

Article

The Role of GI Products or Local Products in the Environment—Consumer Awareness and Preferences in Albania, Bulgaria and Poland

Etleva Muça ^{1,*} , Iwona Pomianek ^{2,*}  and Mariya Peneva ³ 

¹ Department of Economy and Rural Development Economies, Agricultural University of Tirana, 1025 Tirana, Albania

² Department of Development Policy and Marketing, Warsaw University of Life Sciences-SGGW, 166, 02-787 Warsaw, Poland

³ Department of Economics of Natural Resources, University of National and World Economy, 1700 Sofia, Bulgaria; peneva_mm@yahoo.co.uk

* Correspondence: evadashi@ubt.edu.al (E.M.); iwona_pomianek@sggw.edu.pl (I.P.)

Abstract: The main goal of this paper is to measure and compare the awareness and preferences of consumers in relation to local products in three countries: Albania, Bulgaria, and Poland. (1) Background: The analysis focused on consumer choices when presented with local products, specifically knowledge as to their environmentally friendly status. The study was evoked by the need to recognize and evaluate changes in consumer behavior as a result of the pandemic and the global challenges related to climate change and the widespread call for nature preservation. (2) Methods: An online survey was conducted with 300 respondents from Poland, 262 from Albania, and 250 from Bulgaria. Statistical analysis was applied. (3) Results: The study answered research questions about consumer readiness to pay a premium price and awareness about the impact of regional products on the environment and livelihood of rural communities. (4) Conclusions: The study proved that consumer perceptions and behavior are influenced by a variety of factors and driving forces in the three countries surveyed depending on socioeconomic characteristics and relevant policies. COVID-19 accelerated the demand for products derived from nature-friendly production systems. Products with geographical indication (GI products) are a better choice from the perspective of sustainable consumption.

Keywords: intellectual property; GI; regional products; traditional product; locavore



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1. Introduction

The issue of proper nutrition is crucial in all political agendas elaborated on in the European and international context [1]. Additionally, a key priority of the European Union (the EU) is ensuring food safety because food supports lives, thus food safety is considered a human right [2]. Another priority concerns waste management [3] and energy-friendly production. The integrated approach referred to as “farm to fork” was presented in a 2020 Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions [4]. The EU’s goals are to reduce the environmental and climate footprint of its food system and strengthen its resilience, ensure food security in the face of climate change and biodiversity loss, enable a global shift towards competitive sustainable development from farm to fork and seize new opportunities [5]. The Strategy emphasizes the importance of ensuring a diversified food offer, which is at the same time sufficient, nutritious, sustainable, and affordable, especially in times of crisis [6]. These priorities are in line with recommendations presented by the United Nations. The UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development covers, among others, issues such as: reducing poverty and hunger, good health and wellbeing, affordable and clean energy, decent work and economic growth, sustainable cities and communities,

responsible consumption and production, action concerning the climate [7]. Moreover, among the world days adopted by the United Nations, the following are celebrated: World Environment Day (5 June) [8], World Food Safety Day (7 June) [9], Sustainable Gastronomy Day (18 June) [10] and International Day of Awareness of Food Loss and Waste (19 September) [11].

Labelling of products enables consumers to obtain information about the origin and composition of the product, therefore it is a certain guarantee of quality and safety. A special type of labelling is a geographical indication affixed to products that have a specific geographical origin and the characteristics or reputation associated with that origin. Not only does it provide companies with the opportunity to harness the value of their geographically unique products, but it also informs and attracts consumers. Modern trends also lead consumers to choose local products, directly from the producer/farmer, which is in line with the European Union Farm to Fork strategy [5].

2. Literature Review

2.1. *The Importance of Local and Regional Products for the Economy and Environment on Micro and Macro Scales—Literature Review*

In times of crisis, including the one in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to ensuring safe food, it is also important to cope with the loss of job security [12] and to ensure the continuation of income, not only for households professionally related to the service sector such as tourism, gastronomy, cosmetology, hairdressing, fitness, public transport, culture, and entertainment. Increased unemployment and the uncertain income situation forced part of society to seek other sources of income [13]. In the case of farms in particular, such a solution could be to work in the field and stand-alone sale of agricultural products-activities that have so far been outsourced to seasonal foreign workers (for example, from Eastern Europe) [14]. In the United States, it was also observed that due to the dependence of the agricultural sector on unauthorized immigrants or temporary workers, COVID-19 outbreaks on farms caused disruptions in the food supply as a direct result of the pandemic [15,16].

According to several studies conducted in Poland in 2020 by Kalinowski and Wyduba, work in agriculture is decisive for increased job security. The surveyed farmers were more concerned about drought and the inability to sell agricultural products. New distribution channels have gained importance among farmers, including direct sales, which were most often indicated by farms up to 10 ha and plant production. The surveyed farmers reported difficulties in searching for new markets, only 20% (in June) and 10% (in September) stated that cooperation offers or new contractors had appeared. Initially, farmers most often received cooperation offers and contacts from Agricultural Advisory Centers, although in the last stage of the study they emphasized the importance of informal contacts [17].

A study of the marketing activities of vegetable growers in Bulgaria [18] revealed that direct sales are important for farmers but the specificities of products (freshness and low endurance), combined with low economic power within the supply chain, forced many to choose longer distribution channels. But even in that case, all respondents appreciated that personal sales are crucial to understanding consumer preferences, facilitating communication. Another analysis [19] concludes that companies operating in the dairy sector use locality, including cultural traditions, appropriate production conditions, and the special location of their production premises as the main instruments in their market positioning for yogurt.

EU policy is based on the already well-verified assumption that decarbonisation requires solutions at all levels of governance and collaboration—global, regional, national, and especially local [20,21]. Various environmental, health, and food safety concerns influence consumer purchasing decisions and contribute to increasing demand for local products and those offered at local markets by farmers [22].

