



REGIONAL TERRITORIAL BRANDING IN RURAL TOURISM: THE ROLE OF LOCAL ACTION GROUPS AND EMERGING PRACTICES IN SERBIA

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Abstract:

Tourism development in rural areas increasingly relies on strategies that emphasize the distinctiveness of place, identity, and local resources. Regional territorial branding has emerged as a comprehensive approach integrating cultural, natural, and social dimensions into a coherent narrative of destination identity. This paper examines the conceptual foundations and practical implementation of territorial branding in rural tourism, focusing on the role of Local Action Groups (LAGs) as facilitators of participatory and sustainable development. Through a comparative case analysis of European and Serbian experiences, the study highlights how LAGs contribute to the co-creation of regional brands that reinforce authenticity, community cohesion, and competitiveness. European examples such as Pays Cathare (France), Marca Trevigiana (Italy), and Dobrote Dolenjske (Slovenia) demonstrate mature governance models that Serbia can emulate. Serbian initiatives, including Regionalni brend Bačke and Moravski market illustrate early but promising steps toward integrated territorial branding. Findings suggest that empowering LAGs with institutional support, funding mechanisms, and cross-sectoral networks could significantly strengthen Serbia's rural brand ecosystem and contribute to sustainable regional development.

Keywords:

territorial branding, rural tourism, Local Action Groups, place identity, quality labels.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, territorial branding has become an increasingly significant paradigm in rural development and tourism. In contrast to conventional marketing approaches that prioritize product promotion, territorial branding emphasizes the holistic identity of a place—its people, landscapes, traditions, and shared values (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). Rural regions, often marginalized within national economies, have adopted branding as a means to enhance visibility, competitiveness, and social cohesion (Pike, 2015).

Within the European Union (EU), the LEADER approach has provided an institutional framework through which Local Action Groups (LAGs) mobilize local stakeholders in participatory governance. These groups serve as mediators between public policy objectives and community aspirations, implementing development strategies that often incorporate branding initiatives (Ray, 2001). LAGs have thus evolved into critical actors in the articulation of regional identities, particularly through the creation of collective brands that integrate tourism, agriculture, and cultural heritage (Bassi, 2017).

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In Serbia, rural tourism represents one of the most dynamic segments of the national tourism strategy, aligned with the objectives of sustainable territorial development (Ministry of Tourism and Youth, 2023). Yet, the country's rural branding landscape remains fragmented. While individual municipalities and NGOs have developed ad hoc labels, systematic regional branding initiatives—especially those guided by LAGs—are still emerging. This paper seeks to fill this research gap by exploring the potential of LAGs to drive territorial branding in Serbia through comparative insights from established European models.

The primary objectives of this paper are:

1. To examine the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of regional territorial branding within rural tourism.
2. To analyze the role of LAGs as institutional enablers of participatory branding.
3. To compare selected European and Serbian case studies.
4. To identify key challenges and recommendations for enhancing Serbia's regional branding ecosystem.

By addressing these objectives, the paper contributes to a growing body of literature on place-based development and offers practical guidance for policymakers and rural communities in Serbia.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Conceptualizing Territorial Branding

Territorial branding extends beyond the mere promotion of geographical origin; it embodies the collective identity, values, and aspirations of a region (Anholt, 2010). It integrates principles from marketing, sociology, and regional development, forming a multidimensional construct that merges economic competitiveness with socio-cultural sustainability. According to Govers and Go (2009), effective territorial brands create symbolic value through narratives that connect visitors' expectations with local authenticity.

Unlike product-based geographical indications (GIs), which certify specific goods such as wines or cheeses, territorial branding in tourism operates at the level of experience and perception. It encompasses intangible elements such as hospitality, tradition, and landscape aesthetics (Hankinson, 2015). The success of such brands depends on stakeholder collaboration and governance mechanisms capable of ensuring coherence across multiple sectors (Braun, 2012).

Rural Tourism and Place Identity

Rural tourism provides fertile ground for the application of territorial branding. Its appeal lies in authenticity, tranquility, and the preservation of cultural heritage—values that align closely with brand narratives rooted in place identity (Sharpley & Roberts, 2004). As Daugstad (2008) observes, landscapes function as both a resource and a representation: they produce economic value while embodying collective memory and cultural meaning. Therefore, branding processes in rural contexts often intertwine with identity construction and community empowerment (Florek, 2011).

In European policy frameworks, rural tourism and branding are increasingly linked to sustainability goals. The European Commission (2022) emphasizes the integration of ecological stewardship, cultural preservation, and innovation as cornerstones of rural competitiveness. Consequently, territorial branding becomes both a marketing tool and a governance instrument for achieving balanced regional development.



