

GEOGRAPHICAL INDICATIONS AND NATION BRANDING IN THE VISEGRAD COUNTRIES

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of geographical indicators in nation branding and competitiveness within the Visegrad countries (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia). Using data from the EU's official eAmbrosia register, the study conducts a comparative analysis of registered geographical indicators across three product categories: agri-food products, wines, and spirit drinks. The results reveal clear national patterns and also highlight temporal trends, with a registration peak following EU accession in 2004 and more continuous activity in recent years. The findings demonstrate how geographical indicators function as legal instruments of intellectual property but also as strategic resources for place-based development, tourism promotion, and nation branding. The paper concludes that, despite institutional and procedural challenges, these indicators hold significant potential for enhancing rural resilience, preserving traditional know-how, and reinforcing the international reputation of Visegrad countries.

Keywords: Geographical Indications, Nation Branding, Regional Competitiveness, Visegrad

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Introduction

The influence of a product's place of origin on consumer purchasing behaviour has been a longstanding focus in international marketing research (Martin *et al.*, 2011; Septianto *et al.*, 2022; Tarabashkina *et al.*, 2024). Especially in recent years, consumer preferences have shifted toward greater transparency and authenticity in their buying behaviour, with growing interest in understanding not only the physical attributes of products but also the production methods and geographical origin. The respect for local traditions and know-how is an important factor when buying food products for a great majority of Europeans (European Commission, 2022). Respondents are also more likely to buy food products that come from a geographical area that they know. This trend reflects broader concerns related to quality, authenticity, sustainability efforts, and ethical sourcing. Geographical Indications (GIs) have emerged as a strategic response to these evolving demands by legally certifying the geographic origin of a product and the traditional practices associated with its production.

Beyond serving consumer interests, GIs also hold significant economic and territorial implications. They are widely recognized as instruments that contribute to the valorisation of local knowledge and resources, reinforcing cultural identity and supporting place-based rural development. Moreover, GIs can function as differentiation tools in increasingly competitive agri-food markets, enabling producers to command premium prices and enhance their market positioning. As such, GIs not only preserve tradition and strengthen regional branding but also promote economic resilience and competitiveness for producers embedded in specific localities.

This study aims to explore how GIs contribute to regional branding and competitiveness within the Visegrad countries – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia – by analysing their distribution across product categories and protection schemes. While the EU's GI system provides a common legal framework, the way each member state utilizes it reflects unique cultural, economic, and policy priorities. By drawing on data from the EU's official eAmbrosia register, this paper examines and compares the scope and structure of GIs across the V4 region. Specifically, the study seeks to identify key patterns in GI registration and specialization: Which Visegrad country is most active in registering protected products? Which countries prioritize agri-food products versus wine or spirits? Are Protected Designations of Origin more prevalent than Protected Geographical Indications in certain contexts? And are there dominant product types, such as cheeses in Slovakia or spirits in Poland, that signal regional branding opportunities or institutional preferences? These guiding questions frame a data-driven inquiry into how GIs function not only as tools of legal protection but also as instruments of sustainable development, heritage marketing, and regional identity formation in Central Europe.

Geographical Indications: Concept and Function

Geographical Indications (GIs) are labels that link products to their geographic origin and distinctive qualities or reputation. In terms of marketing, a GI functions as a shared brand used by producers from the same region to signal a product's origin and quality. This place-based branding mechanism leverages the concept of terroir—the unique combination of local natural and cultural factors—to differentiate products in the marketplace. Research confirms that adding origin information to a product's branding can strengthen its appeal; provenance associations often generate stronger brand value than other generic attributes (Balabanis and Diamantopoulos, 2011; Newman and Dhar, 2014; Oduro *et al.*, 2024). In essence, a GI “brands” the place itself through its product, turning regional names (e.g., Champagne, Parma Ham) into symbols of quality and tradition recognized by consumers. This is often the case in wine and food markets. From a policy perspective, GIs are seen as tools for valorising cultural heritage and promoting rural development. The European Union explicitly frames GIs as a means to preserve traditional know-how and cultural heritage, to add value to traditional foods, and to increase producers' incomes. By protecting regional product names, communities can prevent misuse and ensure that only authentic products (made in the traditional way in the place of origin) bear the name (Zappalaglio, 2023). This not only safeguards cultural traditions but also allows producers to command price premiums for authenticity (Newman and Dhar, 2014). Belletti and Marescotti (2011) identify multiple pathways through which origin products contribute to local development: 1) strengthening the GI product's supply chain, 2) supporting rural economic diversification, 3) empowering local actors and encouraging collective organization, and 4) protecting environmental amenities and local culture. In other words, a successful GI can become a hub for broader community benefits—fostering farmer cooperation, preserving landscapes and biodiversity, and sustaining local food heritage for future generations.