Globalisation has made the world smaller and closer, not only in terms of spatial distance but also culturally. In the era of globalization and the widespread availability of goods, there is a growing trend and more intense attempts to return to our roots, which are

the source of differences and constitute the rich culture associated with a given country. As noted by Jin-Young, it becomes a common daily routine to have coffee produced in Ethiopia in the morning, enjoy salmon caught in the Norwegian Sea for lunch and conclude a meal with chocolate from Belgium. This culinary adventure seems no extraordinary pleasure for ordinary diners. In other words, many of us are used to the foods that travel thousands of miles to sit on our dining table [23]. Of course, this all comes at the expense of time, energy, and the environment.

The modern trend of purchasing locally grown food is behind the growing popularity of direct marketing models, for example, farmers' (agricultural) markets, u-picks, and community-supported agriculture [22]. Communities seek greater self-sufficiency and less dependence on food transportation, all the while craving fresh and nutrient-rich food that does not require a lot of packaging and refrigeration (Figure 1). A further consideration is the calls to reduce environmental impact by saving energy used to store and move products to supermarket shelves. Local agricultural markets enable links between consumers and food producers, provide an additional source of income for farmers, and generally serve as a tool for local community development [22,24,25]. Considering the recent trends in Korean society, 'eating healthy food' definitely has a positive impact on rural communities in many dimensions, including tourism and the local job market [23]. According to Scuderi and Pecorino [26], the introduction of GIs comes as a result of the evolution of consumer behavior and changes in diet patterns with the main shift from quantity to quality. The authors also claim that it is part of the development of new models of both production and consumption, which simultaneously contribute to the creation and development of alternative food distribution channels and new models for rural development. Moreover, another study [27] found an important issue related to the possibilities of new government structures emerging based on local actors networking to utilize the specific territorial characteristics and production of traditional food. It is fact that, in the cases of new initiatives, existing governance structures could hamper their development simply because they are not part of the mainstream. Thus, in the presented case studies (of Bulgaria, Czech Republic, and Greece) the initiated local quality and certification schemes are perceived by the actors as crucial for sustainable development.

Consumers who knowingly buy and eat locally produced food that does not need to be transported long distances (usually a 50 to 100-mile radius) are referred to as a "locavore" [23,28].

Traditional local gastronomy and food production, as a reflection of a specific complex of natural and cultural and historical assumptions, makes it possible to diversify destinations in the tourist market. Therefore, the existing uniqueness conditioned by climate, ethnic group, religion, social status, cultural tradition, and fashion trends among others marks the beginning of the area's marketing plans and an important attribute differentiating the identity of some tourist destinations [29]. The decisive motives for purchasing regional and traditional products also include their quality-equal to taste values—as well as pride and commitment to culinary traditions [30].

Moreover, Lambarraa-Lehnhardt et al. claim that Geographical Indications are intended to protect and promote the marketing of locally produced food specialties and link their specific characteristics and reputation to the national production region, the origin labelling is necessary for both consumers and producers in Morocco [31] and other countries [32–34].

The role of local food systems in revitalizing rural economies is increasingly appreciated, and the positive consequences of their operation are of interest not only to local authorities but also the European Community; especially so because local food systems can be part of the broadly understood processes of sustainable rural development. Social benefits include the fact that they promote social inclusion and improve the quality of life in local communities. Moreover, the environmental benefits result from more sustainable and environmentally friendly behavior on the part of agricultural producers [35,36].

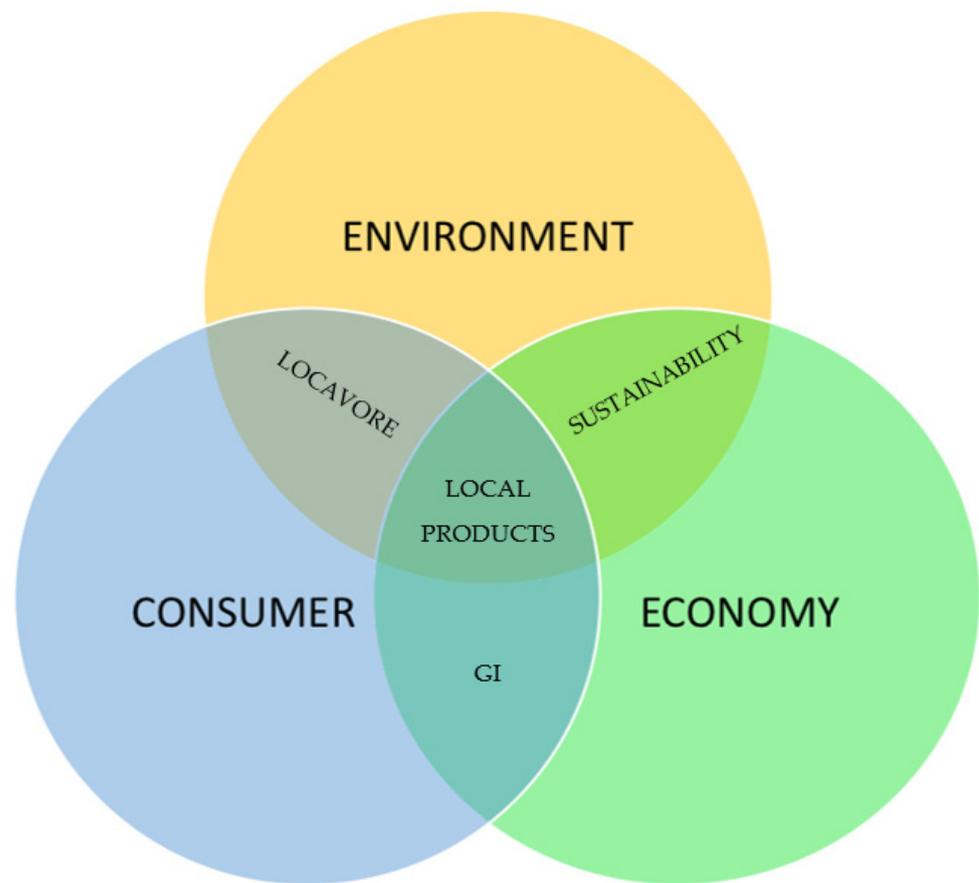


Figure 1. Importance of local and GI products for the environment, consumers and economy. Source: own elaboration.

