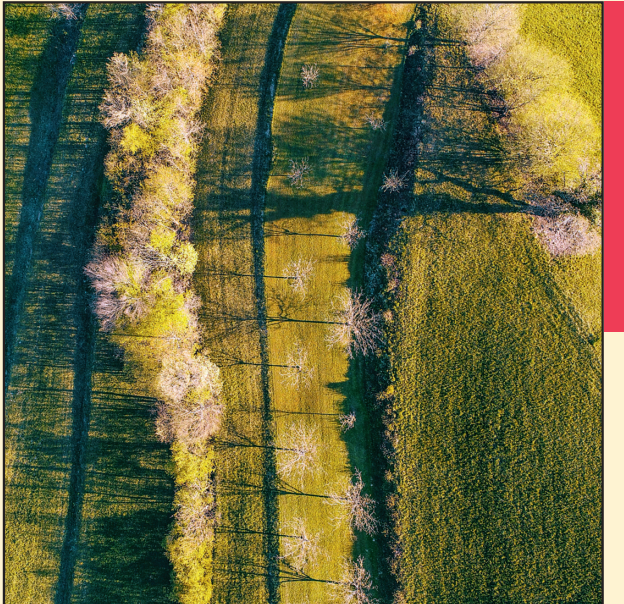


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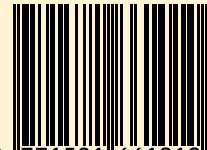
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SPECIAL ISSUE
Branding, labelling and certification

EDITORS:
Špela Ledinek Lozej
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THE USE OF EUROPEAN UNION INSTRUMENTS FOR BRANDING AND LABELLING REGIONAL FOOD PRODUCTS IN ESTONIA

Ester Bardone, Anu Kannike



ESTER BARDONE

The owner of Metsavenna Farm Meelis Möttus selling sõir cheese at a local food fair, 2018.

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Ester Bardone¹, Anu Kannike²

The use of European Union instruments for branding and labelling regional food products in Estonia

ABSTRACT: The article examines how European Union rural development measures and food quality schemes are used for creating added value to regional food products in Estonia. In order to understand these processes, national food and heritage policies are analysed to highlight a lack of national instruments that would protect and promote regional specialities. The emergence of regional brands (funded by the European Union LEADER measure) is an example of an initiative to increase the visibility of regional products and food culture on the domestic market and to brand the region. Another attempt for recognising and re-regionalising local specialities is the application for the European Union Protected Geographical Indications (PGI) label for a traditional cheese *sõir* in south-eastern Estonia.

KEY WORDS: regional food, food policies, heritage policies, geographical indications, food quality labels, Estonia

Uporaba instrumentov Evropske unije za znamčenje in označevanje regionalnih živilskih izdelkov v Estoniji

POVZETEK: Članek preučuje, kako se ukrepi Evropske unije za razvoj podeželja in sheme kakovosti hrane uporabljajo za ustvarjanje dodane vrednosti regionalnim živilskim izdelkom v Estoniji. Da bi razumeli te procese, smo analizirali nacionalne politike o hrani in dediščini. Prepoznali smo pomanjkanje nacionalnih instrumentov za zaščito in spodbudo regionalnih posebnosti. Pojav regionalnih blagovnih znamk, financiranih z ukrepom Evropske unije LEADER, je primer pobude za povečanje prepoznavnosti regionalnih proizvodov in prehranske kulture na domačem trgu ter za znamčenje regije. V članku predstavljamo tudi drugačen poskus prepoznavanja in ponovne regionalizacije lokalnih posebnosti, in sicer prijavo za oznako zaščitene geografske oznache Evropske unije za tradicionalni sir *sõir* v jugovzhodni Estoniji.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: regionalna hrana, prehranske politike, politike dediščine, geografske oznake, oznake kakovosti hrane, Estonija

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1 Introduction

In the global food system, indicating the origin of food products is not just about localisation; it also creates connections and trust between producers and consumers, often enables consumers to support regional development, and adds symbolic value to products through stories related to traditions, geography, and production. Almost every product that has some connection with a certain region (either historical, constructed, or both) can be sold as an embodiment of the taste of this place (Bell and Valentine 1997). Thus, regional (or local) food products and culinary experiences are significant tools in region branding (Tellström, Gustafsson and Mossberg 2006). Previous research has demonstrated the importance of small-scale food producers often operating in peripheral rural areas as key agents of a regional food scene (Tregear et al. 2007). Their products are usually artisanal regional specialities, some also niche market products, which are marketed as »localised foods« (Bérard and Marchenay 2008), in contrast to »placeless« standardised foods available on the mass market.

