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Transnational Entrepreneurs of Place and 'the Last Authentic European Medieval Landscape' in Transylvanian Highlands, Romania

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ABSTRACT

There is a renewed interest in Europe's rural regions and in the consequences of migration on rural social relations, economy and landscape. This paper seeks to contribute to these debates with a case from Eastern Europe showing the contribution of returned migrants in the cultural branding of the overly romanticised region of Transylvanian Highlands, Romania. By conducting fieldwork in a series of localities in the region, we analyse how returnees develop entrepreneurialism through a specific mix of social activism with business-oriented activities, aiming to change local villages through branding. The specific rural branding is based on a notion of European medievality, fusing together local food, crafting and idyllic lifestyle. We explain how returnees acting as 'entrepreneurs of place' participate in the reworking of the local cultural landscape. They are active in articulating a vision of Transylvanian Highlands' rural idyll—an exoticism coming out of remoteness and a unique landscape linked to the regions' German medieval heritage. Thus, while employing a critical perspective, we contribute to the debates on return migration and on place branding reshaping rurality.

1 | Introduction: Dieter's Dilemma

We are in a village sitting at lowland in the Hârtibaciu Valley, the river in the centre of the Transylvanian Highlands. Dieter, an ethnic German returned migrant, remembers how speechless were German tourists coming to the village, baffled by the image of cow and buffalo herds returning from the pastures through the village, and the roughness of the village life; yet, he thinks that idyllic image was vanishing. He devoted himself to maintaining that uniqueness and the memory of his forebears, engaging in activism and in small business activities in that otherwise poor village. He even intended to offer local people other cows and buffaloes to remake that idyllic image, and he was saddened when nobody needed them anymore. Dieter's dilemma sits in the centre of branding the local cultural landscape. The result is encapsulated in the idea of 'the last authentic medi-aeval European landscape' (Transylvanian Highlands 2025)—a medieval historical heritage, simple rural life and unique natural landscape—yet delivered through entrepreneurial initiatives as a model of rural development.

This paper examines the contribution of returned migrant entrepreneurs to the production of a specific cultural landscape in the Transylvanian Highlands. This cultural landscape is a specific variation of the rural idyll, adapted to their lifestyle, interests and desires. It involves a translation process of transnational ideas and practices and a remaking of elements from the local culture and history. By looking at this cultural landscape in the countryside,

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we draw attention to the relation between entrepreneurialism, return migration and the rural space. We contribute to the recent conversations on migration to rural areas, where the rural idyll is a motive and part of the return experience (Cawley 2020; Ni Laoire 2007, 2011), with a critical assessment on the production of cultural landscapes and social change in rural areas under the impact of return migration and transnational exchanges. More precisely, we ask how, by building a specific form of entrepreneurialism based on commodified activism, returnees act as 'entrepreneurs of place' by reshaping the cultural landscape of villages in the region.

Transylvanian Highlands were inhabited until the beginning of the 1990s by a mixed population of Romanians, Transylvanian Saxons (ethnic Germans), Hungarians and Roma. With the massive outflow of Transylvanian Saxons to Germany in the 1980s and 1990s especially, the region lost almost entirely its German population; yet the image of Germanness remained alive, and it is revitalised as the region remained associated with its German historical heritage and the activities involving the local German and German-speaking population (Oltean et al. 2017). The term 'Saxon Villages' (*Satele Săsești* in Romanian) came to symbolise in Romania an odd mix of traditional heritage and rural development. Two apparently opposite images overlap here, the rural authenticity, medieval architecture and unspoilt nature on one hand, and an image of superiority vis-à-vis other regions based on its connectedness to Germany and the German culture (Figure 1).

The theoretical part of the paper provides a conceptual triangulation for the production of cultural landscapes in rural areas in which we use ideas from the sociology of migration, cultural studies and branding research. Our research question focused on returnees' entrepreneurialism in NGOs, tourism and food production. In this sense, we will rely on recent debates on return migration, entrepreneurialism and social change (King 2022; Fauser and Anghel 2019), here focusing on how returnees enhance and scale up their branding activities. After presenting the methodology and the case study, the social regional context of the villages examined in the paper is briefly introduced, with a focus on returned migrant entrepreneurs. We first ask about return motives and experiences, linked with returnees' visions of Transylvanian rural idyll. We then look at the ways in which they articulate elements of rural branding, including landscape and historical heritage. Unlike similar recent cases in Western Europe (Alonso-Pardo et al. 2023), this process occurs in a region that experiences a high level of out-migration and return. Before reaching the conclusions, we interrogate ensuing inequalities and exclusions brought by the remaking of rural cultural landscapes. Our main argument in this paper is that the Transylvanian Highlands go through rapid changes in their cultural landscape, with significant socio-environmental consequences. Notably, some of these changes are generated and partially controlled by a specific category of returned migrants, having a fundamental contribution to the branding of the area as a neo-medieval rural idyll delivered for cultural consumption to the growing local tourism industry. These agents—whom we call 'entrepreneurs of place' (inspired by Logan and Molotch 2007)—put to work transnational relations in reinventing local histories and traditions, especially in connection to the German heritage. Although they are neither pioneers nor alone in this entrepreneurial ecosystem, they play a pivotal role in rural branding expansion in the area. The result is a peculiar rural idyll based on the fusion between Transylvanian neomedieval ruralism with recent trends in Western lifestyle.

