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Empirical research on business ethics of SMEs in the V4 countries

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to evaluate the level of select ethical issues in Visegrad Four (V4) countries (Czech republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary) and quantify the differences in the attitudes of entrepreneurs in the field of business ethics in these countries. Empirical research was conducted in June 2022 in the V4 countries. Data collection was carried out by the renowned external company MNFORCE using "Computer Assisted Web Interviewing" (CAWI Research Method), according to the questionnaire created by the research team. The total number of respondents was 1,398, of which 347 were from the Czech Republic, 322 from Slovakia, 381 from Poland, and 348 from Hungary. Statistical hypotheses were verified using descriptive statistics, chi-square, and Z-scores at a $\alpha = 5\%$ significance level. The preliminary results of this study can be evaluated as follows: The ethical level of entrepreneurs in V4 countries is high because the dominant group showed a positive attitude towards the defined issues in the field of business ethics. The attitudes of these entrepreneurs showed that they not only perceived the importance of business ethics, but also implemented and promoted these practices in managerial decision-making. Moreover, they feel good when they behave ethically, which is a significant motivating factor. In this study, it was found that Hungarian SMEs presented the highest level of business ethics. In contrast, the Czech Republic presented the lowest level of perception and enforcement of business ethics.

Keywords: small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), business ethics, countries of Visegrad

Introduction

Globally, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) represent a crucial role in economic development (Tomášková & Kaňovská, 2022; León-Gómez et al., 2022; Savur et al., 2018), and due to their growing importance and dynamic competition, they must be actively involved in solving ethical and social issues (Mazharul & Alharthi, 2020).

Ethical considerations are often missing in traditional economic theories. Thanks to modern economic trends, ethics play a crucial role in the life of companies, even though many behave unethically (Zsigmond et al., 2021; MacGregor et al., 2021). Remišová and Lašáková (2020) analysed the area of unethical business practices in the Slovak Republic. The authors emphasise "business persons tend to give up on their own proactive approach to the development of business ethics and position themselves in the role of an "expectant" instead of a "creator" of ethical standards in society". According to the authors, businesses lack ethical self-reflection regarding corruption.

Business activities cannot be separated from ethical aspects. Businesses without ethics causes entrepreneurs to become uncontrollable, and would legitimise them to use any means to achieve their business goals (Syariati, 2022).

Lately, the issue of ethics in SMEs has received limited attention in the literature (Fassin et al., 2010; Fuller & Tian, 2006). Business ethics research has primarily focused on large enterprises, while the discussion on this topic has been limited to the conditions of SMEs (Mayanja & Perks, 2017). Currently, ethical challenges are no longer limited to large companies, so research focussing on the factors influencing business ethics in the SME sector has become significant (Belas et al., 2020; Çera, et al., 2022).

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SMEs are increasingly challenged by decisions that have ethical implications. Therefore, it is necessary to consider SMEs' ethical decision-making processes (Savur et al., 2018). According to Mazharul and Alharthi (2020), an ethical approach to SMEs' businesses is essential.

This study examines the important factors in business ethics. It evaluates the level of business ethics in the Visegrad Four (V4) countries and quantifies the differences in entrepreneurs´ attitudes in these countries.

This study consists of three parts. In the first part, we present the theoretical background and factors that characterise the important aspects of the topic. The second part focuses on the research objective, methodology description, and empirical research data. The third part presents the results of the empirical research and a discussion on this issue. In the conclusion, the primary results of this study are formulated.

Theoretical background

Business ethics represents an ethical way of conducting business activities that cover all aspects of the activities of individuals, companies, and industries (Syariati, 2022). In the SME environment, business ethics are determined by several factors, such as the specifics of SMEs, the motivation to do business, and the personal characteristics of the business owner and his approach to solving business ethics activities.

In addition to size, SMEs differ from large firms in the following essential characteristics: limited resources, lack of knowledge, and implementation of an informal organizational structure (Małkowska & Uhruska, 2022; Karas & Režňáková, 2021; Sunil, 2017; Mayanja & Perks, 2017; Fernandez & Camacho, 2016; Kot et al., 2019). In these companies, family members are often occupied, which determines a different approach to corporate governance (lower level of control) (Kyereboah-Coleman & Amidu, 2008; Domańska & Zajkowski, 2022). According to these authors, in an SME environment, there is no problem of responsibility towards the public, because these firms are not dependent on public resources. There is no problem with profit maximisation (it may not be as strong as in large companies) or market value growth in these companies.

