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Regional Branding as a Tool for Sustainable Development: The Transylvania Case

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ABSTRACT:
Regional branding represents a key strategic instrument for strengthening territorial identity and enhancing regional competitiveness within the dynamics of globalization. Transylvania, characterized by its unique historical, cultural, and economic profile, offers an appropriate case for examining how regional branding can be applied in the context of Central and Eastern Europe. This article aims to analyse the theoretical foundations of regional branding and the ways in which they can be adapted to the Transylvanian specifics, considering the ethnic diversity, cultural heritage, natural landscape and economic potential of the region. The results highlight the fact that a coherent regional brand for Transylvania must go beyond strictly touristic approaches and integrate economic, social and institutional dimensions, contributing to attracting investments, stimulating local entrepreneurship and consolidating social capital. The conclusions emphasize the need for participatory governance and an integrated regional branding strategy, capable of supporting the sustainable development and competitive positioning of Transylvania at the European level.

Keywords: regional branding, Transylvania, territorial identity, cultural heritage, economic development

1. Introduction

In recent years, more scientific sources address the issue of modifying or influencing the image of a specific country, which is slowly but surely becoming a widely recognized international trend. The concept of a nation's image has evolved, often being referred to by terms such as place image or country brand, alongside the processes through which it is developed. As noted by Jenes (2013), the idea of Country Branding has acquired a broader significance, essentially reflecting the perception of a country's image (Jenes, 2013; Burlacu et al., 2022; Burlacu et al., 2024).

In this study, we aim to present the key findings from significant research on the notion of "country image." Our goal is to contextualize this information to highlight the potential of regional branding, focusing on the theoretical foundations of Country Imaging. This approach allows us to quantify and demonstrate research outcomes in a way that is both measurable and analysable.

There are various ideas about how great a country's contribution is to increasing global well-being. According to Anholt (2011), the measure of this contribution can best be tracked by introducing the term "Good Country Index" which shows us to what extent the decisions and actions of different countries influence the evolution of the general well-

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being of humanity, FDI decreases and increases depending on the country's ranking on the Good Country list (List of the "best" countries) (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2010; Nica et al., 2023).

Depending on the result obtained on this list, it is possible to track what kind of contribution the respective country has had through the actions taken to improve the well-being of humanity. The closer a country ranks to the top of the list, the more it has contributed to protecting the environment or, looking at the issue differently, what the respective country has not done (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2010). Considering health, cultural and security aspects, Anholt (2011) showed that within a country's GDP, FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) decreases and increases depending on the country's ranking on the Good Country list (List of the "best" countries). This list lists 125 countries and has no influence on the ranking of the amounts spent on marketing development of those countries.

In the article in question, according to the method developed by Anholt (2011), it will be proposed for the Transylvanian "regions" to introduce this index under the name of "Good Transylvanian Regional Index", which will be correlated with the GDP of these regions. The main problem that will address will be the analysis of the contributions of these areas ("What did they have to do to become good?"). This example can contribute to solving the problem of "good regions" within administrative-territorial units of different sizes both in Romania and elsewhere. The respective regions must communicate the ways in which they help each other and how they influence their development in a good direction (Balzan, et al., 2025).

If we analyse the developed settlements, we can see that they have all the aspects created based on the results of scientific research, through which the development strategies created for them facilitate their positioning in a more favourable situation from the point of view of their development. The implementation of a good development strategy contributes to increasing the level of comfort, well-being and satisfaction of the population. The holding force of the respective locality becomes much stronger (Zhang et al., 2020; Burlacu et al., 2023; Bran et al., 2023).

These days we need more and more the world of good countries. They exist, if we ask them for these things from: our leaders, from our entrepreneurs, from society or from ourselves.

The "Good Country Index" represents the score received by different countries in different international analyses and hierarchies, which according to Anholt, who conceived the phrase with the aim of having an instrument that would measure the degree of cultural, political and economic contribution of different countries in order to implement local policies for each one, which would lead to the development of these entities. From the point of view of the various devices that help with social research, one of the newest would be the project "The Good Country Index", which could make an important contribution to the general contribution of the region, to local, national and international well-being (Zenker & Braun, 2017).

The marketing of localities, regions or countries is a young area of marketing sciences, which is developing very quickly in this period. The idea of brand creation is well established for products, services, or individuals, yet it represents a relatively novel approach when applied to local development (Briciu et al., 2020).