In the European context, regional foods can be considered as food products and raw produce originating from a specific geographical area predominantly associated with certain traditions of production (Bryła 2015; Florek and Gazda 2021). Place-based labels highlight the connection between food and place and emphasise the nonmaterial qualities of products, the values related to communities where the product comes from (Parasecoli 2017). The branding of food products happens at different levels (international, national, sub-national) and accordingly reflects different understandings of regional food. For instance, Geographical Indications (GIs) in the European Union rely on the French concept of *terroir* – interconnectedness between the place of production, producers' knowledge and skills, and historical tradition (Bérard and Marchenay 2008). In Northern and Eastern Europe, national policies may focus on other food quality assurance schemes not based on *terroir* (Sadílek 2020) or products that are made by local producers in a particular geographical area, not necessarily related to culinary traditions, may also be considered regional foods (Holt and Amilien 2007). Despite the ambivalence of the concepts of 'region' and 'regional food' (Paasi 2003; Spiller and Tschöfen 2017; Pícha et al. 2018) it can be argued that looking at regions in terms of food can fruitfully add to debates on regionality. This enables us to analyse how characteristics of a cultural-geographical region are expressed in its food culture (heritage) and how the production of regional foods is related to territorial identity and regional development (cf. Ray 1998; Pollice 2003).

The article examines how regional initiatives as well as national and EU policies intermingle in the case of branding and labelling regional food products in Estonia. We focus on (a) how the existing national food quality and heritage management instruments reflect state policies regarding regional food culture; (b) what have been the principles for creating regional brands for food products, using the EU LEADER funding; (c) how the application for the EU Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) label of a traditional south-eastern Estonian cheese *sõir* reflects regional producers' needs and expectations regarding regional food heritage.

2 Food quality labels and regional food brands in Estonia

Food quality labels used on the Estonian market belong to three main categories: national labels for the local market issued by producers' organisations, which emphasise either the Estonian origin of the raw produce or Estonian production; regional food quality labels that are issued by local rural developmental organisations (Local Action Groups – LAGs) funded by the EU LEADER measure; and European Union food quality labels such as Geographical Indications. In the official and public discourse, the terms 'regional food', 'food heritage', and 'local food' are often used inconsistently (Kannike and Bardone 2021).

Estonia joined the EU in 2004 and has implemented the activities funded by the LEADER measure which have been integrated with the Rural Development Plan since 2007. Local food was a developmental priority in the Estonian Rural Development Plan through the LEADER measure in 2007–2013, which resulted in establishing multiple local food networks, farmers' markets, cooperation projects, and 4 regional food brands by 4 LAGs. Currently there are 26 LAGs in Estonia; however, most of them are not focusing on the promotion of local food. Six regional food brands established by local LAGs exist in 2022, and the respective products are marked with specific quality labels. These food brands primarily emphasise the local origin of production or (less frequently) the local origin of raw produce, and rarely the connection

of the product with the food culture traditions in the region. Currently a PGI label has been given to only two products in Estonia (Estonian Vodka – registered in 2019; *sõir*, a traditional curd cheese – registered in 2021). In general, the GIs are unfamiliar among Estonian producers and consumers alike, as they are rather accustomed to national food quality labels (Lepane et al. 2016).