2 | Theoretical Background: Transnational Entrepreneurs of Place, Place Branding and the Rural Idyll

We start our discussion of the Transylvanian rural cultural landscape by connecting to the literature on the European countryside. Several approaches are useful for our understanding of the production of local cultural landscapes. First, we extrapolate debates on the rural idyll to the cultural landscape of Transylvania. We resonate with critical conversations on place-branding, especially regarding the commodification of rural landscapes. Then we focus on a very specific category of returnees—rural entrepreneurs and activists, and thus we connect the production of cultural landscapes with the study of migration in Eastern Europe.

The rediscovery of the European countryside is cyclical. It is a process based on a long history of appropriating rural spaces by urban elites (Mormont 1987; Cloke and Little 1997; Halfacree 2017). This appropriation went together with cultural representation of rural spaces as the idyllic 'other' and 'good' of urban life (Shucksmith 2018). In Eastern Europe as well, remote and less developed villages are rediscovered as the 'natural' and 'authentic' alternative to the urban lives. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to renewed interests in Europe's rural space. Economically, the interest in rural areas is motivated by investment opportunities in a highly competitive rural neoliberal development (Swain 2016). Not the least, in times of ecological crises, the access to environmentally 'safe places' in the countryside is increasingly present in the urban–rural interactions. Such arguments surface also in the study of rural return migration where the rural idyll is a motive in return processes. Rural idyll is intimately connected to a different lifestyle, often *laissez-faire* (O'Reilly 2007), defined as closeness to nature and farm life in contrast to a more turbulent lifestyle in cities, usually offering a better balance between life and work (Farell et al. 2014), a slower life rhythm, a healthier food and less polluted environment. The idyll encompasses not just references to nature as sometimes it is connected to childhood memories (Cawley 2020), while families can offer an 'innocent childhood' to their children (Ni Laoire 2011). Importantly, it also reflects connectedness and a search for closer relationships with family members, relatives and friends. Some other times, the rural idyll relates to a sense of nationalism or belonging to communities and regions of origin (Farell et al. 2014). While idyllic images may prevail when people return to villages of origin, the reality of return most often differs as they encounter hardships, a sense of exclusion and loneliness (Ni Laoire 2007) and a lifestyle different from what they imagined beforehand (Saar and Saar 2020). While such motives surface in different studies, there are less accounts on how returnees not just consume the idyll but, as entrepreneurs, play a role in constructing and reproducing it and what *topoi* are used in such constructions.

This is particularly important, given that the rural idyll is by definition manufactured (Lowe 1989). Its geographical place is

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FIGURE 1 | Photo by Adrian Arsu]. Typical village in the Transylvanian Highlands, with a medieval fortified church in the centre.

in the countryside, but its production is distinctively urban (Williams 1975) as socio-natural landscapes—not just their cultural representations—are manufactured to 'fit' the desires of urban elites in the countryside and also their economic interests. Landscape research offers numerous examples of such transformations (Mitchell 1998). Improvement, beautification and renovation are the keywords in the production of rural cultural landscapes, what Short calls 'from farmland to manicured parkland' (Short 2006, 138). These are not limited to aesthetical transformations but are an essential component in the expansion of neoliberal rural development (Tonts and Horsley 2019; Woods and McDonagh 2011). Transylvanian villages too have long been subjected to various processes of idyllisation (Corsale and Iorio 2018, Stroe 2011, 2016) in line with the literature that distinguishes between the pastoral, the natural, and the sporting rural idyll, which engage in a mutual 'mobile combination' (Bell 2006, 150). We shall explore later in this paper the *topoi* of the rural idyll as incorporated in the cultural landscape produced by returned migrant entrepreneurs.

We see rural branding in connection with the 'politics of place' (Lucarelli 2018) to reveal how branding discourses are shaped by economic and political interests (Çaglar and Glick-Schiller 2018). Indeed, place branding has a specific economic drive, related to the neoliberal politics of development and to capitalist accumulation more broadly (Anttiroiko 2014). Commodification applies directly to local urban and rural landscapes, as aptly pointed out in Ward's (2005) expression of 'selling places'. Both cultural and natural landscapes, in the cities and in the hinterlands, are affected by commodification and neoliberalization (Brenner and Katsikis 2020). These processes, through the contribution of rural branding, put villages in a global competition (Woods 2013). Such competition further deepens the neoliberalization of space already underway in rural areas in Romania (Vesalon and Nițu 2021). Rural branding usually applies to food and tourism industries, although new sectors are increasingly targeted (Sidali et al. 2015). Especially relevant for our context is environmental entrepreneurialism, as in the case of conservation projects and eco-tourism (Anghel et al. 2023).