THE ROLE OF LOCAL ACTION GROUPS (LAGS) IN TERRITORIAL BRANDING

The LEADER Framework and Participatory Governance

The LEADER approach (Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale) has served as a cornerstone of EU rural development policy since the 1990s. Its core philosophy—bottom-up, area-based, and partnership-oriented—positions local communities as co-creators of development strategies rather than passive recipients of external aid (European Commission, 2022). Within this framework, Local Action Groups (LAGs) bring together representatives of the public sector, private enterprises, and civil society to design and implement local development strategies (LDS).

LAGs typically operate as associations or partnerships with legal personality, responsible for administering funds, supporting innovation, and fostering collaboration among stakeholders. Their holistic orientation aligns closely with the principles of territorial branding, which requires the integration of economic, cultural, and social dimensions into a shared regional identity (Moseley, 2003). By encouraging participatory decision-making and building local capacities, LAGs create the institutional preconditions for collective brand governance (Esparcia, 2014).

LAGs as Brand Facilitators and Stewards

The involvement of LAGs in branding processes varies across contexts but generally includes four primary functions:

- Initiation – mobilizing stakeholders to recognize the potential of a collective identity;
- Coordination – aligning actors from different sectors under shared goals;
- Certification – defining quality standards, authenticity criteria, and governance rules; and
- Promotion – implementing communication strategies and market positioning (Bassi, 2017).

Through these roles, LAGs act as brand stewards, ensuring that the brand reflects community values and remains accountable to local stakeholders. This model contrasts sharply with top-down branding initiatives, which often lack local legitimacy and sustainability (Kneafsey *et al.*, 2001).

CASE STUDIES: EUROPEAN AND SERBIAN EXPERIENCES

LAGs as Brand Facilitators and Stewards

France: Pays Cathare (Occitanie Region)

The *Pays Cathare* brand, established in 1992 by the Aude Departmental Council in southern France, represents one of the earliest and most sophisticated examples of regional branding in Europe. The brand integrates local products, gastronomy, cultural heritage, and tourism under a unified visual identity centered on Cathar history and medieval architecture (Ray, 2001). Local Action Groups in the region played a vital role in structuring the network of producers, artisans, and tourism providers. Their participatory certification process ensures that members adhere to quality standards emphasizing authenticity and sustainability. The *Pays Cathare* model demonstrates how a historically rooted narrative can generate long-term regional cohesion and international recognition (Cazals & Mermet, 2017).

Italy: Marca Trevigiana (Veneto Region)

The *Marca Trevigiana* initiative, promoted by the LAG *Prealpi e Dolomiti* and the Province of Treviso, exemplifies the integration of rural tourism, cultural heritage, and local entrepreneurship (Garofoli & Musyck, 2012). The brand's governance structure relies on a public-private consortium that manages product labeling, communication, and event coordination. Its success lies in combining the agricultural tradition of the region with contemporary eco-tourism practices, positioning Treviso as a destination of quality and authenticity.



Spain: Costa Brava Verd and Basque Country Initiatives

In Spain, LAGs have been instrumental in promoting regional umbrella brands that emphasize environmental stewardship and community-based tourism. The *Costa Brava Verd* network in Catalonia integrates eco-certified accommodations, gastronomic events, and landscape conservation efforts. Similarly, the *Euskal Kostaldea* (Basque Coast) initiative highlights cultural heritage and sustainable coastal tourism through cross-sectoral partnerships facilitated by LAGs (Esparcia, 2014).

Slovenia: Dobrote Dolenjske

A particularly relevant case for Serbia is *Dobrote Dolenjske* (“Delicacies of Dolenjska”), a regional brand launched in 2014 under the leadership of the *Razvojni Center Novo Mesto* and supported by local LAGs (Mlakar & Bartol, 2019). The brand certifies high-quality local products, accommodations, and experiences that reflect the authenticity of the Dolenjska region. It employs a strict quality-assurance protocol developed collaboratively by producers and tourism operators. The initiative has increased the visibility of small-scale producers and strengthened regional cooperation.

Collectively, these European examples illustrate that successful territorial brands are underpinned by **participatory governance, clear certification mechanisms, and integrated storytelling**—elements that Serbian LAGs can adopt in the process of developing their own regional identities.