2.2. The Concept of Local Products in Albania, Bulgaria and Poland

The globalization process has also affected post-communist countries in terms of market liberalization and export increases, which were part of the rapid reforms adopted after the 1990s [37]. Thus, for these regions, the concept of the local product was initially insignificant since they were focused on rapid economic growth and the regulation of their trade balance with a sustainable national economy [38].

Numerous studies have shown that in economically developed countries, research into local products has been a trend for a relatively long time, although it is in its infancy in less developed or transition countries [39]. A growing middle class in Western Balkan countries tends to eat healthier and richer diets, including indigenous Balkan foods [40]. Since the 1990s, there has been an increase in consumer concerns about the origin of food, agricultural production methods, and food safety, changing the landscape of consumer purchasing decisions and contributing to an increase in demand for local products [22,41–43]. The concept of local products has been developed over the years in line with consumer ideas. Guerrero [44] describes them as food produced in a specific area in a traditional way and having specific sensory properties. Currently, there is no universal definition relating to local products, but in most cases, they relate to animal or plant production [45].

For Hand and Martinez [46], local food and its supporters originate in the Slow Food movement and organic farming, while for Bérard and Marchenay [47,48], local products are strongly associated with the concept of territory. Tischner [49], meanwhile, combines the concept of the local product with a fair-trade approach, and Sims [50] believes that such products are conceptualized as “authentic” and symbolize the culture and other characteristics of the region. On the other hand, countries in Eastern Europe, like the rest of the world, are impacted by the effects of climate change due to gas emissions and the

greenhouse effect. All such change directs the consumer interest towards standardized and healthy products. Today, buying local is associated with lower emissions and is therefore more environmentally friendly than buying global products [51].

Table 1 provides a narrative literature review of the main studies in the countries observed. The identification of the local product concept was assessed according to the perception of the attribute assigned in the literature.

Table 1. Perception of local products according to selected Albanian, Bulgarian and Polish authors.

Attributes of the Local Food	Authors			Impact: Environmental, Economic, Social
	Albania	Poland	Bulgaria	
Traditional product	Bombaj et al., 2016 [52] Haas et al., 2021 [53]	Dąbrowska 2018 [54] Małecki and Sołowiej 2019 [55] Hełdak et al., 2020 [56]	Boshnakov 2016 [57] Mishev and Valcheva 2005 [58] Stankov and Fidan 2019 [59] Pashova 2020 [60]	Economic, social
PDO, PGI	Medolli et al., 2016 [61] Imami et al., 2016 [62] Kokthi and Kruja 2017 [63] Cela et al., 2019 [64]	Borowska 2010 [65] Bryła 2017 [66] Barska and Wojciechowska -Solis 2018 [67] Majewski and Malak-Rawlikowska 2019 [68]	Ivanova et al., 2014 [69] Kazakova 2017 [70]	Economic, social
Organic food	Driouech et al., 2013 [71] Skreli et al., 2017 [72] Kokthi et al., 2021 [73]	Grzelak and Maciejczak 2013 [74] Kuboń and Olech 2018 [75] Majewski and Malak-Rawlikowska 2019 [76] Bórawski et al., 2021 [77]	Vasileva et al., 2019 [78]	Environmental, Economic, Social
Touristic product	Holland 2000 [79] Çani 2013 [80] Brokaj 2014 [81]	Niemczyk 2014 [82] Jęczmyk et al., 2015 [83] Ozimek et al., 2017 [84] Nowak & Bogusz 2018 [85] Sanetra and Sanetra-Półgrabi 2019 [86] Niedbała et al., 2020 [87]	Stankov et al., 2019 [88] Lulcheva 2020 [89]	Environmental, Economic, Social
Environment protection	Kushi 2011 [90] Bashi 2015 [91] Olli 2017 [92]	Woś 1995 [93] Zegar 2003 [94] Nieżgoda 2004 [95] Krasowicz 2008 [96] Kapera 2018 [97] Waś et al., 2021 [98]	Peneva and Kazakova-Mateva 2015 [99] Dzhabarova and Peneva 2017 [100] Lulcheva and Arseniou 2018 [101]	Environmental, Economic, Social
Slow food	Muca and Zene 2020 [102]	Farelnik 2020 [103]	Yotova 2018 [104]	Economic, social
Ethnocentrism	Brucaj 2020 [105]	Siemieniako et al., 2011 [106]	Noev 2005 [107]	Economic

Source: Authors' elaboration.

As observed from the publications consulted, researchers believe that consumer preferences for local products have increased significantly over the past decade. Consumers are aware of the importance of local food, preferring it over imported products [52,53,57,106].

However, local food and domestic industrial products should be protected, taking into account the need to separate traditional food stalls in supermarkets. Local food is identified by consumers as high-quality due to its freshness, naturalness, and flavor. Local production, processing, and food distribution are concepts that aim to reduce the distance between the food producer (farmer) and the final consumer. They are an alternative to conventional food production and distribution systems [35].

This is one reason why consumers are willing to pay more for regional products. In fact, this observation applies not only to the countries studied but also to the USA. Many consumers prefer locally grown food and are even willing to pay more for local products [22,108].

Traditional and regional food are key elements in the promotion of cultural heritage [54,55,109–111]. A previous study [112] also acknowledges that GIs products are positively perceived in society, specifically that the products taste better; an impression that is partly induced by nostalgia for the past and the promotion of local/national patriotism. For several years, there has been a noticeable and increased interest in these products throughout the European Union, including Poland [113,114], and other parts of the World [115,116]. Visitors, according to Tian et al., are attracted by traditional farming practices, aromatic food, and the related rural culture and experience the agricultural heritage in an attractive natural environment perfect for educational, experimental, and recreational purposes. For this reason, local communities should benefit from sharing their heritage with visitors [117]. Offering traditional products to tourists is an example of a cultural identity reference as food plays an important role in providing tourists with a rich and authentic experience [118,119]. For many authors, traditional products are tied to the territory or their protected origin [61–63,67,70]. Dumitras et al. [120] conducted a study during which the various economic, environmental, and recreational benefits were taken into consideration, both for the local population and visitors to rural areas. They found a link between the desire of customers to buy local/traditional and geographically defined products and the experience they have within the territory. Their results show that complexity is accompanied by the emotions encountered by the consumer, which strongly supports the identification and recognition of the product.