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Our case is about a specific type of cultural landscape, produced in the Transylvanian Highlands by a decentered network of transnational actors (Faist et al. 2013) acting as rural entrepreneurs. This developed through various channels, including individuals, groups, networks and hometown associations. The transnational dimension involved in the production of rural cultural landscape is interesting because traditionally the countryside provided foundational narratives for national cultures (Cloke and Little 1997). If during colonialism it involved the interests of the colonial elites, in the Western world, the countryside was first and foremost a national countryside (Bell 2006). In the current global context, rural cultural landscapes are often produced by transnational actors, including the super-rich elites (Woods 2013), often building on pre-existing local histories and reflecting global and local inequalities.

Our discussion contributes to the debates on return migration development and social change, routinely associated with returnees' transfers of knowledge, resources and social capital accumulated during migration (Fauser and Anghel 2019; Van Hear 2010). We look at how returned migrants not only redesign their lifestyles (Saar and Saar 2020) but also reimagine and effectively change rural cultural landscapes. While recognising differences between urban and rural entrepreneurship (Fortunado 2014), we acknowledge that return migration is increasingly important in rural areas (Cattaneo and Robinson 2020), which actually offer adverse conditions to entrepreneurship due to lack of resources and human capital and often a more conservative environment (Möllers et al. 2025). Significantly, there is scant research on rural migrant entrepreneurship (idem), even less on various forms of mingled social activism and economic entrepreneurship as analysed in this paper.

Even more significant for our case study is that this process of branding the region was precisely driven by migrants' initiatives: West Europeans arriving in the region setting up large NGOs, Romanian internal migrants and returned migrants. Compared to non-migrant locals, returnees usually possess more resources and use their transnational connections more efficiently. The notion of social remittances as the main drivers of social change can help us unpack their activities and visions, points of interaction and disagreements. Social remittances as ideas, values, systems of practice and social capital (Levitt 1998; Vargas-Silva 2013) are selectively learned by migrants, transformed and then transferred to their countries of origin (Grabowska et al. 2017). In communities and regions of origin, they may entail shifting attitudes and behaviours, new ideas about identities or politics (Vathi et al. 2023; White 2016). There are also many cases when there is resistance to such changes and to social remittances (Garapich 2016) when they oppose or do not align with locally shared values, ideas and social norms (King et al. 2011). In our case, one way of diffusing such new ideas related to local branding was via returnees' entrepreneurial initiatives, often fusing with local activism, as was the case of Dieter.

This paper brings to the foreground the concept of returnees' entrepreneurialism in rural areas to account for the processes involved in the branding of the Transylvanian Highlands. Entrepreneurialism is conventionally seen as one of the main drivers of rural development (Pato and Teixeira 2016). In the EU, entrepreneurial initiative is indeed not only a pillar of rural development, but also a part of the Western rural culture (Fortunado 2014). As entrepreneurship is fluid and culturally constructed, it opens up different roles for entrepreneurs in rural development (Berglund et al. 2016). Rural entrepreneurialism also occasioned numerous critiques. Some indicate how entrepreneurialism opens up the rural space for neoliberal development and for the global circulation of capital (Mitchell 1988; Van der Ploeg 2008; Marsden 2016). Others point to the cultural impact of entrepreneurialism in rural areas, in connection to the debates on exogenous/endogenous development (Bock 2016). In what follows, we will examine motives and mechanisms of return, and the ways in which returnees engage in entrepreneurship, fusing together the rural idyll and place branding.

2.1 | Methodology and the Case Study

In line with studies on social remittances and social change (Grabowska et al. 2017), we unpack how returnees participate in creating a new rural cultural landscape as an East European rural idyll. The research was carried out between the summer of 2021 and 2023 in a series of multiethnic localities—several villages and two towns in the counties Brașov, Sibiu and partially in Mureș, southern Transylvania. Research in towns also focused on returnees involved in activities in villages. Towns were economically stagnant and were losing population: Sighișoara (23,000 inhabitants in 2021 decreasing from 25,600 in 2011), Făgăraș (26,200 in 2021 down from 30,800 in 2011). The villages included in the research—Cincu, Saschiz, Hosman, Stejărișu, Movile, Gherdeal—are distant from larger cities, such as Brașov or Sibiu (see map in Figure 2). Thus, while Sibiu and Brașov are among the most economically developed cities in Romania, these villages were deprived, and much of the population, especially the Roma, was poor. In the annex is included the list of villages and their population in 2011, the last year we possess the distribution of ethnic groups as well (Annex 2 in the Supporting Information).