3 Methods and research area

In terms of national agricultural and heritage policies, the research area is Estonia. For two case studies we focus on two cultural-historical regions in south-eastern Estonia – Võrumaa and Setumaa – which today administratively belong to Võru County. The territory of Võru County is 2,773 km² and it includes five municipalities; in 2022 the population is ca 35,000 inhabitants (the total population of Estonia is ca 1.3 million) and it is ethnically homogenous. In terms of economy, the contribution of Võru County is rather marginal. The area is mainly rural and its main economic sectors are forestry and wood processing, food industry, and tourism. In the article we use the term Võrumaa (or Setumaa) because these names are used by the local communities. We chose examples from these regions because of their strong regional identity, which is supported and promoted by two state-funded research and development institutions, Võro Institute and Seto Institute. These regions enabled us to study the dynamics of different food quality labelling systems supported by the EU rural policies and food quality schemes.

The data was collected in 2017–2021, using qualitative methods; also, we partly drew on the materials of our previous fieldwork conducted in 2010–2013. We mainly relied on informal correspondence with

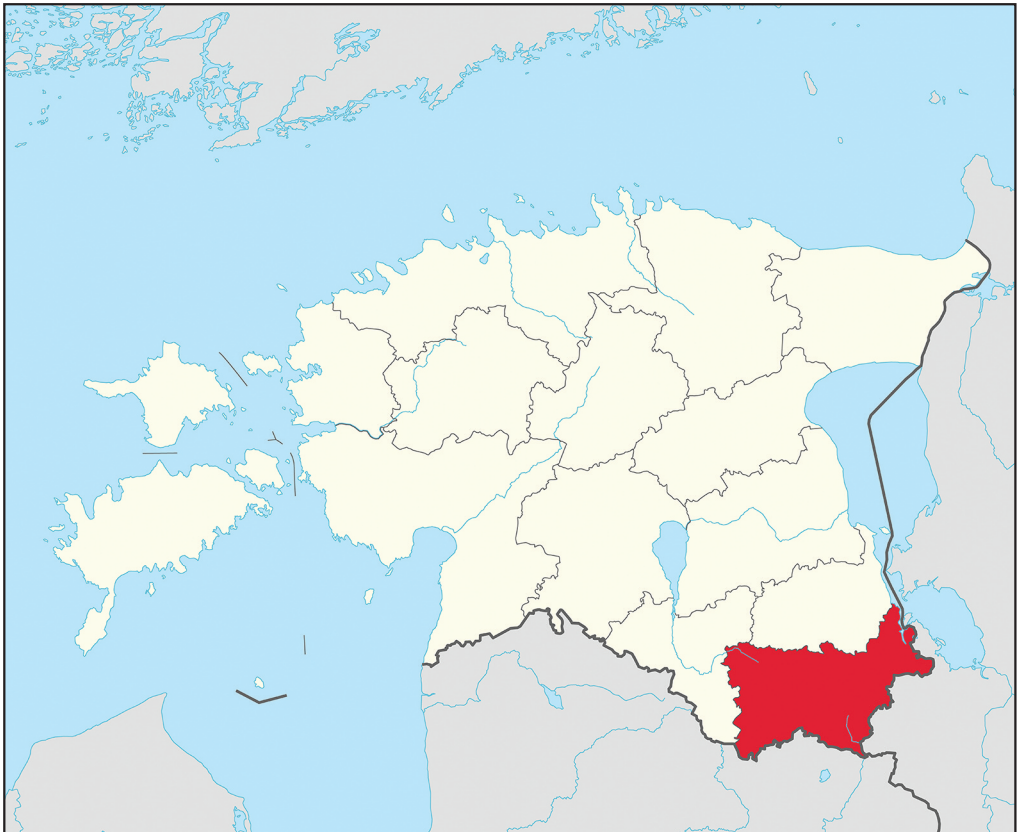


Figure 1: The study area Võru County marked within the contours of the territory of Estonia (Wikimedia Commons, 2017).

different types of actors in the food sector, as well as field notes from observations at events and minutes of meetings. We also conducted semi-structured and conversational interviews with food producers, caterers, and tourism entrepreneurs (n=6), local food developers from a LEADER LAGs Võrumaa Partnership assembly (n=3), local heritage experts (n=2), and state officials (n=4) responsible for implementing food policies at the Estonian Ministry of Rural Affairs. (It should be noted that some local actors simultaneously belong to several groups.) Additionally, we examined various publicly accessible documents (e.g., development plans, statutes, specifications), media texts, and websites. We applied thematic analysis (Ayres 2008), combining document analysis with triangulation (Bowen 2009). Ethnographical methods enabled us to gain insight into different actors' intentions, interpretations, and attitudes, which was complemented by our analysis of documents and media texts. The latter shed additional light on the institutional and organisational practices and discourses related to food quality labelling schemes.

