

# The impact of Pillar G's significant factors, on Corporate sustainability perceptions: Empirical research in the V4 countries

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**Abstract:** *This study aimed to identify the key determinants within the Governance pillar of the Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) framework and assess the extent to which these factors influence the perception of corporate sustainability in the V4 countries. The empirical investigation was carried out by an external professional agency, MN Force, in February 2024 across the V4 countries. Data were collected using the CAWI method, with responses exclusively provided by company owners or top managers. A total of 1,320 respondents from the V4 countries participated in the survey. The research employed linear regression modelling to test the formulated scientific hypotheses. The findings indicate that the identified factors have a significant impact on shaping corporate attitudes towards sustainability in the V4 region. Notably, the most influential factors include the company's current strong financial performance, the quality of financial reporting and auditing, and the presence of a well-developed strategy and principles for financial performance and risk management. Additional factors, such as fostering strong customer relationships and aligning executive compensation with ESG principles, were also found to play a significant role. In contrast, the implementation of internal control mechanisms to prevent financial fraud and the existence of business risk management documents did not enhance the positive perception of corporate sustainability. The study's results offer valuable insights for both regulatory bodies and businesses operating in the V4 countries.*

**Keywords:** *ESG, corporate governance, financial performance, management remuneration, financial reporting, audit, customer relations*

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# 1 Introduction

Environmental, Social, Governance (ESG) is gradually playing a more prominent role in business and the socio-political context. Companies are implementing social and environmental initiatives with diverse objectives, such as seeking to integrate purpose (in this case, the obligation to report ESG activities) and profit, to manage risks better, to attract and retain customers and employees, and to gain a competitive advantage [1]. Companies can implement these initiatives in their management activities voluntarily under the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) or mandatorily under the concept of ESG. ESG is considered one of the drivers for implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), proposed by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015. ESG is a clear standard for promoting corporate sustainability and a prescriptive guide to action for companies, investors, and rating agencies [2].

The goals of modern business have expanded from the exclusive maximization of profit to social responsibility, represented by the ESG concept. Corporate governance (Pillar G) is defined by a company's strategy, business ethics, internal controls and executive compensation policy [3].

European Parliament directives have made it mandatory for large and selected small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to disclose ESG information. ESG disclosures provide a channel to report on firms' efforts to achieve these non-financial objectives and acquire economic significance by increasing transparency, investor confidence and capital market integrity, reducing information asymmetries agency and financial costs, which can have an impact on share price and company value growth [3], but also responding to socio-political developments in developed countries.

The motivating factors of ESG activities are maximizing long-term profit, promoting stakeholders' social objectives, or promoting top management interests [4].

ESG also elicits critical reactions. The authors point to the low credibility and verifiability of ESG metrics [3], significant discrepancies between ESG rating agencies [5], the low usefulness of ESG indicators for other stakeholders, such as consumers and individual investors [6], greenwashing, insufficient knowledge about ESG, and high costs for SMEs without a clear return on investment [7]. Practicing ESG has certain short-term risks and weakens the competitiveness of a company, any in the current period, which causes managers to tend to avoid this activity [8].

This study focuses on the Governance (G) pillar within the ESG framework. The objective of the paper is to identify the key factors of the Governance pillar and assess their impact on the perception of corporate sustainability in the V4 countries. Corporate sustainability has become a critical requirement in the global context due

to volatile economic conditions and significant social and environmental challenges [9].

The originality and significance of this research lie in its examination of the perspectives of firm owners and top managers regarding the Governance pillar in the V4 countries (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary). The data collected provide valuable insights into business perspectives in this crucial area, offering important guidance for both economic policymakers and businesses.

The paper is organized as follows. The theoretical section examines the key areas that define the Governance (G) pillar, leading to the formulation of scientific hypotheses based on the reviewed sources. The subsequent section outlines the research methodology and provides a description of the empirical data. This is followed by the presentation of the research findings and a brief discussion. The concluding chapter summarizes the key research outcomes, identifies the study's limitations, and suggests directions for future research.