More Geographical Indications (GIs) are found in countries where tourism plays an important role and GIs enable a diversified and enriched tourist offer [121]. A geographical indicator is displayed on products that have a specific geographical origin and characteristics or a reputation associated with that origin. It not only provides a way for companies to leverage the value of geographically unique products but also inform and attract consumers. International research shows that the GI is praised as a tool for revitalizing agricultural communities at the local or regional level, but is simultaneously criticized as an instrument used by global corporations to promote their interests [122]. The main challenges for registering a Protected Designation of Origins (PDO) or GI product relate to: the small scale of production; the strict registration procedure in terms of product and area studies and specification; the need for external expertise to support them; and the requirement to fund all associated costs [82]. These issues have hampered PDO or GI registration in Albania due to the EU geographical indications register. The recent amendments of Law No. 17 dt. 16.02.2017 on “Industrial Property” and Decision of the Council of Ministers (D.C.M) No.251, date. 24.04.2019 for the protection of GIs, as well as Law No. 8/2019 on “Quality Schemes for the Agricultural Products”, will improve the situation for GI registration. In Albania, the approach is of high interest since many local products (agriculture and livestock) are a priori of good quality but insufficiently recognized and visible, valued economically, ecologically, and protected. On the other hand, many initiatives and projects have been carried out in recent years around GIs, but to date, no GI has yet been filed. This recognition takes the form of a collective intellectual

property right, granting legal protection of the product name in competing markets. From a consumer point of view, a GI guarantees a given quality and clear origin [31,123].

Several treaties concerning the protection of intellectual property are under the administration of the World Intellectual Property Organization. The basis is the Paris Convention for the Protection of Industrial Property, adopted in 1883, which applies to industrial property in the widest sense, including patents, trademarks, industrial design, utility models, service marks, trade names, geographical indications, and the repression of unfair competition. This international agreement was the first major step taken to help creators ensure that their intellectual works were protected in other countries [124]. In 1995 the World Trade Organization's Agreement on Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) came into effect and it is to date the most comprehensive multilateral agreement on intellectual property [125]. Geographical indications are defined, for the purposes of the Agreement, as indications that identify a good as originating in the territory of a member, or a region or locality in that territory, where a given quality, reputation, or other characteristics of the good is essentially attributable to its geographical origin. Thus, this definition specifies that the quality, reputation, or other characteristics of a good can each be a sufficient basis for eligibility as a geographical indication, where they are essentially attributable to the geographical origin of the good [126]. The indication cannot mislead the public as to the good's geographical origin and its use, which constitutes an act of unfair competition. The registration of a trademark that uses a geographical indication in a way that misleads the public as to the true place of origin must be refused or invalidated (Article 22). However, Article 24 contains a number of exceptions to the protection of geographical indications; these are of particular relevance in respect to additional protection for the geographical indications of wines and spirits. For example, Members of TRIPS are not obliged to bring under protection a geographical indication under protection that has become a generic term to describe the product in question. Measures to implement these provisions must not prejudice prior trademark rights acquired in good faith. Under certain circumstances, continued use of a geographical indication for wines or spirits may be allowed on a scale and nature as before. Members availing themselves of the use of these exceptions must be willing to enter into negotiation about their continued application to individual geographical indications. The exceptions cannot be used to diminish the protection of geographical indications that existed prior to the entry into force of the TRIPS Agreement (Article 24) [127].

Geographical indications (GIs) are collective intellectual property (IP) rights for agri-food products that highlight the unique tie between the quality of the GI product and the territory in which it is produced and/or processed. This relationship includes both physical (i.e., soil, climate, local variety, and breed) and human-related factors (i.e., local know-how, specific skills, historical traces). GI policies encourage competition and provide agri-food producers with productivity tools and, thereby, have the potential to foster regional economic growth and prosperity [128].

Geographical indications are used worldwide as an instrument for brand management and the diversification of products. In the EU (European Union), too, efforts continue to protect products through the registration of geographical origin and traditional indication [129].

In Poland, according to Article 174.1 of the Act of Industrial Property Law, Geographical indications are word marks referring directly or indirectly to the name of a place, town, region, or country (area) identifying the goods as originating from this area if the product's quality, reputation, or other characteristics are attributed primarily to its geographical origin. Moreover, foreign geographical indications may be granted protection in Poland only if the sign is protected in its country of origin [130]. Thus, while buying foodstuffs consumers take account of the health benefits, natural environment of production, quality, and organoleptic features rather than economic concerns [81,131].

The Slow Food initiative in the studied countries is perceived by the authors through quite a different optic. In Poland, it is related to the notion of slow cities, and the slow

food movement can serve as a positive image for promotion. However, scholars in Albania believe that the slow food initiative can be considered the first step to register local products as GI or PDO [102]. This procedure may also help rural communities to promote their products and increase their income. Meanwhile, in Bulgaria [104] and Poland [103], Slow Food and organic products should not be viewed as a purposeful challenge to increasingly industrialized globalized markets, but rather as a food justice between villagers and urban-based policymakers.

Maciejczak draws attention to the growing awareness of wine consumers regarding problems related to climate change. They often declare their willingness to pay a higher price for wine from vineyards that use climate-appropriate production methods (described on the product label). Thus, pro-environmental production methods are more important to wine consumers than country of origin, type of wine, place, and frequency of purchase [132]. Furthermore, research carried out by Łuczka in Poland reveals the growing importance of health and environmental concerns among the motives for buying organic food, as indicated by consumers. Education on the environmental threats related to their purchasing choice is necessary [133]. Consumer awareness is growing and has transformed from an egoistic to an altruistic approach in how purchasing decisions affect the natural environment. Positive developments also include an increase in the share of regular consumers who form the basic segment of the organic food market and the fact that online markets are viewed as a prospective place to buy organic food [134]. Labelling of products -whether organic, local, or regional- is important from a marketing point of view. For example, the research of Čagalj et al. shows that many products made in Croatia, produced as organic, are not certified and labelled. This is detrimental to both producers and processors, but also consumers, as many of the benefits of organically produced food cannot be communicated and remain hidden from the consumer buying or consuming organic food [135]. As indicated by Iqbal, demand for organic food is growing despite premium prices and unavailability, especially in developing countries like Bangladesh. The barrier to organic food is that most consumers have less knowledge and do not know the main distinction between it and traditional food [136].