4 Results

4.1 State policies

In Estonia, the Ministry of Rural Affairs is the state body responsible for agriculture and food. In the vision document, »Estonian Food 2015–2020«, regional food is mentioned as a developmental challenge and a priority (Eesti Põllumajandusministeerium 2014). The document states that »food cultures and ideologies in different regions are not clearly defined and therefore regional characteristics are not considered« (Eesti Põllumajandusministeerium 2014, 7). Consequently, the priority should be »developing and introducing regional cuisines that bring into focus the distinctiveness of diverse regions in Estonia and their food heritage« (Eesti Põllumajandusministeerium 2014, 11). Thus, food heritage is acknowledged to be an important characteristic of regional food distinguishing one region from another. Yet, to achieve this goal, only some initiatives have been launched by the state, most significant of which being the yearly nomination of a food region since 2016. The territory of these food regions does not overlap with the administrative regions but is based on a cultural-historical region composed of multiple municipalities or, in some cases, an invented region is created and managed by several LEADER LAGs. The title Food Region of the Year has served mainly a marketing purpose for making a region's food products and catering services more visible for the domestic as well as foreign consumers through various thematic events and activities throughout a year (see Kannike et al. 2021). Local bodies that manage food region activities are development organisations (NGOs) partly funded by state and EU measures (LEADER LAGs). One of the main goals of the Food Region of the Year is to promote local foods and improve their availability in cafes, restaurants, shops, and events. The Ministry expects the selected food region to highlight the stories related to local foodstuffs and dishes, although the terms 'traditions' or 'heritage' are not used and no specific value criteria are set for regional food (see <https://eestitoit.ee/en>). Some regions have had a regional brand for food products before the nomination, others do not have a brand or a label but emphasise regional speciality in their marketing messages.

The relative indifference of Estonian producers and consumers towards the EU food quality labels is related to national food policies. A survey conducted among different actors of the Estonian food sector in 2016 demonstrated that respondents' knowledge about the possibilities of applying for EU quality labels in Estonia was limited; they did not fully understand the functions and potential of these labels. This study suggested that producers would need »strong state-level support and consultation« to successfully apply for the EU food quality labels (Ahermaa and Nittim 2016). According to our research this has not been implemented. On the one hand, officials acknowledge that the application process for EU quality labels is challenging for producers and there should be more applications. On the other hand, the Ministry has not demonstrated initiative to lead the process or give systematic and professional support (for example, legal advice). Consequently, producers or other stakeholder groups who may lack the resources needed for a successful application have taken the responsibility so far.

In addition to food qualification instruments and regulations, there are also »heritage regimes« (Bendix, Eggert and Peselmann 2013) that transform traditional regional foods and related knowledge and skills into heritage items, using inventory as a tool of heritagisation. In 2006 Estonia joined the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. In 2010 the Ministry of Culture established the

Estonian Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). From 2010 until 2021, almost 30 cooking or eating practices were inscribed into the Inventory by local experts and enthusiasts, highlighting not just the recipe or the dish itself but related knowledge and skills as the ICH. Our previous research has demonstrated that the inventory is little known among the general public and entrepreneurs in the food and tourism sector do not see it as an instrument that would add symbolic value to their products or services; the inventory has no political or legislative power (Kannike and Bardone 2021).

4.2 A regional brand *Uma Mekk*

Support to the emergence of short supply chains and marketing locally produced foods has been a priority of the EU rural policies within the last decades, which has been realised also through the LEADER measure addressed to the development of rural regions (Regulation (EU) No. 1305/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development). Over the past decade, several initiatives for developing local food networks in Estonia have been supported by the LEADER funding. The emphasis of developing local food networks has been on creating short supply chains (e.g., farmers' markets) and promoting food regions through the joint marketing of regional products. Additionally, there are other food networks operating in Estonia (e.g., a network of direct food supply chains managed by an NGO).