## **2 Theoretical background**

The ESG concept is increasingly used to evaluate firm performance, guide investment decisions, inform customer purchasing decisions [6], and present the intensity of environmental and social factors in firms in relation to stakeholders [10][11]. As sustainable investing is gaining increasing global interest, a major focus has been on providing data that assesses ESG scores [12]. ESG is becoming increasingly important to businesses as institutional investors press for increased transparency and disclosure of ESG initiatives [13].

Pillar G covers companies' internal structures, such as board composition issues, executive bodies and governance, executive remuneration, stakeholder relations, lobbying and whistleblowing procedures [14], internal control, audit and shareholder relations [4]. Thus, the Pillar G indicators measure how a company is governed and balances or aligns the interests of different stakeholders [7].

### **Quality customer relations**

Business strategy is an important attribute that promotes a firm's success and long-term sustainability [15]. To increase and maintain business performance, it is necessary to follow market changes and challenges and to use the latest information for building financial strategies to improve the long-term financial resilience of enterprises [16][17].

The sustainability of businesses needs to emphasize respect for the human rights of their customers, protect their personal data, provide truthful information about the products and services they provide to their customers, and communicate lawfully and courteously when problems arise. Businesses need to have a system in place to

assess the satisfaction of their customers. This system should help them improve the quality of their products, introduce innovations, and improve distribution and communication channels [18]. An interesting view of the customer is offered by Garai-Fodor, who emphasizes the importance of financial awareness of the consumer, based on which she defines different customer groups and presents factors that can be useful in communicating with customers [19]. The perception of CSR and the impact of CSR on consumer behavior is related to the individuals age and has a significant impact on their purchasing decisions [20].

Innovation refers to the process of developing and introducing new ideas, concepts, products, technologies, services, or processes aimed at improving the current state. The innovation process can lead to new products, technologies, or market strategies, among other outcomes [21]. Jo and Kwon highlight the significance of green innovation within firms, which involves early collaboration between suppliers and customers during product development to minimize the use of materials and packaging. In this context, the authors stress the importance of environmental cooperation within a green supply chain environment [22]. Similarly, Wang and Esperança argue that digital resources, an effective organizational structure, the adoption of new technologies, managerial practices, and firm competitiveness indirectly and positively affect ESG performance through the mediating role of a firm's market performance [23].

Based on the presented views, the following scientific hypothesis can be formulated:

*H1: Quality customer relationships impact the perception of business sustainability in V4 countries.*

### **Business risk management**

The right approaches to business risk management have a positive impact on the sustainability of a company. According Gangi et al. Corporate Governance and CSR activities can foster trusting relationships with all relevant stakeholders, thereby promoting survival legitimacy and improved competitiveness [24].

Wu & Li argue that digital transformation can create competitive advantages for enterprises and thus improve their ability to take risks related to ESG implementation [8].

The issue of predicting insolvency or, in particular, modelling the insolvency of a company has an irreplaceable role in the management of a company precisely in connection with its sustainability [25]. The results presented by Kanno in his study show that ESG performance contributes more to the prediction of a firm's default risk in the long run. At the same time, it is noteworthy that ESG-related activities do not necessarily contribute to reducing the risk of firm failure [26]. According to Ali et al. ESG activities should reduce the firm's systematic risk. The author states that ESG disclosure leads to risk sharing between shareholders and creditors and

reduces excessive risk-taking in R&D and capital expenditures [27]. In this context, Gangi et al. present an interesting idea. According to the authors, the G pillar influences a firm's propensity to engage in CSR activities, and the higher the firm's CSR commitment, the lower the risk of financial distress [24].