On the other hand, farmers find the price levels of organic food to be excessively low, while consumers consider them high. Two studies have found that the vast majority (91%) of organic farmers expect the prices of their products to be higher than those of conventional goods [137,138].

One way is to cultivate the production of traditional and regional products with distinctly emotional characteristics. Research carried out by Grębowiec found that the main reasons for not purchasing traditional and regional food include consumer ignorance and difficulties in finding such food [113]. Prices are shown in order of importance. In addition, the limited choice of traditional and regional food on the market remains an issue, proving that consumer awareness and insufficient promotion and availability of this food is an issue.

The research shows an emerging market of organic food [78] and a positive attitude towards it [72]. Polish [75] consumers consider the organic food market to be competitive since it has the advantage of health values, brand, reputation, and taste.

The realization of environmental goals in organic farming contributes not only to increased (preservation) soil fertility and plant and animal health, but also positive external effects in biodiversity, energy, climate, and the environment [139].

The basic premise for the promotion of regional food products is consumer interest in the origin of the food and the fact that origin plays an important role in purchasing decisions. Therefore, it should be considered useful to highlight this information on the product packaging itself or when the product is displayed at the point of sale [140]. Swedish consumers pay more and more attention to the local origin of food, and some feel that by purchasing it they can support local producers and contribute to the recovery of rural economies [43,141].

Polish consumers also pay greater attention to local origin. Food produced and sold locally, due to its specific and unique features, is a showcase of the region's heritage but also carries a much deeper meaning [142]. It is recognized as contributing to the economic development of rural areas by stimulating entrepreneurship and diversifying the sources of agricultural income [35,143–145].

On the other hand, in Poland, there is a growing interest on the part of agricultural producers regarding the possibility of selling food produced by farms. The current legislative status allows them to do so in the framework of direct deliveries, direct sales, marginal, local, and limited activities, and agricultural retail. As part of marginal, local, and restricted activities, the following products of animal origin may be produced and sold: dairy products, colostrum-based products, pre-processed or processed fishery products, raw meat products, minced meat, meat products, egg products from boiled eggs, ready-made meals (dishes), the cutting and sale of fresh beef, pork, mutton, goat, horse, poultry or lagomorphs, game and farm animals. As part of marginal, local, and limited activity, the place of production or sale of products of animal origin, as well as establishments conducting retail trade for the final consumer, to whom the delivery takes place, are limited to the area of one voivodeship (a region, the EU Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics (NUTS) 2 level) or the area of poviats (the EU Local Administrative Unit 1 level – LAU 1) adjacent to this voivodeship, located within the areas of other voivodships. In order to register an establishment for marginal, local, and limited activity, farmers should contact a competent district veterinarian [142].

Various forms of initiatives aimed at uniting food producers allow for efficient operation, mutual support and joint business, marketing, and other activities. Other forms of co-operation are food co-operatives owned by employees or customers, which provide members with food of the highest quality and best value. Co-operatives can take the form of retail stores or shopping clubs [146]. Food cooperatives are one way to supply consumers with local and environmentally friendly products [147,148]. They are a perfect illustration of the “farm to fork” concept. A food co-operative is a consumer initiative in which cooperative members together find producers and then source directly from them. The aim is to obtain food—healthy and of the best quality—at the lowest possible prices. Often, the products we buy come from organic farming and always meet ethical standards. By avoiding intermediaries and buying directly from farmers, we can negotiate lower prices—goods from the farmer or the agricultural market are even half the price charged in-store. It is also important that, unlike food from a hypermarket, it is possible to control the quality of products and their freshness. The food cooperative, as part of the joint work of its members, gradually builds a network of agricultural producers with whom it cooperates directly, and simultaneously influences production methods and food quality, ensuring a real impact on the style of consumption and work relations in local communities. All products are personally bought by the cooperative members. Such direct contact with farmers not only guarantees better prices, but also gives control to members over the freshness and quality of goods. What's more, food in this scenario is no longer anonymous. In this way, we can also shorten the procurement chain and at the same time take care of the environment by using less energy [149]. Moreover, local products are considered an important tool for tourism promotion and the conservation of the landscape [150].

Thus, it can be concluded that local production is primarily agricultural products linked to their territory, produced from indigenous varieties that protect the environment and health of consumers. For consumers, the term “local” means environmentally friendly, small farms, and local properties [151]. But even when considering the profits of local products, studies have shown that they are more likely to be bought by high-income consumers [152,153]. While the price of local products may be higher, many studies emphasize the support of rural communities and benefits to the environment in using them [49,108,148].

3. Materials and Methods

Nowadays consumers are more and more sensitive about food quality and its standardization. Sadílek [154] considers food quality as a multidimensional concept, and consumers associate it with attributes like food safety, nutrition, organic production, fair trade, free-range, animal welfare, origin, and locally grown. For this reason, it is important to evaluate consumer behavior and preferences regarding regional products.

The overall objective is to gain insight about consumer choices on buying or not buying local/regional products and/or products with GI, measuring the motivations behind these and their effects in Albania, Bulgaria, and Poland. Studies on regional products measuring the willingness to pay of consumers consider that GI-labelled products will have a higher price than other commercial products, but in reality, this is not a certainty [155].

For the purposes of the study, two hypotheses were formulated:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *Consumers link their willingness to buy local products not only with health issues, but also environmental protection.*

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *The COVID-19 pandemic has stimulated consumer purchases of eco-friendly products.*

The conclusions relating to the interviews will feed into regional product market (GI) analysis and system implementation and recommendations in three countries (Albania, Bulgaria, and Poland). The study will also investigate the impact of the economic, social, and environmental importance of local and regional (GI) products at the farm level and for local communities.