Economic and Developmental Impacts of GIs

Importantly, GIs serve as a form of place-based marketing that can drive rural economic growth. A GI can confer a competitive advantage to the region by differentiating its products from those of other places. Studies show that GIs often add value to products—consumers are willing to pay more for goods labeled with a respected origin, and this effect on product pricing then allows traditional modes of production to persist (Ho *et al.*, 2024). This added value can translate into higher farm-gate prices and improved incomes for local producers (Crescenzi *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, GIs frequently stimulate related economic activities such as tourism. For example, many regions have developed wine roads, food festivals, and agritourism centered on their GI products, attracting visitors and boosting the local service economy. The presence of a famous cheese or wine GI can draw tourists to the area's restaurants, farms, and wineries, thus multiplying the economic impact beyond agriculture. This territorial branding effect creates a virtuous cycle: the product's reputation enhances the place's appeal, and the place's identity reinforces the product's value.

Empirical research on GIs in Europe generally supports their potential for rural development, though with nuanced findings (Jantýk, 2025). A systematic review of EU GIs found that GIs do create added market value, especially at the consumer and retail levels, by commanding price premiums (Musolino *et al.*, 2022). However, the extent to which this value trickles down to producers varies by context. A share of the price premium does reach farmers in the form of higher prices for raw materials, but these premiums are not always high enough to substantially improve every producer's profitability. Success depends on local conditions, such as the organization of the supply chain, the strength of producer associations, and the region's capacity to leverage the GI for tourism or other spin-offs. In less developed rural areas, GIs can be a valuable tool to foster development and retain value locally, but a GI label alone is not a sufficient instrument (Raimondi *et al.*, 2024). External factors (market demand, marketing efforts, and governance of the GI) determine whether a GI delivers on its promises (Cardoso *et al.*, 2022). For instance, GIs could help marginalized rural regions narrow the gap with wealthier areas by capitalizing on unique local products (Augère-Granier and McEldowney, 2021). Case studies (e.g., of wines, cheeses, and craft products in the Balkans and Central Europe) indicate that when supported by strong producer groups and marketing, GIs can reinforce regional identity and open niche markets for traditional products, aiding rural revitalization.

National Branding, Country-of-Origin, Region-of-Origin, and Terroir

Geographical Indications can play a strategic role in the context of nation branding. Food and beverage products with GI status often serve as flagship examples of a country's cultural heritage and quality standards (Vegheš, 2022). Simon Anholt's nation branding framework includes cultural and heritage dimensions as one of the pillars that shape international perceptions. When a country promotes its GIs—for instance, France highlighting Roquefort cheese or Greece promoting its olive oils and feta—it is effectively weaving those regional brands into the national brand narrative. This linkage between GIs and nation branding is evident in how countries use iconic local products in tourism campaigns and trade fairs to project an image of authenticity, craftsmanship, and uniqueness. Reputation management is at the heart

of both concepts: just as nation branding aims to build trust and admiration for the country, GI protection builds trust in the product's origin and quality. Dinnie (2008) notes that the ultimate aim of nation branding is a favorable reputation that also “shines” on a nation's products. We see this synergy in practice when, for example, the reputation of Italian cuisine (famous GIs like Parmigiano Reggiano and Prosciutto di Parma) enhances Italy's competitive appeal internationally in both tourism and exports. Conversely, the nation's strong cultural brand gives those GI products added prestige in global markets. Thus, GI strategies and nation branding can be mutually reinforcing. Both leverage a country's unique assets—be it cultural traditions, gastronomic heritage, or artisanal skills—to differentiate it on the world stage. By protecting and promoting GIs, a nation not only supports its rural producers but also enriches its storytelling in nation branding campaigns with genuine examples of quality and heritage (Török, 2022). In summary, nation branding provides the conceptual umbrella for enhancing a country's image and competitiveness, and GIs are one practical instrument under that umbrella that ties a nation's reputation to tangible products and places, strengthening the credibility and richness of the national brand.