The following scientific hypothesis was formulated based on the results of the scientific studies presented:

*H2: Quality business risk management impacts the perception of business sustainability in V4 countries.*

### **Strategy and principles for financial performance and financial risk management**

For a business to succeed, it must place significant emphasis on strategic and financial performance management. Long-term strategic planning plays a vital role in enhancing a firm's financial performance and sustainability. Companies that prioritize strategic planning are more likely to invest in ESG practices, demonstrate a greater willingness to enhance ESG performance, mitigate risks, and build a positive market image. The relationship between a firm's strategy and the likelihood of failure is mediated by both ESG and financial performance. Financial performance serves as a key explanatory variable in this relationship, indicating that it is a crucial factor in reducing the risk of failure through effective ESG practices [15].

Fu and Li argue that ESG has a positive and significant effect on the financial performance of businesses [28]. Similarly, Zeng and Jiang's findings indicate that ESG and corporate performance are strongly and positively correlated, with higher ESG scores contributing to improved corporate performance. Notably, the performance of the Social (S) and Governance (G) pillars has a greater impact on enhancing business performance compared to the Environmental (E) pillar [29], [30]. According to Lee and Rhee, the Environmental (E) pillar does not positively influence brand image, brand attitude, or brand affection, whereas the Social (S) and Governance (G) pillars positively affect corporate brand and brand loyalty through improvements in brand image, brand attitude, and brand affection. These attributes have a clear impact on strengthening business performance [31].

Conversely, several authors point out the increased corporate costs related to ESG. Businesses that score high on ESG report lower expected returns [32]. Implementing, complying with, and reporting ESG activities is considered costly with no clear return [7], which, among other things, increases the cost of equity capital. These facts may lead to incorrect ESG reporting.

The following scientific hypothesis was formulated based on the results of the presented scientific studies:

*H3: Quality management of financial performance and financial risks impacts the perception of sustainability of companies in V4 countries.*

### **Quality of financial reporting and regular audit**

High-quality financial reporting and regular auditing are important for a company in the context of its transparency and credibility, meeting legal and regulatory requirements, for management decision-making, enabling the identification and management of risks and improving internal control.

From an investor perspective, Pillar G is very important because it provides information on the accuracy, transparency and sustainability of financial reporting and auditing [33]. According to Gjergji et al. ESG disclosure has become a key component of corporate reporting [34]. Companies with higher social sensitivity (pillar S) and strong governance (pillar G) produce reliable financial information [35].

ESG performance and disclosure are fundamental concepts of accountability and sustainability in the corporate world [36]. Companies need to be transparent in disclosing financial and ESG performance information [5], to reduce information asymmetry [2].

Based on the presented views, the following scientific hypothesis can be formulated:

***H4:** Quality financial reporting and regular auditing of financial reporting impact companies' perception of sustainability in V4 countries.*

### **The importance of internal control mechanisms**

The ESG concept clearly requires the establishment of internal controls and processes that, on the one hand, prevent errors and fraud in financial accounting and, on the other hand, transparently and correctly report ESG activities. Gu et al. state that despite the efforts and attention of the regulator, one of the fundamental problems of current ESG reporting is the credibility and verifiability of the information [3], as there are significant disagreements among ESG rating agencies [5], there are continuous and unannounced adjustments of ESG scores by raters. The data exhibit temporal inconsistencies [12]. ESG metrics have been criticized for offering limited usefulness to certain stakeholders, such as consumers and individual investors, when making informed decisions [6].

Based on the views presented, the following scientific hypothesis can be formulated:

***H5:** A high-quality internal control system impacts the perception of corporate sustainability in V4 countries.*

### **Executive remuneration with emphasis on ESG**

Executive remuneration emphasizing ESG is important for promoting sustainable and responsible business. Integrating ESG into the remuneration system is possible by including ESG objectives in executive bonuses and remuneration, including ESG

objectives in executive performance appraisals, and long-term remuneration linked to positive developments in the company's sustainability.

Homroy et al. investigated the remuneration of CEOs of Swedish firms in relation to ESG performance. The authors report that ESG goals represent only a small part of incentive pay. According to the authors, meeting ESG targets negatively correlates with meeting financial targets. This suggests that ESG goals compete with the firm's financial goals [13].