SMEs are highly heterogeneous (Fernandez & Camacho, 2016). They differ in firm size, sector and management structure, history, development dynamics, and the national context (Vivier, 2013). Despite their diversity, they showed considerable similarities. These firms are managed by an owner whose personal characteristics determine the company's culture and business practices, whereas owner-managers have multiple positions and cover many diverse roles within the firm. Their management activities are based on informal practices and relationships (Vivier, 2013).

According to Staniewski and Awruk (2015), the three most important motivational factors are satisfaction with one's own life and the possibility of self-realisation (63%), the opportunity for a higher salary (48%), and independence in decision-making (30%). Other motivational factors were stated as confirmation of self-worth (21%) and higher social status (5%). According to the authors, lack of experience, lack of capital, risk aversion, lack of technical knowledge, and tax aspects are considered the most critical obstacles for businesses. Ketko and Akimova (2016) stated that entrepreneurs are motivated by their inner comfort, self-esteem, success, freedom, and the possibility of fulfilling their personal goals and financial security. Other authors emphasise different entrepreneurial motives or factors that influence the decision to become an entrepreneur, for example, the choice to do something on one's own (Hikkerova et al., 2016), previous professional knowledge, success, and social motives (Pinho & De Sampaio, 2014), higher education; ability to innovate, and independence (Plotnikova et al., 2016). Thus, money is an important motivating factor for becoming an entrepreneur.

The personality characteristics of entrepreneurs play an important role in applying business ethics. An entrepreneur must be resilient to uncertainty through a high degree of self-motivation, free decision-making, and the initiative to overcome fear and anxiety about the future (Ilouga et al., 2014). Individuals who show greater risk aversion are more likely to become entrepreneurs (Hvide & Panos, 2014) because effective management of business risks is essential for a company's survival (Dvorsky et al., 2021). Emotional stability and internal locus of control help them believe in their decisions (Caliendo et al., 2014). The need to achieve success, internal locus of control, self-sufficiency, and extroversion (Lee & Tsang, 2002) are also essential characteristics of entrepreneurs. Sunil (2017) added the following characteristics: bossy and inspirational. In this context, several authors state that a correctly set entrepreneurial orientation of the owner-manager represents a key element for the success of SMEs (Belas et al., 2019; Belas & Sopková, 2016; Kozubikova et al., 2015 and other authors).

According to Fuller and Tian (2006), responsibility and ethics represent an entrepreneur's personal attitudes and are inseparable. This opinion is also expressed by other authors who emphasize that the activities of SMEs in the field of business ethics reflect the values, character, attitudes, education, and family background of the owner-entrepreneur (Huang et al., 2022) Sunil, 2017; Vivier, 2013; and other authors).

The company owner´s direct involvement in management is a fundamental determinant in applying business ethics procedures to the SME segment. In this context, it is necessary to emphasise that company owners must set an ethical level in the company that their employees will also follow (Vivier, 2013). Mayanja and Perks (2017) evaluated the position of the owner-manager in the company as irreplaceable, which allows him to introduce his own rules of business ethics. The owner-manager makes business decisions and takes control of business operations, and his personal attitude will be integral in applying business ethics to all employees in the company. Belas et al. (2020) also presented this opinion. According to the authors, the smaller the company, the more significant the factor.

Werner (2021) presents an interesting opinion. According to the author, SME owner-managers can engage in ethical activities due to their personal values and beliefs. Owners and managers often prioritise social and affective factors in their decision-making processes (Jurásek et al., 2021). This approach is typical even for businesses in sectors with ethical implications, such as gaming, defence, and adult entertainment (Cayón & Gutierrez, 2021). However, they can also abandon the concept of profit maximisation and engage in profit satisficing because of their strong identification with their social and cultural contexts. The activities of social enterprises are an obvious example of business owners' aspirations (Bilan et al., 2017).

Considering the defined personal characteristics of the owner-managers, it can be assumed that SMEs use less sophisticated management methods in the field of forecasting, analysis and planning and lack suitable tools for solving ethical problems in the company. In contrast, the high operational and financial stress to which they are permanently exposed can lead to compromises, representing the possibility of ethical dilemmas or misconduct (Savur et al., 2018).

Arend (2013) states that, on the one hand, SMEs depend on their good "ethical position" because they need to survive (they have to gain and maintain the trust of their customers and supply chain partners and work closely with nearby communities). On the other hand, they face the temptation to lower the level of ethics in the company to survive.