Quality Schemes Specification

The European Union has developed a highly structured system for protecting Geographical Indications (GIs), currently regulated under Regulation (EU) No. 1151/2012, which has been in force since January 2013. This framework establishes three primary quality labels: Protected Designation of Origin, Protected Geographical Indication, and Traditional Speciality Guaranteed. Among these, PDO status imposes the strictest criteria, requiring that all stages of production—from sourcing raw materials to final processing—occur within the designated region and that the product's specific characteristics are intrinsically linked to that environment. In contrast, PGI certification is more flexible, necessitating only that one part of the production process take place in the identified area and allowing for a looser connection between the product's qualities and its place of origin. TSG, while not a geographical indication in the strict sense, protects products based on their traditional production methods or recipes, regardless of where they are made.

Products that have obtained registration are required to display the corresponding official logo, which helps consumers readily recognize certified items (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2) for examples of integrating the logos in the marketing of the products).



1: Logos of geographical indications registers
Source: Adapted from European Commission [n.d.]

In addition to the European Union's official food quality labelling schemes, many Member States maintain national-level food quality labels, which are recognized and applied exclusively within their respective countries. These national labels serve as guarantees of superior product quality, verified geographical origin, or organic production standards. For instance, quality assurance labels include Klasa and Czech Product in the Czech Republic, The Quality Food in Hungary, Try Fine Food in Poland, and Quality Food in Slovakia. Labels indicating geographical origin include Regional Food (Czech Republic), HÍR (Hungary), Traditional Product (Poland), and Regional Product (Slovakia). These labels are typically administered by national authorities such as ministries of agriculture, food industry federations, or similar governmental and professional bodies (European Commission, n.d.).

Methodology

This study adopts a comparative and descriptive research design based on secondary data retrieved from the eAmbrosia database, the official register of GIs maintained by the European Commission. The eAmbrosia system consolidates previously separate registers for agri-food products, wines, and spirit drinks, and provides publicly accessible information on product names protected under the European Union's GI schemes. These include Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), Protected Geographical Indication (PGI), and Traditional Speciality Guaranteed (TSG). The register also includes metadata on the legal status of the GI (such as registered, published, or opposed), the product category, the country of origin, the date of registration, and relevant legal references. Data for this research were collected from the eAmbrosia portal in July 2025 and were manually extracted and cross-checked for completeness and accuracy.

Only GI products meeting specific criteria were included in the analysis. First, the product had to originate from one of the four Visegrad countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, or Slovakia). Second, it had to be registered under one of the three official EU GI schemes: PDO, PGI, or TSG. Third, the product needed to have a formal status in the EU system as registered (fully approved); other statuses (applied, opposed, rejected, or withdrawn) were excluded from the dataset.

The dataset was analyzed across several key dimensions. First, the total number of GIs per country was calculated, with further classification according to the type of protection (PDO, PGI, or TSG). Second, GIs were grouped by product category, distinguishing between agri-food products (such as cheeses, meats, and bakery goods), wines, and spirits. Third, the year of registration was recorded, allowing for a longitudinal perspective on how GI protection has evolved in the V4 region, particularly in the two decades following EU accession in 2004. Where appropriate, attention was paid to regional clustering, identifying whether GIs are concentrated in particular areas within each country, which may suggest branding potential tied to specific regions.

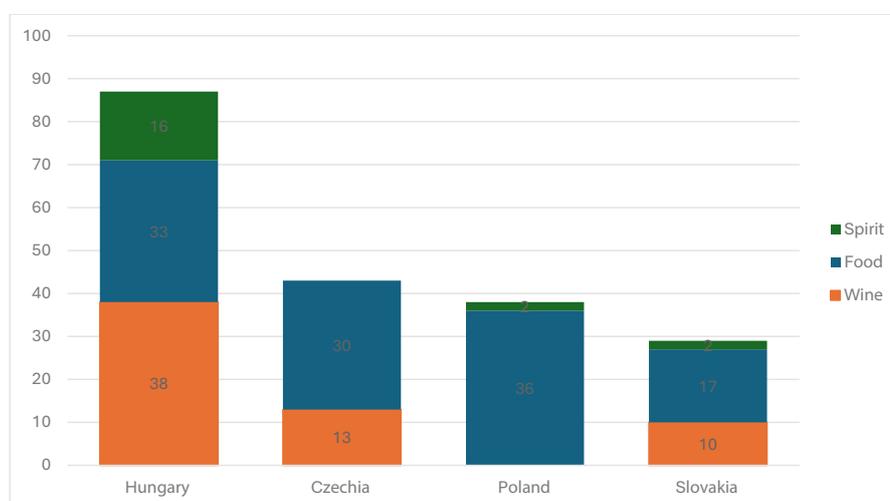
There are several limitations linked to the eAmbrosia register that need to be acknowledged. It does not consistently include information on the date of application, which constrains the analysis of time lags between submission and registration. Consequently, temporal trends must be interpreted with caution, as observed registration peaks may not accurately reflect the timing of producer interest. Second, the treatment of multi-country GIs presents an additional methodological challenge. For the purposes of comparative analysis, such products (in two cases: Hungary–Austria and Lithuania–Poland) were reassigned to a single Visegrad country.