Võrumaa region is one of the cultural-historical regions in south-eastern Estonia where local cultural heritage is valued by several organisations, groups as well as individual heritage enthusiasts or experts. However, conscious interest in the food heritage of the region emerged mainly in the past decade. A regional food brand *Uma Mekk* (Own Taste) was established in 2010, in cooperation between municipalities, non-governmental organisations, and local enterprises, and is managed by a LAG Võrumaa Partnership Assembly which defines *Uma Mekk* as a collective brand. This initiative was an outcome of a LEADER measure project developing local food as part of the Rural Development Plan in Estonia 2007-2013. According to the current development strategy of Võru County, *Uma Mekk* is considered one of the most successful brands of the region (<https://www.riigiteataja.ee/aktiis/4160/3202/1009/Arengustrateegia%20lisa.pdf>).

The name *Uma Mekk* comes from the regional dialect, highlighting the connection with this cultural-historical region. The logo of the brand that is used both on sticker labels on products and in catering establishments has a visually distinguishable design created by a local artist. The aim of the brand has been to create better market opportunities for local micro-producers by organising *Uma Mekk* Food Fair in November each year and supporting entrepreneurs' participation at other food fairs and events in Estonia,



Figure 2: Logo of the regional brand *Uma Mekk* (left) and Micro-producers selling their *Uma Mekk* products at the Annual *Uma Mekk* Food Fair in November 2017 (right).

helping producers to get access to retail sales at supermarket chains and creating marketing materials for *Uma Mekk* products. Throughout the years coordinators of the LAG have organised training courses on product development and marketing for local entrepreneurs as part of brand development activities. The statute for awarding and use of the brand states that it is given to products that utilize at least 50% of their raw materials from Võrumaa region or southern Estonia, or to dishes that use at least 50% of ingredients from the region and the »cooking methods of which are characteristic of southern Estonian region, or which have been traditionally prepared in this particular village, farm or family«. The brand can be assigned to single products, products' series, to a single dish or the whole menu at a catering establishment (<https://umamekk.ee/>).

In 2020 almost 300 food products and 80 dishes or menus were given the right to use the *Uma Mekk* brand logo, and each year about 10–50 new products are added. They belong to different categories, such as juices and soft drinks (e.g., fermented birch sap, sea buckthorn juice), alcoholic beverages (e.g., sparkling cranberry wine, craft beers), herbs and teas (multiple mixes of locally harvested herbal teas), oils (e.g., hemp oil), milk and cheese (e.g., fresh and mature goat cheeses), meat products (e.g., meat smoked in the smoke sauna). There are also flours and seeds, bakery products, vegetables, fruits and berries, preserves and jams, and honey. A local heritage tourism entrepreneur, who temporarily also acted as a coordinator of the LAG, was critical of the criteria of the *Uma Mekk* brand, which refer to local raw produce rather than traditional knowledge or production practices. She found the selection of *Uma Mekk* products too diverse and often not related to regional food heritage. Furthermore, *Uma Mekk* brand does not have a special meaning for foreign consumers, unlike for locals who can recognise its label as an indicator of products from Võrumaa region (Interview, August 15th, 2017).

The cultural heritage and identity of Võrumaa region are strongly related to the local dialect or Võro regional language still used in everyday communication. Local food heritage has been described in great ethnographic detail in a cookbook published in the Võro language in collaboration with Võro Institute, local entrepreneurs, and heritage enthusiasts (Karu and Guerrin 2014). Once a year, in October, several cafes and restaurants in the region offer a special *Uma Mekk* menu that highlights local and seasonal ingredients; each place has the names of dishes written also in the local dialect. In an interview a local heritage expert working at Võro Institute brings out that the *Uma Mekk* brand criteria are challenging for several food producers or caterers who have difficulties demonstrating the connection of their products with the local heritage and cultural context. In these cases, she or her colleagues have consulted entrepreneurs, helped show the historical-cultural link, and described the product in the local dialect (Interview, July 14th, 2017). The names and descriptions in the Võro language especially make regional products or dishes stand out for domestic consumers, as compared to other food items.