Kyereboah-Coleman and Amidu (2008) investigated SMEs' management practices and their links to firms' financial performance. According to them, the application of business ethics has a negative impact on companies' financial performance. This opinion is also supported by the findings of Syariati (2022), who formulated a rather controversial conclusion that unethical behaviour is suitable for the company's financial result, while ethical business is expected in

the community's interest. On the other hand, Mazharul and Alharthi (2020) suggest that the ethical commitment of top management and the creation of a vital ethical climate support the firm's overall performance.

In general, the authors assume that companies will consider changing ethical attitudes when it is advantageous for their competitive ability or ethical image, or they follow a combination of these factors (Arend, 2013; Tóth et al., 2021).

Ji et al. (2019) investigated the deviant business behaviour of SMEs, which they characterised as everyday business deviance (EBD). The authors identify two key sources of personal tension that influence EBD: materialism and trust in institutional justice. Materialistic owners of SMEs are forced into such ethical deviance to obtain associated materialistic benefits. Institutions critically influence the behaviour of SME owners. Anger towards institutions may motivate SME owners to engage in EBD because it instils a desire for revenge and reduces their cognitive abilities to solve business problems. In this context, several authors draw attention to the obstacles SMEs face in their business activities. However, a study by Ji et al. (2019) did not find this. The study emphasises that individuals with high ethical standards do not attempt to justify their suspicious behaviour when dealing with ethical dilemmas.

Lašáková et al. (2017) investigated ethical leadership in a Slovak business environment. According to the authors, ethical leadership is not deeply rooted in the current business environment in Slovakia and leaders do not use the full potential of ethical management tools in the workplace. The authors pointed out that ethics cannot develop in business without ethical leaders. Ethical leadership represents a key to a better working environment and an ethical society.

A similar issue was also addressed by Mura et al. (2021). The authors stated that if individuals focus too intensely on achieving a goal set by their boss, they will sometimes use unethical methods. The results of their research showed that individuals require trust and emotional security. If they trust their co-workers and bosses, they are likely to act ethically.

In conclusion, it should be emphasised that SMEs show different and unique characteristics compared to large companies; therefore, it is appropriate to explicitly investigate business ethics factors in this segment (Ibanez & Fernandez, 2021).

Aims, research methodology, and data

The aim of this research is to evaluate the level of selected ethical issues in the countries of the Visegrad Four (V4) and quantify the differences in the attitudes of entrepreneurs in the field of business ethics in these countries. The empirical research was conducted in June 2022 in the countries (the V4 (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary). Data collection was carried out by the renowned external company MNFORCE using "Computer Assisted Web Interviewing" (CAWI Research Method), according to the questionnaire created by the research team. The questionnaire could only be filled out by the owner or top manager of a small or medium-sized enterprise (hereinafter referred to as an entrepreneur or SME).

A total of 347 SMEs in the Czech Republic participated in the survey. The structure of SMEs in terms of company size was as follows: 45.2% micro-enterprises, 30.8% small enterprises, and 23.9% medium-sized enterprises. The most significant number of companies operated in the sphere of services and production, followed by trade, construction, transport, agriculture, and tourism. The level of entrepreneurs' education was as follows: 18.2% reported primary or secondary education without graduation, 52.2% had completed secondary education with graduation, 9.2% had 1st degree of university education, 18.7%, had 2nd degree of university education, and 1.7% had a doctoral degree.

The total number of SMEs in the Slovak Republic was 322. The structure, in terms of company size, was as follows: 51.9% micro-enterprises, 26.7% small enterprises, and 21.4% medium-sized enterprises. According to the sector, the highest number of SMEs operate in

services and trade (79), followed by production, construction, transport, agriculture, and tourism. Regarding the educational level of entrepreneurs, 9.3% of respondents reported primary or secondary education without graduation, 50.9% of respondents reported secondary school with graduation, 5.9% of respondents reported 1st degree in university studies, 31.1% 2nd degree, and 2.8% 3rd degree.

In Poland, the total number of SMEs was 381. The structure, in terms of company size, was as follows: 47.2% micro-enterprises, 27.8% small enterprises, and 25.0% medium-sized enterprises. Most companies are engaged in tourism and production, followed by trade, services, construction, transport, and agriculture. The educational level of entrepreneurs was as follows: 1.8% reported primary or secondary education without a high school diploma, 33.9% had completed secondary education with graduation, 19.2% 1st university degree, 42.5% 2nd degree, 2.6% 3rd degree.