Lee et al. concluded that managers receive ESG incentives implicitly and explicitly. The new findings of direct and indirect links between ESG and top executives' compensation contribute to the debate on explicitly including ESG objectives in compensation design [37].

Executive compensation linked to achieving ESG goals is a motivating factor for ESG performance growth in firms. A survey of the academic literature has highlighted the fact that there are relatively few scholarly studies that seriously address this issue.

Based on these findings, another scientific hypothesis was formulated:

***H6:** Rewarding managers not only according to profit but also according to care for employees and the environment has an impact on the perception of corporate sustainability in V4 countries.*

### **Current financial performance of the firm and ESG follow-up**

A firm's current financial performance results from the quality of its financial management and is likely to determine the top management's approach to ESG activities.

It can be assumed that the willingness of firms to transparently, fairly and fully report ESG activities is determined by the current financial performance of the firm. There are several reasons for this. First of all, ESG reporting is not a natural business activity. It is a directive regulation that companies must comply with. On the other hand, reporting ESG activities entails costs for firms. In this context, current good financial performance is a crucial factor.

Several researchers highlight the significance of ESG for business performance. According to [5] and [38], ESG factors play a crucial role in maintaining a company's long-term financial value. As market forces increasingly pressure companies to address social and environmental issues, businesses that fail to respond to these challenges risk experiencing a decline in economic performance and valuation over time [39]. However, the authors note that their findings do not support the hypothesis that investing in ESG consistently leads to positive outcomes. An interesting perspective is offered by Gholami et al. [40], who suggest that all elements of ESG performance are positively linked to profitability in large

firms, but this relationship does not hold for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

Based on the views presented, the following scientific hypothesis was defined:

***H7:** Good financial performance of a firm currently impacts the perception of sustainability of firms in V4 countries.*

### 3 Methodology

The empirical research on firms' attitudes was carried out in February 2024 across the V4 countries. Data were gathered using the CAWI method. Only the firm's owner or top manager was eligible to complete the questionnaire. Data collection was conducted by an external agency, MN Force, based on a questionnaire designed by the research team. Respondents evaluated their agreement with the presented statements using a 5-point Likert scale, where (1) indicated strong agreement, (2) agreement, (3) neutrality (N/A), (4) disagreement and (5) strong disagreement.

*Dependent variable (y):*

- y = I rate our company as sustainable (it will survive in the market for at least the next 5 years)

*Independent variables (x1 - x7):*

- x1: The company builds good relations with customers (respects their human rights, protects personal data, informs truthfully about products and services, communicates lawfully and politely in case of problems, and has a system to evaluate their satisfaction).
- x2: The company has a business risk management directive, measures to prevent information leakage and a plan to manage risks during a crisis.
- x3: The firm has developed a strategy and policies to manage financial performance and risks.
- x4: The firm complies with financial reporting standards and regulations and conducts regular financial reporting audits.
- x5: The firm has internal controls and processes to prevent financial fraud and error. The firm regularly assesses the performance of these internal controls.
- x6: The firm rewards executives not only according to profits but also according to their care for employees and the environment.
- x7: The firm's current financial performance is good.

The linear regression modelling (LRM) was used to test the validity of the statistical hypotheses at a significance level of  $\alpha = 5\%$ . The assumption was made that positive responses to x1-x7 would elicit positive perceptions of y. This would imply that

SMEs in the V4 countries rely on the statements (x1-x7) to assess the value of y1. Multicollinearity was tested using the variance inflation factor (VIF).

## 4 Results

An analysis of the sample size in terms of the number of respondents revealed that the sample exceeds the minimum required number of firms ( $n = 684$ ) in the V4 countries by more than double, confirming that the sample is representative. Respondents were selected through random sampling, with a total of 1,320 participants from the V4 countries. The largest number of respondents was from Poland (349), followed by the Czechia (338), Hungary (321). The smallest number of respondents was from Slovakia (312). The research sample included 560 micro enterprises, 312 small enterprises, 253 medium enterprises and 195 large enterprises.