Uma Mekk is not just a brand but also a food network as it involves multiple actors in the food and hospitality sector and aims to facilitate joint marketing and cooperation between entrepreneurs. The first coordinator of *Uma Mekk* network stressed: »We promote local food – it helps to sustain rural life.« But she also admitted that the development of local food networks and cooperation between producers takes time because cooperation should be built on trust (Allas 2012). Several years later another coordinator acknowledged that entrepreneurs' cooperation still needs to be supported and strengthened, and the added value of the brand requires producers' or caterers' own effort to make it more visible and known. Furthermore, she saw multiple possibilities for cooperative marketing, such as joint participation at food fairs, using each other's products (e.g., collaboration between restaurants and producers), or launching packages of multiple *Uma Mekk* products (e.g., gift baskets) (Frosch 2019). Although the goal of developing *Uma Mekk* food network has been to establish a legal body (such as producers' cooperative) responsible for the further management of the brand, this has not happened in 10 years and the network still relies on the developmental organisation and a coordinator.

4.3 Applying for the EU PGI label for a traditional regional cheese *sõir*

Currently, there are only two PGI products registered in Estonia. The European Commission approved Estonian Vodka as a PGI in 2019. The second PGI product and the first agri-food product that was recognised as a PGI in 2021 was a traditional curd cheese *sõir*. In the case of Estonian Vodka, the production is limited to three producers who are eligible to use the name as they use ethyl alcohol made from locally grown ingredients and water from Estonia (<https://estonian-vodka.ee/en/>). Thus, the geographical indication involves all the national territory, whereas in the case of *sõir* the production area in the product

specification is limited to two cultural-historical regions in south-eastern Estonia – Vana-Võrumaa and Setumaa.

The name *sõir* refers to a traditional unripened cooked curdled milk cheese. It is made with butter and eggs, using caraway seeds for flavouring. According to the PGI specification, traditional production does not use rennet, industrial starter cultures, food additives, aromas, or colouring (Publication of an application for registration of a name pursuant to Article 50(2)(a) of Regulation (EU) No 1151/2012 of the European Parliament and of the Council on quality schemes for agricultural products and foodstuffs, 2021/C 46/08). Similar cheeses exist in Latvia and Lithuania, where they are strongly related to ethnic and national cuisines, although in all the Baltic countries the recipes of curd cheeses vary slightly by region and even between households (Blumberg and Micyte 2016). The word *sõir* originates from the south-eastern Estonian dialect. Historically, *sõir* has been prepared in households and this custom is still alive in some families. Except for a short period in the 1960s (in Soviet Estonia), *sõir* has not been produced industrially. As a commercial product *sõir* was re-introduced to the local market about ten years ago. Today *sõir* is produced mainly by micro-producers who are not represented by any producers' organisations. Overall, there were seven entrepreneurs behind the PGI application that was initiated by one of them in 2017 and ended with the registration in 2021. The Ministry of Rural Affairs provided minimum support in the process of application, all necessary documents were compiled by a food technologist and a regional cultural heritage expert from Võro Institute; as food heritage experts, we also participated in the writing and editing process of the application.

Sõir made by three producers can be purchased at farmers' markets and fairs, in some local shops, and in a small number of supermarket chains all over Estonia; other entrepreneurs sell their *sõir* only at local fairs, tourism facilities, and cafeterias. Hence, currently *sõir* is a product made for the local market, not for export. Why would small-scale producers of a niche product be interested in going for the EU geographical indication that involves a complex application procedure if they are not planning to reach foreign



Figure 3: *Sõir* produced by Metsavenna Farm. On the package, three food quality signs are used: EU Organic Label, EU PGI label, and regional label Uma Mekk.

markets soon? One of the main initiators behind the application, Mr. Tiit Niilo, owner of Nopri Dairy Farm, stated in an interview: »All kinds of cheese-like products with caraway seeds are sold in Estonia, using the name *sõir* on their label. It is not correct in many senses – the consumer is not getting what they are looking for, and for those making genuine *sõir* it is an unfair competition« (Rahman 2018). Thus, getting the PGI label for *sõir* was not aimed at becoming more competitive on the EU market but mainly on the domestic market. However, at the meetings in which product specification was discussed, some producers of the stakeholder group expressed different understandings about what authentic *sõir* is, and some did not consider others' products genuine or questioned their recipe or methods of production. Ideas about domestic production and family traditions conflicted with the standardisation and production methods needed in the commercial production. The final technological description of *sõir* in the specification document was a result of amendments and compromises.

