cohesion can be translated into stronger visibility, marketing capacity and visitor recognition.

5.2 Constraints: weak marketing, demographic pressures and institutional capacity gaps

The developmental impact of the label is restricted by a set of mutually reinforcing constraints. The most visible is weak marketing capacity. The aggregated survey results show that the use of the label or brand mark, own websites and Facebook profiles is widespread, while Instagram and other newer digital channels remain marginal (Figure 5). This produces a communication structure that is stronger in familiar and local channels than in platforms that could reach younger, mobile or external audiences.

This pattern points to a broader problem. The label is visible among members, but its external recognition remains weaker. Interviewees noted that consumers and visitors do not always understand what the label stands for, even when the logo is present on products or promotional materials (I3, I4, I5, I7). This gap between internal meaning and external visibility limits the label's ability to function as a market instrument.

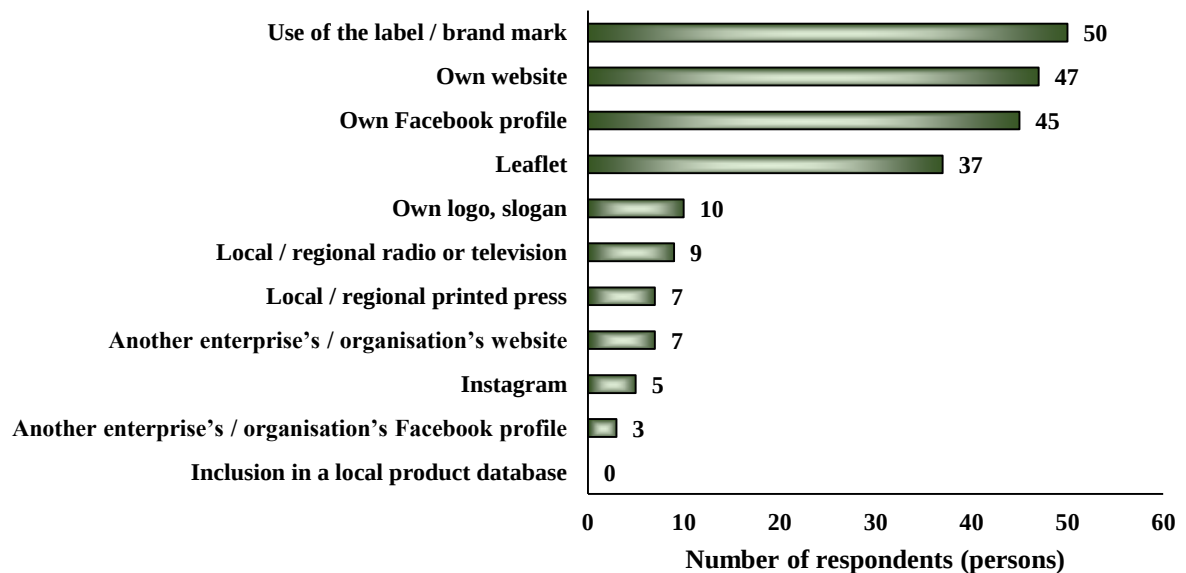


Figure 5. Communication channels used for promotion. Source: own aggregated survey data

Demographic and human-capital challenges further constrain the label's development. Regional outmigration and limited generational renewal reduce the availability of younger entrepreneurs who could bring new digital skills, new products and stronger market connections. Interview evidence also suggests concern about succession and uneven digital competences among members (I4, I5, I7). These demographic pressures are not only social background conditions; they directly affect the ability of the label network to adapt to contemporary tourism and marketing practices.

Institutional capacity is a third constraint. The Borsod-Torna-Gömör Association provides the organisational background of the label, but interviews indicate that brand management depends heavily on limited staff capacity, voluntary efforts and project-based resources (I5). Producers and service providers also face practical uncertainties around marketing, pricing, logistics and legal requirements. These constraints show that the ambitions of the label are broader than the institutional resources currently available to support them.