Results

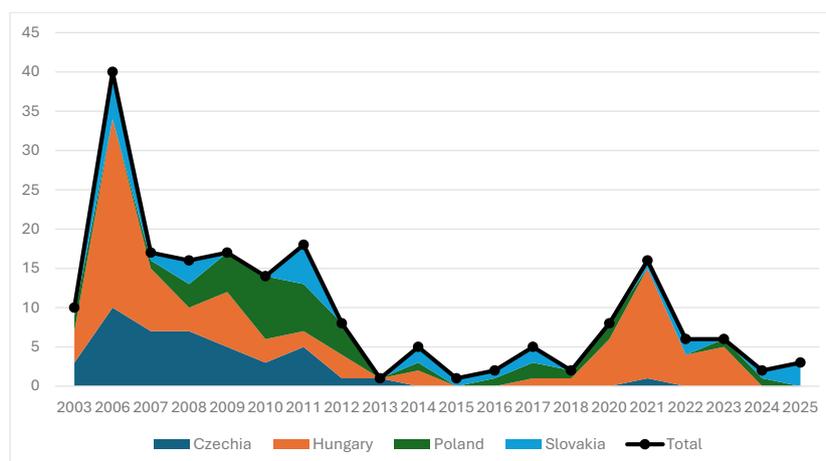
As of July 2025, the EU's eAmbrosia database lists a total of 1,643 wine products, 1,521 agricultural products, and 249 spirit drinks registered under the respective quality schemes across EU Member States. All entries included in this analysis hold the status of "Registered," indicating official recognition within the EU's geographical indication framework.

The analysis of GIs registered in the European Union for the Visegrad countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) reveals distinct national patterns in both the volume and composition of protected product names. A total of 197 GIs were identified across the four countries, distributed among three principal product categories: wine, agri-food products, and spirit drinks.

As shown in Fig. 2, Hungary emerges as the most active V4 country, with 87 GIs recorded, reflecting a well-established strategy for leveraging origin-based product protection. This is followed by the Czech Republic with 43 GIs, Poland with 38, and Slovakia with 29. This leading position likely reflects a combination of factors: a strong and historically established wine sector, a diverse agri-food tradition, and robust institutional support for GI registration. When disaggregated by product type, the data illustrate clear specialization trends within the region. Hungary demonstrates a balanced GI portfolio, with 38 wine-related GIs, 33 food-related GIs, and 16 for spirit drinks, underscoring the country's emphasis on both viticulture and diversified regional food traditions. The Czech Republic shows a concentration in agri-food products ($n = 30$), complemented by a more modest presence in wine ($n = 13$) and no registered spirits. This pattern likely reflects climatic and structural constraints that limit the development of viticulture and spirits production, combined with a focus on leveraging traditional cheeses and bakery products for regional branding.



2: Geographical Indications by Product Types in V4
Source: own proceedings (2025)



3: Yearly registrations by Visegrad countries with total trend

Source: own proceedings (2025)

By contrast, Poland's GI system is almost entirely oriented toward agri-food products ($n = 36$), with no wine-related GIs and only two spirit entries. This likely reflects both the country's agricultural structure and the limited scope for viticulture due to climatic conditions. Slovakia, while the least represented overall, shows a relatively even mix across categories, with a modest emphasis on wine ($n = 10$) and food ($n = 17$).

Across the V4 as a whole, agri-food products constitute the largest share of protected designations ($n = 116$), accounting for approximately 70% of all GIs. This category includes traditional cheeses, meat products, breads, and condiments. The prominence of agri-food GIs reflects the role of food heritage in nation branding and rural development strategies, particularly for Poland and the Czech Republic. Wine-related GIs ($n = 61$) are largely concentrated in Hungary and, to a lesser extent, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, while spirit drinks ($n = 20$) form the smallest category, with Hungary clearly leading in this domain.

The annual registration data of GIs across the Visegrad countries reveal distinct national trajectories and strategic patterns in the adoption of the EU quality label framework (see Fig. 3).