The application for the PGI for *sõir* can be characterised as an attempt to re-regionalise a food product, emphasising that *sõir* is a regional not a national speciality. Previously *sõir* was acknowledged as part of Estonian national culinary heritage. Since the mid-20th century it has been made and consumed everywhere in the country (mainly for non-commercial purposes) and has been included as a national dish in several cookbooks of Estonian cuisine. The PGI application aimed at reconnecting *sõir* as a commercial product with particular regions in Estonia, thereby reminding about its importance as regional cultural heritage. According to the EU legislation, a PGI designates a product produced in a defined geographical area, and it must have a particular reputation related to its geographical origin. The geographical origin of *sõir* from two cultural-historical regions was emphasised from the beginning but it created several frictions during the application process. The first version of the PGI application aimed to protect the name »*Vana-Võromaa and Setomaa sõir*«, thereby including geography in the name of the product. After the application was submitted in 2018, an EU official responded that such a name cannot be registered because it is not used in commerce or everyday communication. On the national market, mainly the general term *sõir* is used. Thus, although the producers and compilers of the application thought that using place names in the name of the product would create a clear link between the geographical origin and the product (cf. *Coppa di Parma*, *Emmental de Savoie*), this did not fit with the EU PGI requirements. Therefore, the name *sõir* could be registered as a PGI. However, in the specification the geographical territory where *sõir* can be produced is limited to the two regions only. Other Estonian producers cannot use *sõir* for similar cheeses but must choose an alternative name.

To understand producers' motives for seeking EU protection to their traditional regional product, the context of the existing food quality and cultural heritage protection instruments in Estonia should be considered (cf. Ledinek Lozej 2021). The brand *Uma Mekk* was already given to several dairy producers making *sõir*. Additionally, the *sõir*-making tradition in the cultural-historical region Old Võrumaa has been described in the Estonian Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage since 2010 (<https://rahvakultuur.ee/2020/03/24/soirategemine-vana-voromaal/>). Yet, according to the producers who initiated the PGI application, the existing food quality and heritage policies in Estonia did not provide the kind of protection and benefits for *sõir* as a traditional regional product. Thus, the PGI was seen to work as a stronger instrument for protecting this traditional cheese as intellectual property.

5 Discussion

National development documents in Estonia state the need for promoting regional food cultures; yet, this has mainly been realised in marketing activities such as the nomination of the Food Region of the Year. Similarly, Sweden has supported the development of food regions within the national *Matlandet Sverige* (Eng. Foodland Sweden) programme demonstrating the importance of regional networks for promoting local products (Skåne region) and using local food in the hospitality sector (Jämtland region) (Halkier, James and Stræte 2017). Although the Estonian Ministry of Rural Affairs announces the nomination, regional developmental organisations are responsible for managing food region events. A study of Sisask (2021) claims that being nominated as a food region in Estonia has improved the region's image, facilitated cooperation between entrepreneurs in the area, increased the use of local raw produce, and brought to the fore small- and micro-scale producers. However, our previous research demonstrated that if promoting a food region is based on project-based funding, it may not be sustainable in the long term (Kannike et al. 2021).