The constraints reinforce each other. Weak marketing cannot be solved only by individual effort if the membership lacks digital skills and if the coordinating institution lacks stable resources. At the same time, institutional support remains limited if it depends on occasional projects rather than continuous brand management. This explains why the label is relatively strong as an internal identity marker but fragile as an external development tool.

5.3 Future development pathways: knowledge transfer, digitalisation and inter-regional learning

Despite these constraints, the findings also point to development pathways that could strengthen the future role of the label. The first is knowledge transfer. Survey responses and

interviews (I4, I7) indicate demand for practical training and mentoring, especially in online marketing, tourism management, product presentation and legal compliance. This finding is important because it directly connects the current constraints of the label to possible capacity-building responses. It also aligns with broader research on rural development, which emphasises that qualifications and institutionalised learning can strengthen local development capacity (Greser et al., 2021).

The second pathway is digitalisation. Members and stakeholders identified the need for a more visible online presence, stronger joint communication and digital tools that could connect labelled products and services to tourists and distributors. The absence of a functioning local product database in the promotional channels is especially important: it suggests that the label has not yet developed a strong digital infrastructure that would make certified products and services easily searchable and marketable beyond the local network.

The third pathway is inter-regional learning. Interviewees (I2, I3, I5, I7) and respondents cited examples from other regions and expressed interest in study visits, peer learning, and exchange with more established label systems. This suggests that the future of the label is not seen only as a local task. Members also recognise the need to learn from other territorial branding initiatives and adapt external experience to local conditions.

Development plans also reveal the direction of member priorities. As Figure 6 shows, equipment acquisition and construction activities dominate future plans, while marketing and event organisation appear less frequently. This indicates that members still prioritise tangible business and infrastructure development over collective visibility-building. For the label to become a stronger development instrument, these individual development intentions need to be more directly connected to joint marketing, shared learning, and coordinated tourism offers.

Generational renewal is a fourth pathway, but it remains conditional. Younger or returning entrepreneurs could bring new products, digital skills and different market orientations. However, this potential can only be realised if they are actively connected to the label network and if institutional support helps translate individual initiatives into collective visibility. Training, digitalisation, inter-regional learning and generational renewal are therefore not separate issues. Together, they indicate how the label could move from symbolic recognition toward a stronger role in rural development.

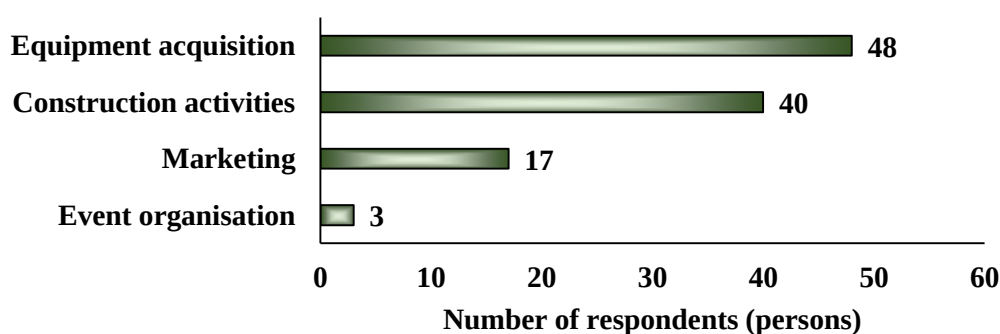


Figure 6. Development plans in agrotourism. Source: own aggregated survey data

5.4 Synthesis: symbolic cohesion with limited development capacity

Taken together, the results show that the Borsod-Torna-Gömör regional label is stronger as an internal identity and cooperation framework than as an externally visible market instrument. It helps certified actors connect their products and services to a shared territorial narrative, supports mutual recommendation and creates a basis for cooperation between local products and rural tourism services. These are substantial achievements in a fragmented peripheral region.