We used a semi-structured online questionnaire, which contained 22 questions based on single choice or Likert-scale evaluations, to obtain the data necessary to answer the research questions and verify the hypotheses. Sampling was selected randomly from May–July 2021. The questionnaire was prepared in Google Forms, considered one of the most effective methods to collect primary data in three different countries. This form provides an easy-to-use web interface for designing and developing web-based survey questionnaires [156]. Another reason for using Google forms as a digital questionnaire is that it is a free application and very suitable for the three countries involved [157]. The form was shared via e-mail, mobile applications, and social media due to the pandemic. The collected responses were organized in a Google Spreadsheet stored in Google Drive [158]. We used forms since they are easy to create and allow for a variety of question types such as multiple-choice, checkboxes, scale, and fill-in text; several themes were also included to make the forms visually appealing [159]. The basis of the research was the empirical method since empirical measurements in experimental economics are derived from observations of human behavior in the laboratory [160]. The survey was carried out on 818 respondents, comprising 300 respondents in Poland, 262 in Albania, and 256 in Bulgaria. Table 2 presents a descriptive analysis of the respondents from the three participating countries. The survey results were analyzed using statistical software SPSS no 21. In addition, we used various statistical tests such as Chi-square (χ^2), p -value to compare the “observed significance level” for the test hypothesis [161]. The p -value is a convenient tool measuring the “strength of evidence” against the null hypothesis [162].

Table 2. Structure of respondents [in %].

Details	Country		
	Albania	Bulgaria	Poland
Gender			
female	76	71	76
male	24	29	24
Age			
20 years old or less	17	7	36
21–30 years old	115	41	116
31–45 years old	78	113	101
45–60 years old	40	67	40
over 60 years old	13	28	7
Family status			
Single	158	75	162
Married	103	142	125
Other	2	39	13
Number of children younger than 15			
no children	155	149	159
1	61	65	75
2	39	29	49
3 or more	8	13	17
Net income per household			
300 EUR or less	45	36	17
301–600 EUR	100	94	58
601–1000 EUR	77	90	83
more than 1000 EUR	41	36	142
Education			
Higher (university)	237	173	179
Secondary (high school)	23	46	118
Other	3	37	3
Place of living			
Large town/city	177	186	161
Small or middle-sized town	53	48	58
Rural area or village	33	22	81

Source: Authors' research.

The largest share of respondents, both in Albania and Poland, was in the 21–30 age group. These, therefore, included young people during or after their studies and beginning their careers in the labor market. On the other hand, in Bulgaria, the largest share of respondents was recorded in the 31–45 age group—mainly people with established careers and their own families. The respondents from Bulgaria were also characterized by a significantly higher number in the 45–60 age group, compared to the other two countries. In each of the analyzed countries, the surveyed men constituted no more than 1/3 of respondents. In Albania and Bulgaria, a significant proportion had a university degree, while 60% of Polish participants had completed higher education. The income distribution shows closer developments in Albania and Bulgaria compared to Poland, which is important when taking into consideration the macroeconomic development of all three countries. It is also a fact that defines consumer behavior measured by elasticities; when income increases so does food expenditure, albeit at a slower pace than the total consumer expenditure. It leads to a change in the expenditure structure and those for food could increase without an equivalent rise in the physical volume of purchased food, with quality being the driver. Thus, higher-income consumers spend more on food per family member than lower-income households. For those groups, it follows that food consumption is becoming a process that provides pleasure, and the traditions, customs, and awareness of product origin are

important as well as the additional values, such as packaging, method of production and processing, sustainability, etc.

4. Results

Regional and traditional products are mainly characterized by an original method of production passed down from generation to generation. Place of origin and the name often associated with it are of particular importance, although quality is of utmost concern and is certainly higher than in the case of mass-produced goods [163]. The brand management of traditional foods is a tool of marketing techniques pertinent to a specific product, product line, or brand. It seeks to increase the product's perceived value to the customer and increase brand equity. GIs may be thought of as sample strategies of brand management [129].

The basis for promotional activities should be the features that distinguish regional and local products, one derived from a centuries-old tradition that differs from a conventional, mass-produced item [113]. So, as we cite in our hypothesis it is important to understand the role of GIs in the promotion of sustainable agricultural development [164].

4.1. Territorial Correlations of Demand for GI Products and Consequences on the Environment

The survey results show that respondents in all three countries mainly have no information, or just moderate to some extent, for regional products (Table 3).

Table 3. Awareness of the term Geographical Indication and regional products by country [in % of answers].

Understanding the Definitions	Countries		
	Albania	Bulgaria	Poland
very well	32	32	35
to some extent	38	36	37
not sure	31	32	29

Source: Authors' research.

A considerable number of consumers living in rural areas remain unaware of local products (GIs). 28% of consumers who are not aware of local products in Poland live in rural areas, with 45% in Bulgaria and 21% in Albania. The latter could be related to the limited implementation of EU GI certification schemes, as in Albania, even a prototype is introduced. Bulgaria officially recognizes only eight products included in the legal register of agricultural product names and foodstuffs; these are registered and protected across the EU (for five more products the procedure has been started but to date not finalized, despite the fact that Bulgaria has been an EU member since 2007).

Another important finding is related to where consumers propose to trade local products. Customers express confidence when they buy local products without the classical chain of distribution. For local products, in particular, they propose to buy mainly direct from farmers or shops they manage. In the context of the standardization of agricultural products within mainstream trade and the emergence of health crises, consumers are increasingly interested in the quality of the products they purchase. Customer behavior in terms of where they propose to find local products shows a strong perception that local products should have a direct connection to farms. This finding relates to the very important question about the need to identify which characteristics are recognized by consumers in products with GIs and, accordingly, which determine their choice. Because there are a number of certification schemes in existence at the European level, consumers are sometimes confused by the application of national and regional ones, which should be avoided. Therefore, further analysis identifies key relationships and motivations behind increased purchases of products, as well as the role of participants in the sales process including governmental authorities, which could support the process.