Hungary stands out as the most active country, particularly in the early years following EU accession. A striking spike is observed in 2006, with 24 GIs registered in a single year, likely reflecting an institutional push to integrate Hungarian food heritage into the EU system. This momentum continued consistently, with smaller waves of registration in subsequent years, and another noticeable increase in the early 2020s. Hungary's strong engagement reflects both its robust wine sector and its diverse agri-food traditions, well suited to the PDO and PGI schemes. The Czech Republic also experienced a notable burst of registration in 2006, with 10 GIs, followed by slower growth after 2014, which points to a combination of post-accession backlog effects and saturation of eligible traditional products. The Czech Republic's GI profile is dominated by traditional cheeses (Olomoucké tvarůžky, Jihočeská Niva) and bakery products (Vlašský frgál, Lomnické suchary), with limited activity in wine and no registrations in spirits, unlike its neighbors. Poland, in contrast, built consistent momentum after 2009. It gradually increased its presence, peaking in the early 2010s. Poland's focus is clearly oriented toward agri-food products, particularly those rooted in regional or seasonal traditions (e.g., Śliwka szydlowska, Podpiwek kujawski, Jabłka grójeckie). The country shows relatively limited activity in wine and spirit GIs, aligning with its agro-based rather than viticultural branding identity. Slovakia, while having the smallest total number of GIs, shows moderate activity in selected years, notably in 2006 and again in 2011–2014. Its registration pattern is less consistent, possibly reflecting limited institutional capacity or fewer eligible products with established reputations. Nonetheless, Slovakia maintains a visible presence in cheese (e.g., Slovenská bryndza, Klenovecký syrec) and pastry-related GIs (e.g., Hrušovský lepník), with occasional entries in the spirits category (e.g., Spišská borovička).

The temporal dynamics of GI registration further illuminate national strategies. The year 2006 represents a pivotal moment, particularly for Hungary and the Czech Republic, where early surges likely reflect backlogs of applications submitted shortly after EU accession. In contrast, Poland and Slovakia display more gradual or intermittent registration patterns, indicative of phased institutional development and selective policy engagement.

Overall, the V4 GI landscape can be explained as the outcome of interacting factors: historical and cultural product traditions, institutional support and policy strategies, and structural constraints such as climate and agricultural specialization. Hungary's strong performance across all product categories exemplifies favorable alignment among these factors, while Poland and the Czech Republic demonstrate specialization driven by structural conditions, and Slovakia reflects a smaller, more selective engagement with the EU GI framework.

Discussion and Conclusion

The GI system enables countries to formalize and promote their distinctive food and beverage traditions through legally protected names, which become part of national and regional branding narratives. Hungary stands out as a regional leader not only in the sheer number of GIs but also in its comprehensive coverage of all major product types—wine, food, and spirits. This breadth supports a coherent and exportable identity grounded in tradition and quality, particularly through iconic products such as Tokaji wine and Pálinka spirits, which are both globally recognized.

Poland's strong orientation toward agri-food GIs illustrates a branding strategy that emphasizes artisanal food traditions and rural authenticity, reflecting broader national narratives centered on agricultural heritage and community-based production. This focus aligns with the country's image as a producer of high-quality traditional foodstuffs rather than premium wines or spirits, thereby reinforcing a distinct “country brand” grounded in rural identity and culinary culture. By contrast, Hungary's diversified GI portfolio conveys a multifaceted brand identity with stronger international recognition, while the more modest but balanced profiles of Czechia and Slovakia highlight untapped potential in transforming regional specialties into coherent branding assets. These patterns point to the potential for GIs to act as soft power assets, reinforcing national reputations for authenticity, tradition, and quality. Moreover, the use of GI labels in tourism, gastronomy, and export marketing can help embed regional products within the global consumer imagination, linking them to narratives of origin, culture, and sustainability.

From a policy perspective, the results point to several practical implications. Visegrad countries could leverage GIs more systematically in tourism promotion, linking certified products with regional gastronomy routes, festivals, and agrotourism experiences. Empirical evidence within tourism management literature demonstrates that GI-certified food products enhance the attractiveness of destinations, generate higher tourism-related revenues, and simultaneously contribute to the preservation of regional gastronomic heritage and cultural identity (Pamukçu *et al.*, 2021; De Simone *et al.*, 2024). Export promotion strategies could also integrate GIs more explicitly, using them as quality markers that strengthen competitiveness in global agri-food markets. At the national level, public authorities should consider reducing procedural burdens for registration, supporting producer associations, and raising consumer awareness to ensure that the economic and symbolic potential of GIs is fully realized.