At the same time, the label's external developmental capacity remains fragile. Weak marketing, limited digital visibility, demographic pressures and unstable institutional resources restrict its ability to generate broader market recognition or stronger tourism flows. The findings also suggest variation in how members use the label: some actors appear to use it actively in promotion and cooperation, while others rely on it mainly as a symbolic sign of belonging. Given the aggregated nature of the survey results, this variation is treated here as an interpretative observation rather than as a formal typology. This distinction is important for the discussion: the developmental value of a regional label depends not only on the existence of certification, but also on the institutional capacities that enable members to use it collectively and strategically.

6. Discussion

The findings from the Borsod-Torna-Gömör case illustrate both the promise and the fragility of regional labelling initiatives in disadvantaged rural regions. The discussion interprets the results through four connected themes: regional labels as institutionalised instruments of place-based branding; institutional capacity and the limits of project-based branding; territorial capital and future development pathways; and fragile resilience in post-socialist rural peripheries.

6.1 Regional labels as institutionalised instruments of place-based branding

The results support the argument that regional labels should not be understood simply as logos or promotional devices. In this case, the label functions as an institutionalised instrument of place-based branding: it connects products, services, territorial identity and quality signalling under a shared framework. This corresponds to identity-based approaches to place branding, which emphasise that place brands are shaped through the interaction of internal and external stakeholders rather than through communication alone (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

The Borsod-Torna-Gömör label is especially strong in its internal function. It helps local actors recognise themselves as part of a common territorial narrative and supports cooperation between producers and tourism providers. This is consistent with rural place branding literature, which shows that branding can contribute to endogenous development when it is embedded in local networks, shared values and stakeholder cooperation (Domínguez García et al., 2013; Donner et al., 2017; de San Eugenio-Vela & Barniol-Carcasona, 2015).

At the same time, the findings show the limits of symbolic cohesion. Internal identity does not automatically translate into external recognition. The label is meaningful to members, but its market visibility remains limited. This distinction is central to the article's contribution: regional labels may create the symbolic and relational foundations of place-based branding, but their developmental impact depends on whether these foundations are supported by sustained organisational capacity and market-oriented coordination.

6.2 Institutional capacity and the limits of project-based branding

The case also confirms the importance of institutional capacity. The Borsod-Torna-Gömör Association coordinates the label and provides the organisational framework behind certification, visual identity and local development activities. However, the interviews indicate that the label's operation is constrained by limited staff capacity, project-based resources and reliance on voluntary effort. This finding echoes the institutional capacity literature, which stresses that collective development initiatives require networks of trust, shared knowledge and durable coordination (Healey, 1998; Amin & Thrift, 1994).

The contrast with better-supported branding initiatives is instructive. In more visible regional label systems, stronger institutional coordination, professional marketing and integration into tourism routes help translate local identity into external recognition. Similar conclusions appear in studies of LEADER-related branding and rural place branding processes, where support structures and governance arrangements shape whether labels become development tools or remain symbolic markers (Müller, 2021; Gulisova, 2021).

The Borsod-Torna-Gömör case therefore illustrates a common problem in peripheral rural development: project-based initiatives can create important starting points, but they do not automatically produce durable institutional capacity. The label exists, the network is bounded, and members recognise its value. Yet without continuous coordination, joint marketing and professional support, the label risks remaining stronger as a sign of belonging than as a development instrument.

6.3 Territorial capital, digitalisation and future development pathways

The case can also be interpreted through the lens of territorial capital. The region possesses significant assets: karst landscapes, folk traditions, local gastronomy, artisanal products and rural tourism opportunities. The label makes these assets visible and connects them to a shared territorial framework. However, the results show that territorial capital is not automatically mobilised. The weaker use of digital channels, the absence of a strong product database and the limited role of marketing in development plans all indicate that local assets require organisational and communicative capacities in order to become development resources.

This is where future development pathways become important. Training, digitalisation and inter-regional learning are not only practical recommendations; they are mechanisms through which dormant or underused territorial capital can be activated. Digital tools could make certified

products and services more accessible to visitors and distributors. Training could strengthen members' ability to communicate the value of the label. Inter-regional learning could help the network adapt practices from more established initiatives without copying them mechanically.