Regarding industry distribution, the highest representation was in services (462 firms, 35.00%) and trade (260 firms, 19.70%), followed by manufacturing (215 firms, 16.29%), construction (143 firms, 10.83%), transport (52 firms, 3.94%), tourism (34 firms, 2.58%), and agriculture (21 firms, 1.59%). Additionally, 133 firms (10.08%) identified their business sector as "other." In terms of gender, 629 respondents were male and 691 were female.

Table 1  
Descriptive statistics

|                      | y      | x1     | x2     | x3     | x4     | x5     | x6     | x7     |
|----------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Valid                | 1320   | 1320   | 1320   | 1320   | 1320   | 1320   | 1320   | 1320   |
| Mean                 | 2.008  | 2.040  | 2.155  | 2.102  | 1.796  | 1.955  | 2.195  | 2.117  |
| Std. Error of Mean   | 0.026  | 0.026  | 0.028  | 0.027  | 0.023  | 0.025  | 0.029  | 0.026  |
| Std. Deviation       | 0.933  | 0.956  | 1.023  | 0.986  | 0.853  | 0.907  | 1.038  | 0.958  |
| Skewness             | 0.925  | 0.849  | 0.774  | 0.784  | 1.026  | 0.889  | 0.757  | 0.782  |
| Kurtosis             | 0.787  | 0.504  | 0.281  | 0.357  | 1.037  | 0.746  | 0.175  | 0.369  |
| Shapiro-Wilk         | 0.834  | 0.844  | 0.857  | 0.853  | 0.797  | 0.830  | 0.863  | 0.854  |
| P-value Shapiro-Wilk | < .001 | < .001 | < .001 | < .001 | < .001 | < .001 | < .001 | < .001 |

The results of the Shapiro-Wilk test, along with the analysis of skewness and kurtosis, indicate that the data follow a normal distribution, which satisfies the prerequisite for performing linear regression analysis at a significance level of  $\alpha = 0.05$ .

Table 2  
Pearson's Correlations analysis

| Variable | y     | x1    | x2    | x3    | x4    | x5    | x6    | x7 |
|----------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|----|
| y        | —     |       |       |       |       |       |       |    |
| x1       | 0.463 | —     |       |       |       |       |       |    |
| x2       | 0.509 | 0.525 | —     |       |       |       |       |    |
| x3       | 0.526 | 0.516 | 0.787 | —     |       |       |       |    |
| x4       | 0.484 | 0.452 | 0.492 | 0.498 | —     |       |       |    |
| x5       | 0.486 | 0.500 | 0.591 | 0.577 | 0.685 | —     |       |    |
| x6       | 0.501 | 0.565 | 0.578 | 0.553 | 0.469 | 0.563 | —     |    |
| x7       | 0.572 | 0.503 | 0.584 | 0.596 | 0.521 | 0.565 | 0.627 | —  |

The dependent variable shows a moderate positive correlation with the independent variables x1 to x7, with Pearson's correlation coefficient ranging from 0.463 to 0.572. Table 3 presents the calculations of the relevant variables.

Table 3  
Model Summary – y

| <u>Model</u>                 | <u>R</u>              | <u>R<sup>2</sup></u> | <u>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></u> | <u>RMSE</u> |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------|-------------|
| H <sub>0</sub>               | 0                     | 0                    | 0                             | 0.933       |
| H <sub>1</sub>               | 0.652                 | 0.425                | 0.422                         | 0.71        |
| <b>ANOVA – H<sub>1</sub></b> |                       |                      |                               |             |
| <u>Model</u>                 | <u>Sum of Squares</u> | <u>df</u>            | <u>Mean Square</u>            | <u>F</u>    |
| Regression                   | 488.173               | 7                    | 69.739                        | 138.478     |
| Residual                     | 660.736               | 1312                 | 0.504                         | <b>p</b>    |
| Total                        | 1148.908              | 1319                 |                               | < .001      |

Table 3 indicates that the regression model is statistically significant (p-value < 0.001) and explains 42.2% of the variance in the dependent variable (Adjusted R<sup>2</sup>) based on the independent variables x1, x3, x4, x6, and x7. The independent variables x2 and x5 were found to be statistically insignificant. Table 4 presents the calculated regression coefficients.