Emerging Practices in Serbia

Regionalni brend Bačke (Regional Brand of Bačka)

The *Regionalni brend Bačke* (Regional Brand of Bačka) represents the first comprehensive and institutionally coordinated example of regional branding in Serbia. It was established in 2015 by the **Regional Development Agency Bačka (RDA Bačka)** and funded by the **Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications of the Republic of Serbia**. The conceptual framework and strategic design of the brand were developed by Ivana Pajić within the institutional framework of RDA Bačka, with the goal of promoting the integrated identity of the Bačka region and stimulating rural economic development.

Unlike initiatives launched under Local Action Groups, *Regionalni brend Bačke* was neither created nor managed by the LAGs in Bačka Region, founded later in 2019 and limited to the two municipalities. RDA Bačka’s mandate, by contrast, covers the **entire territory of Bačka**, including eleven municipalities and rural areas of the City of Novi Sad. Consequently, the brand functions on a genuinely regional scale, uniting small food and beverage producers, artisans, family businesses, cultural associations, and tourism operators from rural communities across the region.

The initiative originated within the 2015 project *Regionalni brend Bačke i Sajam ruralnog turizma i privrede* (“Regional Brand of Bačka and Fair of Rural Tourism and Economy”), financed by the Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications. Through this project, RDA Bačka developed the *Regionalni brend Bačke* certification label — a **mark of positive impact on rural development** — awarded to products, producers, associations, tourist destinations, and hospitality providers contributing to the revitalization of Bačka’s villages. The brand’s visual identity, a stylized letter “B” in the shape of a heart, symbolizes both *Bačka* and *belonging*, reflecting the emotional and cultural essence of regional identity.

In October 2015, RDA Bačka organized the first **Fair of Rural Tourism and Economy** which publicly presented the brand, its certified products, and its emblem. The event sought to increase the visibility of rural tourism and strengthen small and medium-sized enterprises in Bačka’s countryside by connecting producers directly with consumers, thereby reducing intermediaries and fostering local entrepreneurship.

The certification process was based on a **public competition** announced in September 2015, through which a professional commission selected products and services that met specific criteria relating the use of local resources, sustainability, and cultural authenticity. These included family-produced food and beverages, traditional handicrafts, and rural events preserving Bačka’s gastronomic and cultural heritage. Each certified product or service was accompanied by a brief text informing consumers that purchasing it contributes directly to rural tourism and the local economy.



A further step in the brand's evolution was the creation of an **e-commerce portal** (www.brendbacke.rs) enabling small producers and rural tourism providers to market their products and services online. The platform allows consumers from urban areas to order authentic Bačka specialties and book accommodation or experiences directly. This digital innovation shows the brand's adaptability to contemporary market dynamics and its role in empowering rural entrepreneurs.

To illustrate the institutional framework and procedural rigor of the initiative, this study refers to the **Public Call for Awarding the Right to Use the Label of the Regional Brand of Bačka**, published by RDA Bačka in 2018 (RDA Bačka, 2018). Although this call was the third in a sequence following those first issued in 2015, it contains the same structure and criteria and is the only version currently available online. The public call defined the brand's purpose as promoting rural entrepreneurship and direct sales of rural products while recognizing stakeholders that generate a positive positive impacts on rural development. Its inclusive scope covered agricultural households, entrepreneurs, cooperatives, associations, hospitality and tourism operators, and craft workshops located within Bačka's municipalities.

Applications were evaluated by a professional commission according to criteria specified in the *Rulebook on the Awarding of the Right to Use the Label of the Brand of Bačka*. The transparent scoring system and contractual regulation of label use ensured the procedural credibility. Beneficiaries gained the right to use the designation "*Regional Brand of Bačka – Positive Impact on Rural Development*", signaling to consumers that purchasing these products supports local rural economies. The public call also provided for capacity-building workshops in marketing, branding, and business standards, as well as opportunities for participation in regional fairs, thereby professionalizing rural producers and improving their competitiveness.

This formalized, codified system of criteria, evaluation, and contractual responsibility represents one of the most advanced examples of **institutionalized regional branding governance** in Serbia. The *Regionalni brend Bačke* thus stands as both a **pioneering institutional model** and a **reference framework** for integrating quality assurance, entrepreneurship support, and regional identity within a single brand architecture.

Moravski market: LAG Čačak – Gornji Milanovac

The *Moravski market* initiative, developed by the Local Action Group (LAG) Čačak–Gornji Milanovac, represents a complementary model rooted in participatory governance. Established as a platform uniting agricultural producers, artisans, and tourism operators, the initiative emphasizes the cultural and environmental values of the Morava Valley. Its activities include regional fairs, digital promotion, and short-supply-chain initiatives that directly link local producers with consumers. Although still in an early stage, the *Moravski market* demonstrates the potential of LAGs to mobilize stakeholders, craft authentic narratives of place, and advance community-based rural branding (LAG Čačak–Gornji Milanovac, 2022).