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The phrase can be interpreted in the case of different geographical units, both from the perspective of the existence of sales markets and because of the competition in which local actors participate, and not only. In conclusion, marketing strategies are applicable in such conditions as well. The importance of the term "place marketing" is absolutely not negligible, because the comfort of locals, as well as the objectives chosen by potential tourists, are very important from the point of view of capital flows (Briciu et al., 2020; Burlacu et al., 2022).

The changes that have occurred both in the lifestyle and in the behaviour regarding the consumption habits of the population have led to changes in the services offered (cultural, educational, social, entertainment, etc.) and changes in traditional ways of consumption. Place marketing is a specific tool of local development, which aims to facilitate the development of local actors, who serve the development of the population and the locality itself.

In the decisions, according to Jafarli & Canavari, (2025). an important role in addition to the utility of the products and their associated value is played by the messages or the overall image of the brand. The product of the specific geographical area defined is the area itself, that is, the natural or anthropic facilities offered by it. The first step in describing these locations has already begun and consisted in choosing the name of the location.

2. National Brand Index — National Brand Index

As smaller geographical areas compete with each other, the same trends can be observed at the national level. One of the most significant aspects of this competition is that this race becomes increasingly tough as time goes by, therefore it is necessary to maintain the good image of a country, the conscious way to build a brand, to position it correctly, to have a strategic planning of the overall process (Li et al., 2023; Burlacu et al., 2024).

All countries possess a certain type of image that has been formed over the years from their history and culture, which is influenced by their economic potential and their tourist image.

There are some opinions that consider that certain countries cannot be branded, that the process is only viable for products. Country brands, unlike certain products, could have formed spontaneously and form a complete unit, which cannot be changed (Margarisová & Vokáčová, 2016). In order for a country to avoid stereotyping, it needs a well-planned, unified image.

In addition to the necessity, there are other advantages that result from branding a country. According to Hankinson, G. (2004), there is a serious sustainable competitive advantage for investors, residents, institutions and visitors, after all for everyone (Hankinson, 2004; Bran et al., 2023). It can bring faster profitability for real estate and infrastructure, and from the perspective of the event, there is a chance for a coherent development of the place in terms of aspects related to branding planning, natural, social, economic and cultural objectives of the community.

As we have previously emphasized, Country Branding is a complex phenomenon, related to multiple attributes, and its overall image is determined by different dimensions, which is why the scientific world refers to it as a "multidimensional image" (Roth and

Romeo, 1992). NBISM (National Brands Index SM) developed by Anholt, contributes to governments and various organizations being able to understand this concept, to measure and thereby bring about a strong national image and fame. 100 countries were included in the index — research based on branding performance and quality, measured by a hexagonal diagram. The six dimensions were based on the following aspects: governance, foreign trade, tourism, culture and heritage, population, investment and settlements.

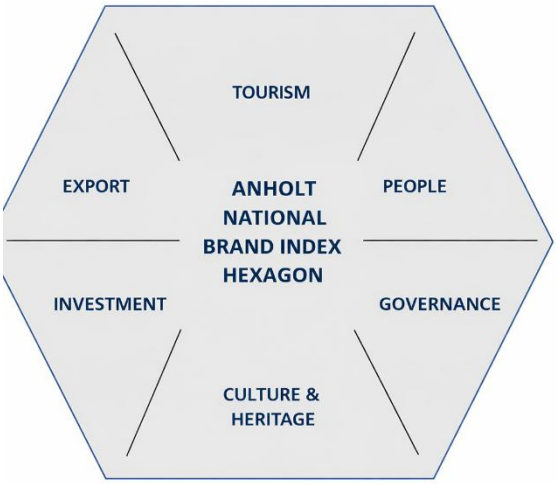

Figure 1. *Anholt's Hexagon by National Brand Index*
Source: author

The areas of the so-called "branding hexagon" are closely linked to each other. The model created by Anholt is a well-defined system of perspectives through which we can measure the overall image of countries. A ranking based on the country brand index can be created for countries, also by the name of the country, which can be used as a brand.

According to research conducted by the Max Planck Institute, if a country's score increases by 1 point, this will generate a 2% increase in foreign trade (Groza et al., 2021). The survey began in 2005, and the list was updated four times over the course of a year. The survey studies 100 countries.

Half of the questions refer to "hard" factors, such as foreign trade (how strong is "made in XY") on the volume of foreign investment (FDI); and the general perception of the government (how strong is democracy, transparency and environmental policy).