Table 4  
Regression coefficients

|                |             |                |                |              |              | Collinearity     |       |
|----------------|-------------|----------------|----------------|--------------|--------------|------------------|-------|
|                |             |                |                |              |              | Tolerance        | VIF   |
| Model          |             | Unstandardized | Standard Error | Standardized | t            | p                |       |
| H <sub>0</sub> | (Intercept) | 2.008          | 0.026          |              | 78.181       | < .001           |       |
| H <sub>1</sub> | (Intercept) | 0.370          | 0.057          |              | 6.506        | < .001           |       |
|                | <b>x1</b>   | <b>0.101</b>   | <b>0.027</b>   | <b>0.103</b> | <b>3.766</b> | <b>&lt; .001</b> | 0.587 |
|                | x2          | 0.053          | 0.033          | 0.058        | 1.596        | 0.111            | 3.005 |
|                | <b>x3</b>   | <b>0.130</b>   | <b>0.034</b>   | <b>0.137</b> | <b>3.815</b> | <b>&lt; .001</b> | 0.340 |
|                | <b>x4</b>   | <b>0.162</b>   | <b>0.033</b>   | <b>0.148</b> | <b>4.971</b> | <b>&lt; .001</b> | 0.496 |
|                | x5          | 0.025          | 0.034          | 0.024        | 0.742        | 0.458            | 2.438 |
|                | <b>x6</b>   | <b>0.079</b>   | <b>0.027</b>   | <b>0.088</b> | <b>2.895</b> | <b>0.004</b>     | 2.096 |
|                | <b>x7</b>   | <b>0.253</b>   | <b>0.030</b>   | <b>0.259</b> | <b>8.553</b> | <b>&lt; .001</b> | 2.098 |

The results in Table 4 suggest that the individual independent variables (x) exhibit moderate correlation.

The results of the scientific hypothesis testing are presented in Table 5.

Table 5  
Hypothesis overview & regression model

|                                                                                                                                             | <i>H1</i> | <i>H2</i> | <i>H3</i> | <i>H4</i> | <i>H5</i> | <i>H6</i> | <i>H7</i> |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| <i>V4</i>                                                                                                                                   | <i>C</i>  | <i>R</i>  | <i>C</i>  | <i>C</i>  | <i>R</i>  | <i>C</i>  | <i>C</i>  |
| $y = 0.370 + 0.101 x1 + 0.053 x2 + 0.130 x3 + 0.162 x4 + 0.025 x5 + 0.079 x6 + 0.253 x7$<br>C = confirmed                      R = rejected |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |

Hypotheses H1, H3, H4, H6 and H7 were confirmed. Hypotheses H2 and H5 were not confirmed.

## 5 Discussion

The most significant factor determining the rating of a firm as sustainable in the V4 countries is the good financial performance of the firm at present (correlation coefficient 0.253). Understandably, favorable economic results determine the optimistic view of entrepreneurs about the future. In this context, it can be stated

that the research results largely correlate with the conclusions of studies by [41][42] who investigated the important determinants of firm financial performance.

The second most significant determinant of firm sustainability is the quality of financial reporting and auditing (correlation coefficient 0.162). Quality financial reporting and regular auditing, on the one hand, verify the current financial performance of the firm and, on the other hand, provide management with relevant information for future planning activities. Habib [15] draws attention to these facts in his research.

The third most significant factor that affects the firm's sustainability is the strategy and policies of financial performance and financial risk management (correlation coefficient 0.130). In this context, investing in meaningful ESG practices plays an important role, which both positively influences the financial performance of firms [29][30] and signals potential threats to the firm [15].