In Hungary, the total number of SMEs was 348. The structure, in terms of company size, was as follows: 50.0% micro-enterprises, 28.2% small enterprises, and 21.8% medium-sized enterprises. The most significant number of companies engaged in tourism and trade, followed by services, production, transport, agriculture, and construction. Regarding the educational level of entrepreneurs, 2.0% of respondents reported primary or secondary education without graduation, 41.7% secondary education with graduation, 32.8% completed 1st degree education, 22.4% 2nd degree, and 1.1% 3rd degree.

The attitudes of entrepreneurs in V4 countries toward the following statements in the field of business ethics will be assessed and compared as part of the research:
ST1: I consider ethics in business to be important.
ST2: When managing the company, I consider my decisions' ethical consequences.
ST3: I feel good when I behave ethically in business.
ST4: Our company enforces the rules of ethical behaviour in business.

These statements were formulated based on the qualitative analysis and the current scientific results of the research team.

Based on the expert estimation method, the following statistical hypotheses were stated:
H1: At least 80% of entrepreneurs in the SME segment agree with ST1.
H1a: There are no statistically significant differences in the overall structure of the answers and in the positive answers of entrepreneurs to ST1.
H2: At least 80% of entrepreneurs in the SME segment agree with ST2.
H2a: There are no statistically significant differences in the overall structure of the answers or in the positive answers of entrepreneurs to ST2.
H3: At least 80% of the entrepreneurs in the SME segment agree with ST3.
H3a: There are no statistically significant differences in the overall structure of the answers and in the positive answers of entrepreneurs to ST3.
H4: At least 80% of entrepreneurs in the SME segment agree with ST4.
H4a: There are no statistically significant differences in the overall structure of the answers and in the positive answers of entrepreneurs to ST4.

Statistical hypotheses were verified using descriptive statistics, chi-square, and Z-scores at a significance level of $\alpha = 5\%$. If the p-value was lower than 0.05, the hypothesis was accepted. If the p-value was higher than 0.05, the hypothesis was rejected. The calculations were performed using free software available on the Internet (chi-square test calculator, Z Score calculator for two Population Proportions).

Results and discussion

The results of empirical research in the V4 countries in the field of business ethics are shown in the following tables.

Table. 1: Assessment of ST1 in V4 countries

ST1: I consider ethics in business to be important.	Czech Republic (CR) n = 347	Hungary (HU) n = 348	Poland (PL) n = 381	Slovak Republic (SR) n = 322	**Z-score p-value** CR/HU CR/PL CR/SR HU/PL HU/SR PL/SR
1. Strongly agree	153	238	221	175	**0.0010**
2. Agree	159	97	126	123	0.5961
Total1+2	312	335	347	298	0.2301
3. Neither agree nor disagree	34	13	24	20	**0.0044**
4. Disagree	1	0	7	4	**0.0357**
5. Strongly disagree	0	0	3	0	0.4777
Chi-square p-value:	CR/HU **<0.0001**	CR/PL **0.0002**	CR/SR 0.0532	HU/PL **0.0101**	HU/SR **0.0041** PL/SR 0.4908
Percentage of agreement with the statement	**90**	**96**	**91**	**92**	
Average value in %	**92.25**				

Source: own research.

92.25% of entrepreneurs in the SME segment agree with ST1's statement. The highest level of agreement with the statement, that ethics in business is important, was demonstrated by Hungarian entrepreneurs at 96%, Slovak entrepreneurs at 92%, Polish (91%) and Czech entrepreneurs at 90%.

H1 was confirmed.

H1a was not confirmed. The research confirmed that there are statistically significant differences in the respondents' attitudes in the overall structure of answers and in the structure of positive answers.

Differences in the overall structure of answers were noted when comparing the Czech Republic with Hungary (p-value chi square=<0.0001), with Poland (p-value=0.0002); when comparing Hungary and Poland (p-value=0.0101) and Hungary and Slovakia (p-value=0.0041).

The research also confirmed statistically significant differences in the structure of positive answers when comparing the Czech Republic and Hungary (p-value=0.0010), Hungary and Poland (p-value=0.0044), and Hungary and Slovakia (p-value=0.0357).