Comparative Insights

The Serbian examples of *Regionalni brend Bačke* and *Moravski market* illustrate two complementary trajectories of territorial branding. The first embodies a **top-down institutional innovation**, emphasizing strategic coordination, certification, and regional visibility; the second reflects **bottom-up participatory development**, driven by community engagement and the LEADER approach.

Together, they point to a hybrid governance model in which institutional agencies and LAGs can form synergistic partnerships. The *Regionalni brend Bačke* methodology — with its transparent public procedures, regional fairs, and digital infrastructure — offers a **replicable framework for LAGs** wishing to develop local quality marks under a broader regional umbrella. By linking LAG-level initiatives with established regional brands, Serbia can develop a **multi-tiered system of territorial branding** that combines the strategic coordination and resources of regional institutions with the authenticity and social capital of local networks.

Such integration would align Serbia's rural branding practices with European standards, ensuring greater visibility, competitiveness, and sustainability. Institutional actors such as RDA Bačka can provide policy leadership, quality control, and marketing infrastructure, while LAGs contribute participatory legitimacy and grassroots innovation. Collectively, these approaches form the foundation for a **national ecosystem of territorial brands** that reinforces Serbia's cultural diversity and rural development.



DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis reveals that while Serbia's regional branding ecosystem is still in its nascent phase, it exhibits several encouraging tendencies aligned with European best practices. The cases of *Regionalni brend Bačke* and *Moravski market* demonstrate that LAGs possess the institutional and social capacity to act as catalysts for place-based branding, even under constrained conditions.

European models such as *Pays Cathare* and *Dobrote Dolenjske* illustrate that territorial branding thrives where participatory governance, coherent communication, and cross-sectoral partnerships are institutionalized (Cazals & Mermet, 2017; Mlakar & Bartol, 2019). These cases also emphasize the necessity of formalized quality assurance systems—an element that Serbian LAGs are only beginning to develop. The comparative lens indicates that the **maturity of brand governance** correlates strongly with the degree of decentralization, stakeholder empowerment, and the presence of dedicated regional development agencies.

In Serbia, rural branding initiatives often remain isolated due to limited inter-LAG cooperation, insufficient funding, and an underdeveloped policy framework for intellectual property and certification. Furthermore, local producers and tourism providers frequently lack marketing knowledge and digital visibility. However, the success of pilot initiatives such as *Regionalni brend Bačke* shows that regional brands can mobilize actors across municipalities, create economic synergies, and strengthen community identity.

The discussion also highlights the transformative role of LAGs as **intermediary organizations** that link bottom-up initiatives with top-down strategies. Their embeddedness within local networks grants them legitimacy, while their formal recognition within EU and national programs provides access to financial and technical resources. Strengthening LAG capacities through training, inter-regional cooperation, and cross-border projects (e.g., with Slovenia and Hungary) could substantially accelerate Serbia's rural branding development.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Territorial branding represents an evolving paradigm of rural development that integrates marketing, governance, and community identity. As the analysis demonstrates, Local Action Groups play a central role in initiating, coordinating, and maintaining regional brands. European examples offer valuable insights into how participatory governance can produce sustainable and authentic place identities.

In Serbia, early initiatives such as *Regionalni brend Bačke* and *Moravski market* showcase the potential of LAGs to serve as drivers of integrated branding strategies. However, realizing this potential requires a more supportive policy environment and consistent institutional backing. The following recommendations emerge from the research:

Institutional Support: National rural development policy should explicitly recognize territorial branding as a strategic instrument and provide funding for branding projects within LAG development strategies.

Capacity Building: Training programs for LAG managers, producers, and tourism operators should focus on brand management, storytelling, and certification systems.

Networking and Cooperation: Inter-LAG and cross-border cooperation should be encouraged to facilitate knowledge transfer and shared marketing platforms.

Digitalization: Development of online marketplaces and digital storytelling platforms is crucial for enhancing visibility and engagement with global audiences.

Evaluation Mechanisms: Establishing measurable indicators (e.g., brand recognition, local revenue growth, visitor satisfaction) will ensure accountability and long-term sustainability.

By adopting these measures, Serbia can build on its emerging practices to develop a coherent system of territorial brands that contribute to rural diversification, sustainable tourism, and strengthened regional identity. Ultimately, territorial branding should be perceived not as a promotional exercise but as an instrument of **integrated territorial governance**, balancing the economic, cultural, and environmental objectives.



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