During the research, we tried to understand return motives and how returnees experienced reintegration, available opportunities and their coping strategies. Beyond individual life stories, we stumbled on how most of them engaged in multiple activities, including activism, and on building an image of the region and advertising it to Romanian tourists and consumers. We defined returned migrants as those residing 6 months or more in the country; almost all were long-term or permanent residents in Romania. We have also included two temporary returnees with permanent activities in the region but commuting between Romania and Germany. Altogether, we have conducted 18 interviews with returnees: nine were Romanians and nine Germans (or coming from mixed Romanian-German families); eight were men, 10 were women; six were living in towns but had activities devoted to the rural areas, while 12 were living in villages. In terms of age, one was in his 20s, five in their 30s, nine in their 40s, 1 in his 50s and two in their 60s. Four were employed by different NGOs and had occasional jobs, while the rest were small-scale entrepreneurs, had jobs, and were simultaneously involved in activism. 11 were small-scale entrepreneurs. Three were married to entrepreneurs, three others had jobs, and nine were involved in NGOs, some connected to the German Forum, the political organisation of the German ethnic minority in Romania. Interviews were anonymized and fictive names are used in this paper.

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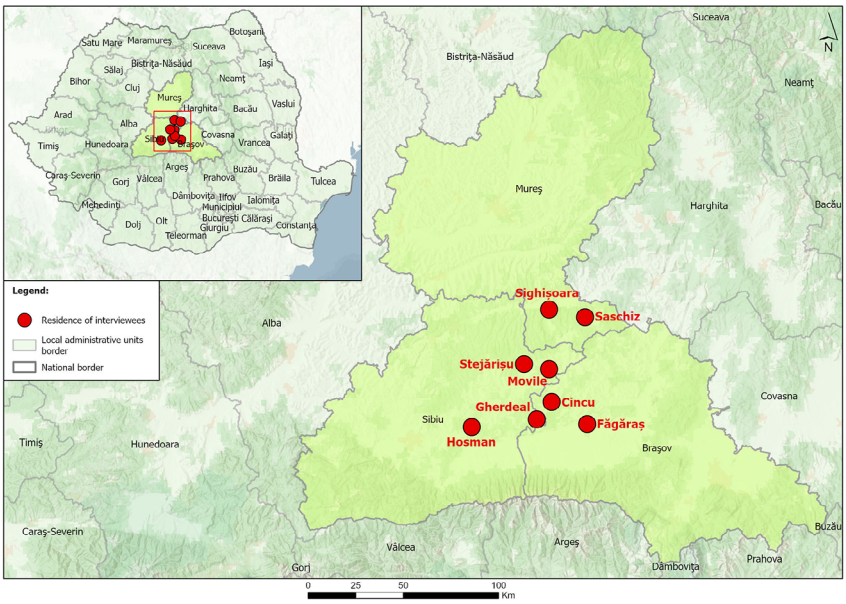

FIGURE 2 | Study area. Map by Paul-Teofil Opriș-Sîrca.

Annex No. 1 in the Supporting Information includes the profiles and the fictive names of interviewees. We conducted longer-term fieldwork in the area and analysed the information by conducting thematic analysis that focused on migrants' reintegration, use of remittances and their adaptive strategies. An important topic was the diversity of activities—business, but also activism, including involvement in the branding and marketing of the region—that many are involved in.

In order to obtain a richer understanding and context, during the research, we have interviewed not only returned migrants, but also non-migrants (individuals without significant migration experience), internal migrants from other localities in the country, West Europeans settling in the region and experts. Most of them were people involved in the region in activism, small-scale entrepreneurs involved in tourism, small-scale food production, services and gastronomy.

2.2 | Rural Migrant Entrepreneurs in the Transylvanian Highlands

Return migration to rural Transylvania that we have uncovered during the fieldwork involved a unique variety of individuals. While their return motivations differed, most of them express a special attachment to these places and in most cases decisions to return or to settle in the region were contingent, often unanticipated. In the past years, a series of studies undertaken in the region unfolded different strategies and motivations for return and of engaging in entrepreneurship. While motivations for return had been analysed among Romanian migrant population (Gherghina and Plopeanu 2020), different studies in Romania and the region underscore the fluid nature of the return process (Anghel et al. 2022) with returnees' repeatedly testing different return and reintegration strategies. Many engage in entrepreneurship and self-employment as necessity or opportunity-driven entrepreneurs (Croitoru 2020, 2021; Coșciug 2022), tapping on newly emerging economic venues generated by the country's economic development (Anghel and Coșciug 2019). Return is very often influenced by family considerations, including their children education opportunities or by lifestyle motivations (Croitoru and Vlase 2022).

Among the interviewees, some of them, such as Daniel, Alexandru and Andreea, went to study in Germany and the United States and chose to return. Andreea said she did not feel well in Germany and she missed her family. For her, some ad hoc opportunities were also important, as she easily obtained a job as a German teacher. She considered herself wholeheartedly welcome: 'many were happy when I returned, especially that there are not many young people in the town… and now I am also happy when I see others returning' (Andreea). Such arguments revolving around the quality of social relationships are also found among returnees seeking a rural idyll and a different pace in life featuring the image of the rural life (Cawley 2020), as they are also revolving around relatedness and family consideration. Ioana and Claudia, who returned after a long-time migration from the United States and Western Europe to enjoy a better life–work balance in their hometown, sought to spend more time with their families and for a slower pace in life. As Claudia considers, she was fed up with the lifestyle she had abroad and was looking to relate more with friends 'I couldn't do the same things any longer, having the same schedule, taking care of the kids… I had to do something [purposeful. I also needed friends]. There I had no friends and no Romanian friends at all' (Claudia). Ioana also recalled she returned needing more time spent with the family. She had no maternity leave as she had to go to work 'it was very emotional… I had no time to rest [after the birth, and] to enjoy the time with my daughter' (Ioana). Anca, another returnee, has a child with emotional deficiency, and she was driven to return seeing how well he was enjoying rural life and how he was playing with animals in their household.