Building good customer relationships also influences the perception of a sustainable firm. In a competitive environment, comprehensive customer care and appropriate customer communication is very important. Thus, a company has the opportunity to provide more value to its customers [15] and to consider the views of its customers in a significant way in the innovation process [22].

An important factor that determines the perception of a sustainable company in the V4 countries is executive remuneration in the context of the ESG concept. Even though a firm's financial goals largely compete with ESG goals [13], or the remuneration of top management is not clearly formulated in the context of ESG goals [43-45] companies in the V4 countries are aware of the importance of this factor in the context of their sustainability. SMEs in the V4 countries understand the concept of sustainable growth and feel the need to positively influence the social system and the environment, which is manifested primarily in a positive approach to CSR [46-49].

The remaining two factors did not significantly influence shaping the sustainability attitudes of companies in the V4 countries.

In the broader European context, similar studies conducted outside the V4 region indicate that the relationship between ESG practices and business sustainability tends to be more pronounced in countries with mature reporting standards and higher transparency requirements. For instance, Li et al. [50] demonstrate that high-quality ESG disclosure among FTSE 350 firms is positively associated with firm value, particularly when combined with strong governance mechanisms. Likewise, recent findings from Spain show that sustainable orientation and credible ESG certification substantially improve SMEs' financial performance, while also highlighting persistent challenges related to ESG measurement accuracy and the risks of greenwashing [51]. Compared with these countries, enterprises in the V4 region operate in an environment where ESG reporting remains less standardized, and the informational function of ESG metrics is considerably weaker. These cross-country differences suggest that the weaker effect of ESG-related factors observed in our model may partially reflect structural disparities in the regulatory and

reporting environment rather than genuine differences in firms' sustainability orientation.

A further comparison with studies outside the EU confirms that the link between ESG activities and sustainability perceptions is highly sensitive to both data availability and the institutional environment. Research from Asian markets demonstrates that the financial benefits of ESG practices vary substantially across countries and depend on regulatory stability and the maturity of capital markets, with inconsistent ESG data posing a major barrier to reliable assessment [52]. Similar conclusions emerge from Southeast Asian studies, which report a generally positive but non-linear relationship between ESG scores and firm performance, heavily influenced by the source and reliability of ESG indicators [53]. Evidence from the United States further shows that even in highly developed markets, the heterogeneity of ESG disclosure methodologies significantly affects environmental outcomes such as carbon intensity, underscoring major measurement challenges [54]. These findings jointly indicate that the ambiguous impact of ESG-related practices observed among V4 enterprises aligns with broader global patterns, where methodological inconsistencies and divergent national frameworks continue to limit the comparability and explanatory power of ESG-based evaluations.

## 6 Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to define the significant factors of the G pillar, within the ESG concept and to quantify the impact of these factors on the perception of corporate sustainability in V4 countries.

The research showed that the defined factors significantly impact shaping enterprises' attitudes towards corporate sustainability in V4 countries.

Among the most important factors that determine a firm's sustainability can be included, in particular, the current good financial performance of the firm, the quality of financial reporting and auditing, and the developed strategy and principles of financial performance and financial risk management in the firm. Other factors, namely building good customer relationships and executive remuneration in line with ESG concepts, also play an important role. Conversely, the introduction of internal control mechanisms to prevent financial fraud and the existence of business risk management documents did not impact the assessment of the sustainability of the enterprises.

The research results suggest that firms should pay comprehensive attention to improving ESG performance by implementing a strategic framework and investing in building a powerful ESG system, as these aspects support their sustainable development. The transparency of ESG information provides external stakeholders the opportunity to understand the actual ESG performance of companies, which is a prerequisite for gaining trust in relation to external stakeholders and potential new investments in the company.

This research has a regional limitation as it was conducted in the region of V4 countries. Thus, the presented research results cannot be automatically applied to other European and world regions. However, the empirical research results add scientific value to the ongoing debate.

Future research will aim to compare ESG approaches based on firm size, gender, firm age and the educational background of entrepreneurs. These factors may provide deeper insights into the key elements shaping the ESG framework in the Central European region.

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