4.2. Relationships between the Consumer Preference for Local Products and Different Consumer Characteristics

In the regions of Albania, Bulgaria, and Poland, customer behavior has shown a relationship between different indicators based on the Chi-square (χ^2) test and Cramer's V coefficient. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to gain information about different variables on consumer behavior in the studied countries.

The relationship between consumer preferences in all three countries is tested by Pearson Chi-Square tests, and at a significance level of 0.05, we can conclude that the association between variables is statistically significant. The results are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Significant relationship between Consumer Preferences and local products with consumer characteristics.

Consumer Preferences and Alternatives		Country			Pearson Chi-Square Statistic
		Albania	Bulgaria	Poland	
Awareness of the production system (conventional, organic, eco-friendly etc.) from which products are sourced	Most of the time	43%	25%	31%	28,414
	Some of the time	37%	41%	34%	
	Hardly ever or never	20%	34%	35%	
Food and agricultural policy for regional (GI) products is	Of too much importance	19%	7%	2%	92,371
	Just about the right level of importance	5%	28%	28%	
	Of not enough importance	76%	65%	70%	
Additional price premium that would be accepted to pay for products sourced from regional (GI) items from production system	No additional price	42%	17%	15%	116,305
	Additional 5% more	30%	18%	32%	
	Additional 10% more	24%	45%	45%	
	Additional 25% more	5%	21%	8%	

Source: Authors' research.

Consumer preferences with the above results show a significant relationship with local products because they suggest a certain willingness to pay for what is offered by regional products (GIs). In Bulgaria and Poland, as much as 45% of respondents declared that they would pay 10% more for a GI product.

On the other hand, 42% of Albanian respondents stated no intention to pay extra fees for the product just because it had a geographical indication, while almost every third respondent was willing to pay up to 5% more for such a product. In Bulgaria, a significant percentage of respondents (21%), in comparison to the other two countries, declared their willingness to buy a product with a geographical indication at a price 25% or higher than that of a standard substitute offered on the market. They also attach importance to the history behind products, the conditions of production, and traceability, at least as much as to price. Consumer incentives to pay a higher price for GI products are linked to the demand for quality in relation to health issues, but also to support local producers.

Food and agricultural policy for regional (GIs) products and customers in each studied country plays a significant role, according to Pearson Chi-Square tests. Customers are convinced that the government should be much more aware of regional products because their expectation of certain awareness will improve the market for regional products, resulting in a lower price. The concerns of participants in this study are confirmed by other research studies. Rodrigo et al. [165] conveyed that without this policy, many products would most likely be lost or, at the very least, unavailable outside their geographical area. Thus, EU food quality policy plays an important role in both restoring and preventing the loss of a great variety of traditional agricultural products and foodstuffs in Europe. In all three countries studied the interviewees (from 66% in Bulgaria to 76% in Albania) responded that the government has not placed sufficient importance on food and agricultural policy

in relation to local products (GIs). In Poland and Bulgaria, 28% of respondents felt that authorities have assigned the right level of importance to food and agricultural policy for local products. However, 19% of Albanian respondents stated that the government focused too much on policies for local products. From these statements, we can see that consumers in these countries even consider governments responsible for what they cannot afford to pay.

When purchasing agricultural and food products, customers are aware of what production systems (conventional, organic, eco-friendly, etc.) those products are sourced because Pearson chi-square statistics show a significant relationship between them. Customer behavior is linked with detailed information about the product, which means that the process of buying food and agri-products entails lengthy decision-making. With more information about products, the customer will spend extra time during the buying process and the additional cost will also affect traders. Action is therefore very much needed to provide a clear differentiation of GI products in all three countries and should include effective marketing strategies and approaches such as the development of short supply chains or out-of-region-oriented strategies. In addition, the development of promotional campaigns to increase consumer awareness of product quality should be a priority.

Pearson's chi-square test confirmed a statistically significant relationship between the country and the declaration of paying (or not paying) more for regional products. The test also confirmed a statistically significant relationship between the declaration of paying (or not paying) more for regional products and the net amount of a household's income. It confirms the well-known statement that higher-income consumers increase their expenditure on food, not by changing the quantity of products they buy but by adapting and even transforming their diet to include better quality products at higher prices. The study revealed an initial stage in the development of new patterns of both production and consumption, which are part of the development of so-called alternative channels of food supply. In fact, these are consumption patterns that have characteristics related to the income and education of the population.

It also seems that awareness of a product being regional or GI did not go hand in hand with the caution of customers regarding how the products are made. When choosing products, customers were primarily guided by their taste and availability. Therefore, respondents were asked what options to purchase agricultural and food products they preferred. It was discovered that the regional products purchased most often were purchased from local farmers/producers—at local markets, farmers' own stores, stores with direct delivery from farms, and directly from farms. There is no doubt that GIs represent an important tool that allows us to emphasize and guarantee the image, quality, and characteristics of a product, which are exclusively part of its origin and belonging to a territory or community. Their legal protection is also part of the opportunity to reduce unfair competition, which is adverse for consumers and producers alike. At the same time, their protection ensures the generation of public goods, such as biodiversity protection, protection of cultural heritage, socio-cultural development, and poverty reduction in rural areas. The key element is the specificity of the geographic features to improve the traceability of products and increase transparency between producer and consumer (from farm to fork). The local perspective also includes the protection of the traditions of territories, guaranteeing local identity, providing employment and self-realization for farmers, increasing quality of life and personal satisfaction, raising and mobilizing the local community for joint action and community self-awareness and, simultaneously, promoting and strengthening urban-rural relations.

The respondents were asked about their reasons for not purchasing regional or GIs products more often (see Table 5 below). 41% of the total respondents across all three countries stated that they like to buy local products (GIs) directly from the farmer/producer/processor at the farmers' market. Albanians demonstrated the highest perception (52%) that buying local products directly from the farmers' market is more convenient than other value chains.