Other returnees 'discovered' the Transylvanian Highlands by visiting relatives left in the country or connected to new acquaintances. They fell in love with the region, discovering a rurality

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they considered lost for decades in Western Europe, with herds and animals on village streets, carriages, medieval buildings and rich biodiversity. At a certain point, they decided to settle there. Andreas is such a person. He was born abroad yet he was visiting Transylvania in his youth by going to his grandparents living in Sibiu, one of the main cities in the region. He contrasts the life he had in the Western Europe with that in Romania: 'When you grow up in the West … it's fun to travel in Romania, to see all these contrasts… It's like a movie, the horse carriage next to the Porsche, futuristic influences mixed with old traditions'. Dieter, whom we already mentioned, even expressed a duty to stay involved and return regularly: 'We owe to our ancestors to restore and preserve the church… and the fortress, to make everything possible to make them renovated'. Yet, his return decision was influenced by a dramatic life event that made him reconsider his aspirations and purpose in life. In his endeavours, Dieter, similar to others, was motivated to preserve 'authentic village life' and the lifestyle of people.

Finally, there were other returnees, 'runaways' from cities, who discovered the Transylvanian Highlands as an 'authentic rural' region. Mihai planned to return even when he moved to the United Kingdom where he worked in gastronomy. He remained there until he and his future wife, Carla, had sufficient funds to buy a house in the village of his grandmother. Although coming from cities, Mihai sought to live in Romania 'a village life'. To their luck, Carla, coming from a Romanian-German family, got a job as a German teacher in the nearby town, which provides a constant income for the family while Mihai runs the small business they have opened locally, a cosy teahouse and a shop with local products. In search of rural life, some look for a sense of personal freedom and self-realisation (Korpela 2014). Teodora grew up in Germany and decided to return to Romania as an adult. She settled in the region and became the founding member of an NGO advocating for biodiversity and running different other NGO activities. She chose to not have a regular job, instead becoming engaged in more fluctuating NGO activities, which, in spite of financial instability, offered her a sense of self-realisation and freedom. Settling in a village she decided to raise her children in a less polluted environment with healthier food. In spite of their differences, they expressed a sense of freedom they have obtained and the silence they now enjoy living in these villages. Tranquillity and authenticity also influence Ana in her life-changing decisions. She was born in Bucharest, emigrated, and upon returning to Romania, she inherited the house of her Saxon grandmother. She needed to take a break from the stressful city life; she had a feeling of sadness and connectedness with the 100-year house. She was touched by silence and somehow remained in the village, becoming involved in artistic and craft work. Deep silence was also mentioned by Eva as profoundly emotional. Her husband had discovered an isolated, depopulated and partially reforested village while wandering the region. Enchanted by the place, he built a large hotel for an exclusive clientele. Similar feelings were also shared by other internal migrants, who in time decided to settle in the village praising its unique atmosphere, the overwhelming silence and the return to 'pure nature'. Such motivations are also found in other cases of lifestyle migrants who seek the rural idyll (Ni Laoire 2007), run away from large cities looking for healthier environment and better work–life balance (Saar and Saar 2020).

Partly motivated by the search for an idyllic rural life, partly by the strive to escape the stressful life of larger cities, these migrants are eager to invest large amounts of money in acquiring and renovating traditional Saxon houses, even when they are in ruin. We should also note that variations in the local socio-economic context between villages in the Transylvanian Highlands also matter as opportunity structures for local entrepreneurship. Interestingly, the rural idyll transgresses such local differences, with major opportunities operating regionally. Returned migrants who activate locally their transnational social capital also transform the opportunity structure, although with highly differentiated outcomes, as discussed in the section on exclusions from the rural idyll.

What criss-crosses divisions and categories of these returnees is that there is an important element of lifestyle in their migration project (Benson and O'Reilly 2016; Papadopoulos and Fratsea 2021), which is yet accessible mainly to these middle class and richer individuals. Similar to other cases (Korpela 2014), their lifestyle considerations include a sense of freedom they feel in rural Romania, with the possibility to 'sleep in the open' and to escape the constraints of late capitalism and larger cities. There was also a search for 'authenticity' and rural idyll, including a valorisation of the mediaeval fortified churches and fortresses, and bucolic villages, experiencing silence, healthy food and nature and better quality of sociality. While such moves to rural Romania involved a spirit of adventure as many left behind better-paid jobs or properties, they have also obtained 'a feeling of being rooted' (Anca) and of a certain accomplishment by devoting themselves to businesses and social activities they consider positive for the region and communities where they live. Such motives are present in other cases of rural return migration (Cawley 2020; O'Reilly 2007), and returning or moving to a rural idyll is not yet free of constraints and contradictions as shown in other cases (Ni Laoire 2007). In the following discussion, we focus on their entrepreneurial involvement and unpack how returnees participate in turn to the construction of the idyll remaking the region through a process of cultural branding.