International and Hungarian examples support this interpretation. The Austrian GenussRegion programme shows how regional brands can benefit from national-level coordination, professional training and joint promotion (www.genussregionen.at). The Italian Slow Food movement illustrates how local gastronomy and traditional food cultures can be mobilised through an internationally recognised movement while remaining rooted in place-based food practices and the valorisation of local food systems (Mayda, 2005; Fonte, 2008). Hungarian initiatives such as Éltető Balaton also show how local products can be linked to tourism routes and territorial identity. Against these examples, the Borsod-Torna-Gömör label highlights the specific constraints of a weaker institutional and market environment.

6.4 Fragile resilience in post-socialist rural peripheries

The case also sheds light on how resilience is shaped in post-socialist rural regions. The demographic challenges observed here – outmigration, ageing and limited generational renewal – are not unique to post-socialist Europe. Similar processes affect many rural areas across Europe. What appears more distinctive is the combination of demographic pressure with weaker institutional capacity, dependence on project-based funding, fragmented local coordination and reliance on a small number of motivated actors.

In this sense, the label contributes modestly to resilience. It creates a framework for identity, cooperation, and knowledge exchange that may help local actors adapt to external pressures. Yet its resilience-building capacity remains conditional. Limited digital skills, fragile institutional resources and weak external visibility restrict its ability to absorb shocks or generate transformative change. Rather than producing resilience automatically, the label provides an institutional platform that can support adaptation if strengthened by training, coordination and sustained support.

This pattern corresponds to observations from other post-socialist rural contexts, where communities often combine creativity and improvisation with institutional fragmentation and dependency on external funding (Bock, 2016; Swain, 2013). The Borsod-Torna-Gömör case therefore demonstrates both vulnerability and possibility. Regional labels can contribute to rural resilience, but their impact depends on the interplay between local initiative and institutional scaffolding. Resilience is present, but it is fragile.

7. Conclusion

This article examined the role of the Borsod-Torna-Gömör regional label in supporting agrotourism within a disadvantaged Hungarian periphery. Using a mixed-methods case study design that combined aggregated survey results covering all certified members with expert

interviews and document analysis, the study revealed both the strengths and limits of regional labelling in a post-socialist rural context.

The first conclusion is that the label contributes to place-based branding by reinforcing territorial identity, supporting quality signalling and encouraging cooperation among local producers and tourism providers. Its strongest effect lies in internal cohesion: it helps local actors connect their products and services to a shared regional narrative and creates a framework for mutual recommendation and cooperation.

The second conclusion is that these achievements are constrained by structural weaknesses operating at two interrelated levels. At the macro level, demographic decline, youth outmigration, peripheral location and weak market access limit the development environment in which the label operates. At the micro and organisational level, limited marketing capacity, uneven digital competences, weak coordination resources and dependence on project-based support restrict the label's ability to become a stronger development instrument. These two levels are connected, but they imply different types of response: broader rural and regional policy support is needed for the macro-level conditions, while organisational development, training and joint marketing can address the micro-level constraints.

The third conclusion concerns future development pathways. Training, digitalisation, inter-regional learning and generational renewal could strengthen the label's role, but only if they are supported institutionally. Individual development plans and local commitment are not enough on their own. For the label to become a stronger rural development tool, symbolic recognition must be combined with sustained coordination, professional communication and collective market access.

Beyond the local context, the case provides lessons for European rural development. It confirms that regional labels can act as institutionalised instruments of place-based branding rather than mere promotional tools. At the same time, it shows that in post-socialist rural peripheries such instruments remain fragile when they depend on project-based resources and a small number of committed actors. Place-based policies therefore need to go beyond creating logos or certification schemes: they must provide institutional scaffolding, facilitate knowledge transfer and support the capacities required for collective branding.

In sum, the Borsod-Torna-Gömör regional label demonstrates both the potential and the fragility of regional branding in peripheral Europe. It succeeds in building identity and cooperation but struggles to translate them into broader recognition and economic outcomes. Its experience suggests that the future of regional labels lies in their ability to combine symbolic value with institutional strength, thereby becoming more effective tools of rural resilience and development.

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