These conclusions raise an important issue that actors within the retail chain should focus more on this market to adapt their strategies and sell local products (GIs) in the future.

Table 5. Preferred methods of buying agricultural and food products sourced from systems defined as producing regional (GIs) products [percentage of respondents from the country].

	Albania	Country Bulgaria	Poland	Total
Directly from the farmer/producer/processor through farmers' markets	52%	31%	41%	41%
Farmers' own store(s) (or store(s) with direct delivery from farmers)	43%	29%	30%	34%
Sales from the farm itself	30%	15%	52%	33%
Retail chains and other	19%	37%	35%	30%
Directly from the farmer/producer/processor through festivals, fairs, sports, holidays	11%	23%	34%	23%
Restaurants or shops	9%	17%	18%	15%
Directly from the farmer/producer/processor through Internet orders and delivery schemes	6%	20%	16%	14%
Consumer cooperatives, including community supported agriculture	6%	6%	5%	5%
Total number of respondents = 100%	263	256	300	819

Source: Authors' research.

Numerous consumers, mainly in Albania, identified local products with fresh farm items. They are not aware of local products, because they do not have the right information. Customers in all of the studied countries noted as a main reason for not buying more local products, the distance in relation to those products (Table 6). It is clear even in this item that retail chains should adapt their strategies to fill the gap in demand for local products (GIs) on the market. In line with the above, another reason for not buying local products (GIs) more often is identified as "Missing in the Market", which responds to 29% of total answers in Albania and Bulgaria and 20% across all three countries.

Table 6. Reasons for not buying regional (GIs) products more often [percentage of respondents from the country].

	Albania	Country Bulgaria	Poland	Total
Farms and places where products are offered are too far away	24%	39%	47%	37%
They are expensive	14%	21%	57%	32%
I/my relatives produce	19%	18%	26%	21%
Missing on the market	29%	29%	4%	20%
Reduced control of sanitary and hygienic requirements	28%	9%	17%	18%
I am not satisfied with the quality for the price I pay	10%	13%	13%	12%
I'm not interested	5%	5%	11%	7%
I do not trust direct sales from farmers	11%	4%	5%	6%
Total number of respondents = 100%	263	256	300	819

Source: Authors' research.

To the question about products bought regardless of their GIs attributes, Polish and Albanian customers reported buying fresh fruit and vegetables (Table 7). This result suggests that consumers do not have enough information about local products, which is an immediate signal for retail chains to inform and convince customers to shop local.

Table 7. Which of the agricultural and food products have you ever bought, regardless of when, seeking specific regional (GIs) production? [percentage of respondents from the country].

	Albania	Country Bulgaria	Poland	Total
Fresh fruit and vegetables	60%	43%	77%	61%
Honey	54%	39%	72%	56%
Milk and dairy products	50%	50%	57%	53%
Meat and meat products	47%	39%	43%	43%
Tea/herbs/spices	31%	23%	16%	23%
Canned fruit and vegetables (juices, nectars, jams, other canned food)	15%	20%	26%	21%
<i>Total number of respondents = 100%</i>	263	256	300	819

Source: Authors' research.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The analysis revealed a difference in the patterns and driving forces of consumer perceptions and behavior in the three countries surveyed -Albania, Bulgaria, and Poland- regarding regional and local products. It results from deviations in the socio-economic characteristics of respondents as well as variations in national policies and the implementation process of certification and relevant policies. This process helps other institutions within the chain of production and food/agricultural certification system to improve their certification standards.

The COVID-19 pandemic challenged the food supply chain and focused attention on the limited capacity of regional/local non-industrial food producers (farmers) to act depending on their unequal position to other actors. Despite this, their adaptability was proven through the development of many and varied delivery schemes, some of which have been initiated by consumers. Thus, their behavior has changed in relation to eco-friendly products, in turn increasing their preference and trust in regional/local items. The attachment to locality is a consequence of the failure of the globalized market and the declared desire for tastier and better-quality products. In the three studied countries, consumers prefer to purchase local products directly from farmers or a shop managed directly by them, since they have lost trust in supermarkets. A major issue has arisen in all three countries regarding the availability of, and access to, products, thus highlighting the necessity of producers to instigate proactive marketing strategies that influence purchasing decisions at the individual and social level. Even the consumer demand for regional products has increased and market mechanisms, especially in Albania and Bulgaria, do not provide the right structures to assure local producers a continuous delivery guarantee in terms of quality and quantity [166].

Next, it was shown that GI products can improve farmers' income, not only in terms of support through different governmental programs and other production incentives, but above all regarding consumer willingness to pay a certain price premium over market prices compared to all other alternatives offered by super- and hyper-market chains.

It is clear that in the case of GIs consumer choices are oriented towards sustainable consumption practices; in the future, it will be important to understand the complex rural territory with its scarce resources and natural and cultural heritage in a globalized world with supply chains that extend on a multinational scale. An important perspective that requires further attention is the general opinion of society and the common interest in qual-

ity, safe food. In addition, future studies should stress the demand for and opportunities presented by GI products as part of the long-term and sustainable governance of rural areas accelerating their characteristics: cleanliness, diversity, calmness, cultural heritage, quality of life, employment, and alternative employment, infrastructure development, etc.

Further research may concentrate on in-depth psychological and economic reasons behind the purchase of local products including, for example, local patriotism. Moreover, as GI products are usually treated as something unique and at the same time more expensive and less available compared to their substitutes in local markets or large retail chains—an investigation should be carried out to discover the characteristics of particular product types that entice consumers to buy.

This study was limited by the fact that it was conducted as an online survey in three different countries with three different cultures. The technology for online survey research is young and evolving but permitted us to gather a large quantity of data in a short period [167]. The survey was distributed across various internet channels, and it was not possible to identify all respondents. However, a preliminary list of possible groups of interests was prepared with the aim of achieving a representative sample. The online survey drew responses spanning different representative age groups and family statuses. In Bulgaria, the dominant group was from 31–45 years old, while in Albania and Poland it was 21–30 years. This difference in age is reflected in the family status. This study does not include variables on brand preferences or local support employment because we intend to address these topics in future work.

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