2.2.1 | Making Cultural Landscapes in the Transylvanian Highlands

The branding of Transylvanian villages relating to their unique natural and cultural landscape has a long history in the region. The case of Emil Sigerus' photographic documentary of Saxon villages discussed by Davis (2023) illustrates this point very well. In discussing the production of rural cultural landscapes in the region, it is important therefore to reflect carefully on local contingencies—here we bring into discussion the entrepreneurialism—migration link. Post-socialist local development and heritage tourism reinvent and commodify the medieval Saxon heritage after decades of neglect. And this process is instrumental in the emergence of a new class of local entrepreneurs. This process does not occur evenly in the whole region as it does not occur everywhere but mostly in some places. Some key actors—individuals, organisations and networks—are involved in this branding process, local authorities sometimes being involved. Pioneers of this branding process were several NGOs established by West Europeans that set foot in the region more

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than 20 years ago. With support from rich donors including British aristocrats, they first targeted a very limited number of localities out of more than 150 villages with medieval heritage. The most active, Mihai Eminescu Trust and Adept, engaged in rural heritage maintenance and biodiversity protection. Similarly, other West Europeans were pioneering the slow food movement in the region (Stroe 2016), the rediscovery of some local Saxon food, or setting up manufactures of local 'authentic' food. Broader national and regional development projects were also directed to the region, including projects run by the World Bank (Sandu et al. 1999) or the branding of Sibiu as a European Capital of Culture in 2007 (Stroe 2011). On the latter were articulated local and regional policies of cultural tourism and initiatives multiplied. Although in the past 30 years, there were national initiatives devoted to this region and large sums of money were directed to renovate the historical built heritage, local branding in the Transylvanian Highlands is less coordinated and less integrated into mainstream branding strategies produced by national, urban or regional administrations. It is instead decentred and partially coordinated by local networks of transnational migrants, with returnees playing an important role.

Returnees have entered this process by getting involved in NGO work related to the activities surrounding medieval heritage, Saxonness and biodiversity. Due to the large funds available from the EU or national agencies, activism provided for some financial opportunities, and for returnees, it offered a reintegration perspective. Some activities are financed through crowdfunding, others use European and national funds for developing the rural economy, while a very few are financed by their initiators directly. In most cases, a key philosophy is engaging in commodified activism mixing non-profit with profit-generating activities, such as tourism for the increasingly richer internal market, and aiming to engage local communities with more or less success. As in the case of mainstream branding, it combines product branding with landscape and cultural heritage, mainstream elements with locally specific ones. Central branding elements discussed below include: local food, crafting and idyllic rural lifestyle, all blended in the image of Transylvanian medievality.

'Local food' is a key element of branding the region (Iorio and Corsale 2010; Stroe 2016). Local food is showcased during local events such as Rhubarb Fest or other branding variations such as the 'Transylvanian Brunch'—a series of tasting events for Romanian urbanites and foreigners in the precincts of the mediaeval Saxon fortresses and fortified churches. Returnees also participate in other activities—visits to Saxon villages, fortified churches and fortresses, but also offers for trekking and bike routes, horse carriage, cooking workshops and access to 'rarities' such as truffle picking in neighbouring forests. While some of the touristic programmes are more popular, others are expensive and meant for a highly selected clientele. Yet, most of these activities claim participation from the local communities as providers of housing (for popular offers) to organising crafting workshops and 'authentic' meals. Christian, a German returnee developed a programme involving local people in accommodation and organising workshops with tourists: '… this is a beautiful place, … I work in tourism and to start developing management solutions for small guesthouses and farmers, to find a way to integrate [their activities], to make a platform and to sell local products, activities, tools, and accommodation' (Christian). He considered it important to offer foreign tourists the possibility to milk the sheep and to obtain firsthand experience of food production. This was part of his vision, which, similar to Dieter, had the aim to preserve an 'authentic' village life that was lost in Western Europe. For that, his entrepreneurial activities aimed to integrate more locals.

With such touristic programmes expanding, they also needed tourist guides able to speak foreign languages, especially German, due to a relatively large number of German tourists. A series of local events further added to the touristic offer, such as bicycle competitions attracting runners from the whole country, organised visits to historical monuments or village food events where 'traditional food', such as rhubarb, and older Saxon recipes are 'rediscovered' and branded as 'authentic' (Stroe 2016). This cultural landscape is further enriched by a series of events with a clear 'German' (or Saxon) patina, and are devoted to celebrate Saxonness and Saxon culture in the area, such as the re-enactment by non-Germans of the local Saxon festivities and traditions, including some marching bands, a cultural week of Saxon villages, or music events attracting German musicians (Corsale and Iorio 2014; Oltean et al. 2017; Stroe 2011, 2016).