According to the 2024 National Brand list, the following countries would be the world leaders: USA, China, Japan, Germany, UK, France, India, Canada, Italy and South Korea. The last ones on the list are: Cameroon, Georgia, Cambodia, Libya, Cyprus, Honduras, Tunisia, Nepal, Iceland, Bolivia, Bahrain. Romania ranked 50th.

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3. Good Country Index

According to Simon Anholt (2011), who is an independent consultant, through his work he creates both economic, political and cultural participation, specializing in national, regional and local politics. "National branding" as a concept and all the studies related to it were initiated by him. He has already collaborated with various trainees in the country and has also initiated various projects oriented towards social sciences, of which the one called "Good Country Index" was one of the most remarkable and could facilitate the contribution of each country both to humanity and to planet Earth itself.

Its aim is to measure exactly how and how much each country contributes to the general well-being of humanity and what it should do in this regard. Data generated by international organizations such as the UN, NGOs or other international agencies were used by Anholt to create an index that could accurately illustrate the contribution of each country.

The purpose of the Good Country Index is to analyze how countries can balance their abilities and plans towards their citizens, the responsibilities they must assume for their actions towards the rest of the world, and to determine what is essential for the sustainable development of both our society and the natural environment (Pasquinelli & Andersson, 2022; Rădulescu et al., 2022).

According to Pasquinelli & Andersson, (2022). today there is a desperate need for "a world of good countries". They exist if we demand them from: our leaders, companies, society and even from ourselves. This index measures the overall contribution of countries to the general well-being of both society and planet Earth itself.

In other words: how much do they do to make everything good? This is very important, because the main problems can be tracked on a global scale, and no country can neglect them. The index is created from statistical reports issued by the UN and other private organizations that contain data on various topics. These indicators are consolidated into a single composite measure, offering an overall ranking that can be organized into the following categories: science and technology, culture, international peace and security, global governance, environment and climate, prosperity and equality, and health.

The index attempts to assess the policies and global behaviours of nations through which they contribute to the common facts. Each country receives its scores based on a fragmented ranking (where 0 is the highest and 1 is the lowest possible score), compared to countries for which data is available. The ranking of these categories generates a common metric, which can provide an overall ranking, while also providing an overview that shows the contribution of each country.

Table 1. The 2024 list, the top 10 countries in the Good Country Index ranking

	Science and technology	**Culture**	**International safety**	**World order and security**	**The planet and the climate**	**Wealth and equality**	**Health**
Sweden	14	5	31	9	4	9	3
Denmark	7	4	49	7	21	2	4
Germany	22	12	38	1	8	19	1
Canada	28	14	18	11	11	21	8

Holland	9	2	25	3	47	25	5
Finland	10	11	34	5	2	52	15
France	25	7	46	12	19	17	20
Spain	46	19	19	14	17	22	24
Norway	25	15	58	6	1	50	2

Source: www.index.goodcountry.org

According to the 2024 list, the top 10 countries in the ranking are mostly European countries, such as Sweden, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Finland, France, the United Kingdom, Spain and Norway. Canada is the exception at number 4. The bottom of the list consists of countries such as Libya, Yemen, Guinea, Mauritania, Iraq, Burundi, Gabon, Papua New Guinea, the Bahamas, Mali and the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Romania is at number 50.

3.1. The "Good Transylvania Region" index

If we look at the Transylvania region, we can see that the processes related to regional marketing aspects have already begun, due to the fact that they have data based on scientific methods, with well-developed marketing strategies, which can contribute to bringing the regions and settlements that compose them into a more favourable position (Balzan et al., 2025; Burlacu et al., 2023). We can also see that by implementing these strategies, the general comfort and satisfaction of the population has increased.

In Romania, there are 178,617 companies that provide services, so practically 34% of the total number of companies were active in the service industry, according to the Erdélystat analysis (Csata and Csata, 2019). Economic activity is mostly focused on intellectual services (22%), of which a considerable share of companies with activities related to professional-scientific and technical activities is noted. The share of other service-related activities is much lower (12%), but these enterprises contribute a higher share to the overall gross value added (21%) (Csata and Csata, 2019; Nica et al., 2023). In Bucharest, 48% of companies operate in the service industry itself, while in Transylvania this number is in line with the national average.

The share of the service sector is on an increasing trend in Central Transylvania, in Banat and slightly above the median level in Southern Transylvania. The service sector is least represented in Northern Transylvania, in the Partium (Crişana) Region and in the Szeklerland.

The regional concentration is even more pronounced in the case of knowledge-intensive enterprises (information and communication services and professional, scientific and technical activities), with a high share in Central Transylvania (19%) and Banat (16%), but Southern Transylvania (15%) and the Szeklerland (14%) are not far behind in this respect.