The Estonian state does not provide food quality or food heritage instruments that would enable protecting or promoting regional food products. In contrast, in the Czech Republic two national schemes exist for labelling regional products: the Regional Food scheme awards the best regional food products, aiming to promote these for domestic consumers, supports their marketing, and provides a label *Regionální Potravina* (Eng. Regional Food); and the Regional Brand scheme managed by the Association of Regional Brands, which selects individual products of regional origin and with particular qualities from different regions all over the country (Bošková and Ratinger 2018; Fialová and Chromý 2022). In Estonia regional food brands are issued by some LEADER LAGs and like in Slovakia, they were established quite recently with the support of EU rural development funding (cf. Štensová 2013). *Uma Mekk* in south-eastern Estonia has become a successful brand for Võrumaa region and has made products from the area visible on the local market. However, the meaning of the brand is understandable for domestic but not for foreign consumers and not all producers consider it as a value-adding instrument (cf. Dare, Jönsson and Knutsson 2013). A recent study published by Ruzskai, Pajtkó Tari and Patkós (2021, 3 & 15) points out that LEADER LAGs have the potential to »develop a labelling scheme to protect real local products from cheap imitations (...) and guarantee the geographic origin of the product«. However, the authors admit that regional labelling schemes require a complex management of short food supply chains, which might be the reason why their occurrence at LAGs is rare and successful well-functioning labelling systems rather belong to higher regional or national levels (Ruzskai, Pajtkó Tari and Patkós 2021). This observation relates to our concerns about the sustainability of *Uma Mekk* brand and food network as currently it remains unclear how the cooperation in the food network and promotional activities would continue in the future without external funding and a supporting organisation. For instance, the Skärgårdssmak (Eng. Archipelago Taste) in Sweden and Finland was a successful example of regional branding and regional development, which was created by a project funded by the EU Interreg programme, whereas after the project had ended, the brand management was turned into a commercial limited company and today its promotion is not as lively as it was during the project period (Larsen and Österlund-Pötzsch 2015).

Estonia stands out even among other Eastern European countries with a very limited number of registered EU food quality labels. This may be a result of the lack of national place-based labelling that prioritises regional or traditional production as this is considered a prerequisite for smoother application for the EU GIs (cf. Parrott, Wilson and Murdoch 2002; Velčovská and Del Chiappa 2015). The Estonian Ministry of Rural Affairs has not taken a proactive position in supporting or consulting entrepreneurs in applying for EU food quality labels. In Latvia, by contrast, the Ministry of Agriculture officials have actively coordinated the application process, seeing these labels as nation branding tools in the EU although the number of GIs is likewise low (2 PGIs and 1 PDO among agricultural products and foodstuffs) (Bardone and Spalvěna 2019). Unlike in the case of mountain cheeses in Slovenia, which are niche products not made for export but registered as PDOs or PGIs as examples of Europeanisation of local traditional foods as well the creation of national property (Ledinek Lozej 2021), registering *sõir* as a PGI aimed to re-regionalise a food product previously considered a national cultural property and to create a regional cultural property instead, using the EU food quality schema as an instrument (cf. Kneafsey 2010; May et al. 2017). However, it is questionable how useful it is for small-scale and micro-producers to seek for European protection if a product is made for the local market, often purchased through direct sales, and familiar only to local customers who know the origin and the taste of such foods (Bérard and Marchenay 2008; Normann Eriksen and Sundbo 2016; Chalupová et al. 2020). In the Estonian context, the registration of *sõir* as a PGI revealed the need of some producers to protect traditional regional specialities in a way that national quality schemes or regional labels, such as *Uma Mekk*, do not provide. Although the custom of *sõir*-making in Võrumaa region is enlisted in the Estonian Inventory of ICH, producers did not see it as a value-adding instrument for commercial products (cf. Ledinek Lozej 2021).

A further research perspective emerging from our study concerns measurable long-term economic benefits of regional food brands – whether developed by LEADER LAGs or within the EU quality schemes – for producers.

6 Conclusion

The study revealed heterogeneous and inconsistent state policies and initiatives related to the marketing and labelling of regional products in Estonia. The LEADER-funded LAGs play a key role in developing regional food networks and establishing food quality labels. One of the brands managed by a LAG and

based on a local food network involving multiple actors in the food and tourism sector is *Uma Mekk* in Võrumaa region in south-eastern Estonia. The regional brand places greater emphasis on the use and origin of local raw materials rather than historical food traditions in the region. Also included in the study was an insight into a regional speciality, a traditional cheese *sõir* from south-eastern Estonia, which demonstrated how producers could add value to their products using the EU food quality instrument. In the latter case, the PGI application was an attempt to re-regionalise a traditional food that originated in a cultural-historical region by using the EU quality schemes.

7 References

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