The use of crafting to re-create 'authenticity' is a social remittance that migrants and associations brought in branding the region. For instance, offering fresh and cooked local food as opposed to industrial processing is delivered as 'authentic', and it is a key ingredient of tourism, as some were stressing. This idea developed over years into a couple of small manufacturers of jams, honey and garden relish, chocolate, meat products, alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages. Carla was deeply involved in her teahouse activity, and she was preparing local cookies and jam and was selling local herbal tea. Ioana, another returnee, remembers that 'before I worked at the Adept Foundation … and we got to learn about the concept of Slow Food, to understand the quality of products … we learned about Natura 2000, about the quality of pastures, basically I understood that the potential maximum of the area comes from agriculture and tourism …' (Ioana).

Crafting is an essential component for the medieval architectural and cultural landscape. Saxon fortified churches and fortresses are being renovated using traditional techniques and materials, works that benefited from foreign and national financial and technical assistance. Besides, many houses that are bought by urbanites and foreigners are renovated or restored upon local 'authentic' style and with local techniques, materials and tools. A fusion of archaism and novelty is increasingly common in crafting: 'We're working with traditional wisdom and we're working with old ideas to see if they're still relevant and what and why our ancestors were doing and what their survival methods were back in the day, and if that's economically sustainable for us now' (Ana). Some of these houses are renovated or rebuilt by craftsmen, including Germans or Romanian German returnees who settled in the region. As Udo, one of these journeymen and a German returnee, had argued, 'I had the idea to come here to restore [old buildings] as they are [restored] in Germany, and to teach people how to do it [properly]'. Different from what many locals think, who usually use new materials, Udo argues that wooden barns and houses' wooden beams need to be preserved. Maintaining authenticity by employing crafting is the result of returnees' experiences and 'lessons learned' from abroad, some-

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FIGURE 3 | A blacksmith workshop revitalised by migrant entrepreneurs from a very active village association. Photo by author.

times participating in international slow food events or in different German journeymen network activities throughout Europe. As a result, Transylvanian Highlands entrepreneurs and locals connect themselves to the Romanian slow food movement or to architects providing 'guides' for traditional houses' restoration (Stroe 2011; Corsale and Iorio 2014, 2018; Akeroyd and Page 2006).

Migrants seek specific geographic places to realise their lifestyle (Benson and O'Reilly 2016). We have discovered that the rural idyll is appealing to the returnees we have interviewed through its promise of greater personal freedom. Sometimes personal freedom is practised in a lifestyle of frugality and isolation with anarchist overtones, as in Ben Fogle's documentaries *Return to the wild* and *Lives in the wild*. The Transylvanian rural idyll brings a different picture. It is not freedom in isolation as in Fogle's documentaries but rather a freedom within a reinvented community. The enjoyment of freedom, perceived in connection to involvement in community life nevertheless becomes a very attractive dimension of lifestyle in the Transylvanian villages, and it does not restrict itself to returnees. It is repeated in interviews by internal migrants from Bucharest or local people involved in NGOs. As Anca, who bought a house in a village considers, 'I have no expectations. I want it to be [in] a place where I feel good and others feel good too. I do not have anything like that' (Anca). This idea sits at the roots of the lifestyle that migrant entrepreneurs are articulating in their attempts to remake the cultural landscape of the Transylvanian Highlands. Their quest for rural idyll accounts for the sometimes unplanned move to the countryside and unexpected courses of events often mentioned in the interviews. Interestingly, this often leads them to a carefully planned entrepreneurial environment. Their quest thus projects to broader audiences this specific blend of lifestyle and rurality (Figure 3).

2.3 | Who Is Part of the Rural Idyll?

As in other contexts (Matthews et al. 2000), the cultural landscape remade in the Transylvanian Highlands generates a series of inclusions and exclusions, supporters and opponents. While the rural idyll has long been involved in the making of national identities across Europe (Shucksmith 2018), in Transylvania, the remaking of the local cultural landscape follows a different route. Migrant entrepreneurs shift the narrative towards post-national narratives, and their migrant background and networks across Europe recreate Romanian-German multicultural landscapes. In terms of branding, they choose to re-articulate previous discourses about Saxonness which became a default category. Not the least, for many, the participation in the remaking of the local cultural landscape provides a sense of belonging.