Beyond their branding and competitiveness functions, GIs can also be understood as instruments of sustainability, particularly in relation to the EU's Green Deal and Farm-to-Fork strategy (European Commission, 2020). By anchoring production to specific territories and often to traditional, small-scale methods, GIs naturally promote shorter supply chains, reducing transport distances and associated emissions. Many GI products also depend on heritage crops, native livestock breeds, and traditional land-use practices, which contribute to biodiversity preservation and climate resilience. For example, cheeses like Slovenská bryndza rely on pastoral systems that maintain mountain grasslands, while wine GIs such as Tokaji are closely linked to vineyard landscapes shaped by centuries of ecological adaptation. Situating GIs within the EU's sustainability agenda therefore underscores their dual role as both economic and environmental assets.

The uneven adoption of the GI system across the V4 countries also points to institutional and capacity-related barriers. While GIs are often promoted as tools to empower rural producers, evidence suggests that their benefits may not be equally accessible to all. In many cases, larger or better-organized producer groups are better positioned to navigate the complex application procedures, bear certification costs, and invest in marketing, thereby capturing a disproportionate share of the economic gains (Cardoso *et al.*, 2022; Menapace and Moschini, 2024). Smaller-scale farmers, by contrast, may face barriers such as limited organizational capacity, lack of financial resources, or exclusion from producer associations. This raises questions about whether GI schemes genuinely function as inclusive rural development instruments or whether they risk reinforcing existing inequalities within agri-food systems. Addressing these concerns requires further empirical research into how benefits are distributed across different categories of producers, as well as policy interventions that lower entry barriers and strengthen support mechanisms for smallholders.

While the eAmbrosia register systematically records the final date of registration for each Geographical Indication (GI), it does not always consistently provide the corresponding date of application. However, based on the subset of entries where both dates are available, the data from this study indicate a substantial time lag between the initial submission and final approval. Specifically, the average duration between application and registration across the Visegrad countries is approximately 41 months. This finding confirms that GI registration is a multi-year process even under normal conditions. In practice, even relatively straightforward applications tend to take 12 to 18 months from the time of submission to final registration, while more complex or contested

cases—such as cross-border claims or insufficient documentation—can experience significantly longer delays (Belletti *et al.*, 2017). This time lag has important implications for both policy and practice, as it underscores the need for early planning, institutional support, and realistic timelines when designing GI-based regional development or branding strategies.

Over time, Member States and producer groups have adapted to the procedural requirements, resulting in more efficient application pipelines. National authorities such as Hungary's Ministry of Agriculture or Poland's GI Coordination Unit have developed dedicated support structures, templates, and consultation processes to assist applicants (European Commission, 2023). Despite this progress, recent evaluations suggest that average registration times still range from 12 to 36 months, depending on the nature and complexity of the application (Vandecandelaere *et al.*, 2018).

Understanding this time lag is essential for interpreting the GI registration trendlines. Peaks in registration do not necessarily correspond to spikes in producer interest or economic demand at that moment but rather reflect the outcome of procedural efforts initiated earlier. This has implications for how policymakers assess the responsiveness of the GI system and for how branding initiatives are timed relative to EU-level recognition. For producers, the lag underscores the importance of strategic planning, as a GI may take several years to come into force, delaying both legal protection and market differentiation.

It is important to acknowledge that the findings reflect only EU-registered GIs recorded in the eAmbrosia database and do not capture complementary national branding schemes such as Polish Product (Produkt polski) or Czechia's Regional Food (Regionální potravina). Moreover, uneven institutional capacity—illustrated by Hungary's well-developed support system for GI applicants versus Slovakia's more limited structures—likely shapes the volume and speed of registrations as much as product diversity itself. Addressing these gaps would provide a more holistic understanding of the role GIs play in both regional development and international competitiveness.

Future research could build on this study through comparative case studies of individual products, which would provide deeper insights into the mechanisms through which GIs contribute to export performance, rural resilience, and cultural identity. Secondly, a systematic assessment of the environmental dimensions of GIs, such as their role in promoting low-carbon, localized production, would enrich the understanding of their contribution to sustainability transitions. For instance, examining how GI schemes encourage shorter supply chains, thereby reducing transportation-related emissions. In addition, evaluating whether GIs stimulate consumer awareness of environmentally friendly production could help clarify their role in shifting consumption patterns toward more sustainable food systems. That could also provide evidence for integrating GI policies into broader sustainability strategies.

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