Overall, the total share of companies operating in medical services and the representation of other non-cognitive services in Northern Transylvania and the Szeklerland is well below the national average (Kavaratzis& Ashworth, 2005). Service-oriented companies are more represented in those regions and counties where larger cities are found (e.g., Braşov, Cluj-Napoca, Sibiu and Timişoara). The position of the Szeklerland in general statistics tends to be closer to the average.

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If we look at the Romanian industry as a whole, we can see that the general contribution of this sector to the country's GDP is in a constant growth trend, in addition to the fact that, contrary to the overall national trends, the total number of companies operating in Transylvania had increased. In Southern Transylvania, there were 249,000 employees in this sector, which covers 29.1% of the total workforce.

In the Banat region, the share of employees working in the industrial sector is also considerable, and here an increase in the total number is observed. The highest share of employees working in the industrial sector was recorded in the Sibiu region in 2018, where it represented 34.2%. For the counties of Arad, Alba, Covasna, industry was also over 29%. With the exception of Covasna, the total number of employees was on a constant growth trend for the counties (Rădulescu et al., 2025).

In Cluj County there is the lowest share of employees working in industrial units, reaching up to 20.3%. This is the result of the general strength of other economic sectors such as trade, IT, financial services, insurance, etc. In the case of Caraş-Severin, Hunedoara, Satu-Mare and Mureş counties, the total share of employees in the industrial sector is below 25%.

Table 2. Transylvanian Regional Index Good

Science	Number of universities	North-West	Centre	Szekler land	West
		1	4	3	2
Culture	Number of museums	3	3	3	4
Tourism	Total number of tourists	3	4	2	1
Prosperity	Total GDP	4	3	1	2
Health	Infrastructure	2	4	3	1

Source: author's contribution based on data from the National Institute of Statistics

The index also studies what is the overall contribution of any region to the common good of humanity. We have to ask ourselves what the purpose of a region is: to serve its own population, businesses, leaders or companies, or even larger goals than that, maybe even the entire planet Earth. Through this we can measure why people prefer a certain region. Regions also contribute to general security, wealth and, through collaboration, have become increasingly competitive.

Table 3. Positioning of regions according to the Transylvanian Regional Index Good

Region	**Position**
Central	I
Szeklerland	II
North-West	III
West	IV

Source: author

If we look at the overall results, we can see that for Transylvania, the Central Region has the highest contribution to total development, considering its population and GDP. This list is not about money, it is more about culture, population and the leaders' perspective on the future. Since Transylvania had a different history in Europe, which is also applicable to the Szeklerland, this should also be part of the general discussions, in order to be able to create a separate branding for it in the future.

4. Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that regional branding represents a strategic governance instrument capable of integrating cultural heritage, economic potential, and institutional coordination into a coherent development framework. In the case of Transylvania, the region's distinctive historical legacy, multicultural character, and diversified resource base provide a strong foundation for constructing a competitive and authentic territorial brand. However, the effectiveness of such a branding strategy depends not merely on symbolic representation but on the alignment of policy objectives, stakeholder collaboration, and long-term strategic planning (Burlacu et al., 2024; Rădulescu et al., 2023).

The study confirms that successful regional branding requires a multidimensional approach that combines narrative identity with measurable development outcomes. Regions characterized by complex identities benefit most from hybrid branding models that simultaneously valorise tradition and innovation. In this context, Transylvania's branding potential lies in its capacity to transform cultural capital into economic value while preserving authenticity and social cohesion (Burlacu et al., 2023; Bran et al., 2023).

At the policy level, the findings highlight the importance of institutional integration, participatory governance, and consistent international communication (Burlacu et al., 2022; Burlacu et al., 2024).

Fragmentation among local actors and the absence of unified strategic direction remain significant constraints that limit branding impact. Addressing these challenges through coordinated regional frameworks, data-driven monitoring, and sustained investment in visibility can significantly enhance brand performance.

In conclusion, regional branding should be understood as a long-term developmental strategy rather than a short-term promotional campaign. When embedded within broader regional development policies, it can strengthen territorial competitiveness, attract investment, stimulate tourism, and reinforce regional identity. For Transylvania, adopting such an integrated branding paradigm represents not only an opportunity for economic advancement but also a pathway toward sustainable and inclusive regional development (Rădulescu et al., 2022; Rădulescu et al., 2025; Burlacu et al., 2023).

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