Promoters of the rural idyll (small-scale entrepreneurs and activists) aggregate into an emerging rural elite. Interestingly, activities of migrant entrepreneurs recompose social relations in rural communities in ways that put them in a privileged position. Sometimes they become providers of economic opportunities for other locals, connect localities to international networks, participate in constructing cultural hierarchies and reinforce rural branding narratives. This also has an important economic function, as the rural idyll is a lucrative business, which brings us to the class dimension of the local cultural landscape consumption. Although claimed to be open to everyone, the target of rural

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idyll is distinctively middle-class. As it was the case with postwar Britain, 'the countryside is to be preserved for consumption, primarily by middle-class residents, many of whom have moved recently from metropolitan backgrounds' (Short 2006, 143). While focusing on actors involved in this process of branding, we also recognise that there are some local people opposing and many of them being rather indifferent to it. At most, complaints directed towards the too large number of tourists disturbing the rural way of life by crowding streets with cars and loud music. There are also tensions between locals and persons settled from other Romanian localities, attracted by the Transylvanian idyll. Udo, whom we mentioned before, argues that newcomers from Bucharest are not greeting locals very often and try to teach them how to behave. In his view, it is important to greet people in villages as a sign of respect and appreciation. He mentioned he knew everybody in his village and beyond, while many newcomers attracted by the Transylvanian idyll hardly know anyone. On the other hand, economic incentives brought by rural tourism being very significant for this depopulated region, more radical critical voices are less heard.

Furthermore, beyond the activities of these local elites, the local population is involved in different activities having little to do with tourism or activism, such as seasonal migration towards Germany, which alleviates financial pressures on households. As a result of population ageing and seasonal migration, people stopped cultivating the fields, gardening, breeding cattle and poultry (Anghel et al. 2023), and the diverse local food that was ensured by small-scale and diverse farming was strongly diminishing. In the view of idyll promoters, this undermines the idea of community participation for their projects, and they see major difficulties in offering 'fresh and healthy' local food for tourists and other customers. The remaining local people are, in such cases, passive witnesses of social and economic changes that are beyond their control. Their participation in this entrepreneurial culture is limited: Usually, they supply tourism businesses with some local produce, become food artisans and local guides and even provide housing and farming experiences.

For the rural idyll to function, several cultural exclusions are also activated. For instance, while the Saxon heritage is reinforced (Stănculescu and Berevoescu 1999), the socialist past is erased. This is not unique to our case, as it unfolds in other Romanian localities (Botea 2018). As local rural traditions are also selected, the local Roma culture is usually put aside, despite the demographic prevalence of the Roma in many villages in the region (Corsale and Iorio 2014). The cultural branding of the region brings forward private initiatives, including those of migrant returned entrepreneurs, and puts in the background local authorities, which randomly participate actively in this process. The privileged actor in local micro-politics of branding becomes the migrant entrepreneur of place—the local activist, promoting specific rural development models and shaping the local cultural landscape. Exclusions produced by practices of rural idyllisation are both symbolic and material (Bell 2006, 150), the latter bearing consequences on local residents' livelihoods while social divisions remain a basis for exclusions from the new rural cultural landscapes (Watkins and Jacoby 2007; Ilbery 2014), as in our case the material conditions in rural Romania often contradict the narratives of opportunities put forward by the rural idyll.

3 | Conclusion

Rural entrepreneurialism currently develops rapidly at the global level, with consequences on local cultures and on the natural environment. In Europe, it also plays an important role, especially as a response to the risks related to climate change and the instability of global commodity chains. Many new entrepreneurial initiatives in rural areas are included in the circulation of global capital, with the tourism industry as a key area in such developments. This big picture leaves untold the story of smaller scale development. This is where we contribute with our own case on returnees' entrepreneurship in rural Romania. Seen by many as 'heaven on earth' (Adriana), the Transylvanian Highlands is a peculiar place unfolding developments and contradictions, in which rural return migration plays a significant role.

The growing local tourism industry builds its branding narrative on the neo-medieval Transylvanian rural idyll. This capitalises on the pre-existing cultural heritage, especially on the local Saxon history. Returnees are actively participating in this process and in a series of villages act as 'entrepreneurs of place', an emerging elite group distinguished from the locals. They package local customs and histories in branding narratives about the Transylvanian Highlands, presenting an authentically medieval European rurality. The model of rural development compatible with this idyll is largely based on eco and cultural tourism, and on organic farming. These are promising evolutions, but also raise concerns regarding the social exclusions mentioned above. Besides this, eco-tourism itself is often regarded critically, given its connections with the neoliberalisation of the natural environment and the commodification of local landscapes (Duffy 2015). The remaking of cultural landscapes in conformity to the rural idyll not only has a distinct class dimension but often encourages the locals to stage traditional idyllic lifestyles for tourists (Shucksmith 2018). Not the least, rural idyll and place branding do not engage local communities entirely, yet they generate opportunities and contradictions within the restructuring of local communities and landscapes.

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Lucian Vesalon and Remus Gabriel Anghel have contributed equally to the writing of the manuscript.

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Ethics Statement

We confirm that both authors have agreed to the submission. The article is not currently being considered for publication by any other journal. We did not use any GenAI tool.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Interview transcripts are available on request due to privacy and ethical considerations.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.

Supporting File 1: soru70031-sup-0001-SuppMat.docx **Supporting File 2**: soru70031-sup-0002-SuppMat.docx

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