Tab. 2: Assessment of ST2 in V4 countries

ST2: When managing the company, I consider my decisions' ethical consequences.	Czech Republic (CR) n = 347	Hungary (HU) n = 348	Poland (PL) n = 381	Slovak Republic (SR) n = 322	**Z-score p-value** CR/HU CR/PL CR/SR HU/PL HU/SR

					PL/SR
1. Strongly agree	120	183	172	123	**<0.0001**
2. Agree	175	149	165	172	0.1707
Total1+2	295	332	337	295	**0.0083**
3. Neither agree nor disagree	50	15	36	25	**0.0006**
4. Disagree	2	1	3	2	**0.0455**
5. Strongly disagree	0	0	5	0	0.1645
Chi-square p-value:	CR/HU **<0.0001**	CR/PL **0.0075**	CR/SR 0.1129	HU/PL **0.0111**	HU/SR **0.0037** PL/SR 0.0599
Percentage of agreement with the statement	**85**	**95**	**88**	**92**	
Average value in %	**90.00**				

Source: own research.

H2 was confirmed. 90% of entrepreneurs in the SME segment in the V4 countries agree with ST2's statement. The highest level of agreement with the fact that entrepreneurs consider the ethical consequences of their decisions was recorded in Hungary (95%) and the lowest in the Czech Republic (85%).

H2a was not confirmed. We found statistically significant differences in the overall structure of the answers and the positive answers of entrepreneurs to ST2. Above all, Hungarian entrepreneurs are significantly different from entrepreneurs in the other V4 countries because they declared a higher intensity of agreement with the statement that they consider the ethical consequences of their decisions when managing the company. The attitudes of Slovak businessmen regarding ST2 are more ethical than those of Czech businessmen.

Tab. 3: Assessment of ST3 separately in V4 countries

ST3: I feel good when I behave ethically in business.	Czech Republic (CR) n = 347	Hungary (HU) N = 348	Poland (PL) n = 381	Slovak Republic (SR) n = 322	**Z-score p-value** CR/HU CR/PL CR/SR HU/PL HU/SR PL/SR
1. Strongly agree	135	198	201	146	**0.0005**
2. Agree	162	128	133	144	0.4122
Total1+2	297	326	334	290	0.0784
3. Neither agree nor disagree	45	15	32	31	**0.0056**
4. Disagree	4	5	10	1	0.0854
5. Strongly disagree	1	2	5	0	0.3173

Chi-square p-value:	CR/HU **<0.0001**	CR/PL **0.0002**	CR/SR 0.2521	HU/PL 0.1015	HU/SR **0.0032** PL/SR **0.0061**
Percentage of agreement with the statement	**86**	**94**	**88**	**90**	
Average value in %	**89.50**				

Source: own research.

H3 was confirmed. The average rate of agreement with the ST3 was 89.50%.

H3a was not confirmed. The research showed statistically significant differences in the overall structure of the answers and the positive answers of entrepreneurs to the statement ST3. Hungarian businessmen once again demonstrated the highest moral attitudes, which significantly differed from Czech and Polish businessmen.

Tab. 4: Assessment of ST4 separately in V4 countries

ST4: Our company enforces the rules of ethical behaviour in business.	Czech Republic (CR) n = 347	Hungary (HU) n = 348	Poland (PL) n = 381	Slovak Republic (SR) n = 322	**Z-score p-value** CR/HU CR/PL CR/SR HU/PL HU/SR PL/SR
1. Strongly agree	121	195	175	129	**<0.0001**
2. Agree	159	125	145	153	0.2420
Total1+2	280	320	320	282	**0.0151**
3. Neither agree nor disagree	57	20	45	34	**0.0010**
4. Disagree	8	4	8	3	0.0615
5. Strongly disagree	2	4	8	3	0.1770
Chi-square p-value:	CR/HU **<0.0001**	CR/PL **0.0075**	CR/SR 0.1018	HU/PL **0.0096**	HU/SR **0.0007** PL/SR 0.0793
Percentage of agreement with the statement	**81**	**92**	**84**	**88**	
Average value in %	**86.25**				

Source: own research.

H4 was confirmed. The average rate of agreement with the statement ST4 was at the level of 86.25% in V4 countries.

H4a was not confirmed. The research confirmed that there are statistically significant differences in the overall structure of the answers and in the positive answers of entrepreneurs to ST4.

Czech entrepreneurs showed the lowest level of ethical attitudes, and their answers differed from Hungarian and Slovak entrepreneurs; the attitudes of Hungarian businessmen can be evaluated as ethically the best, and they also differed significantly from Polish businessmen.

The results of the research can be summarized in several points:

- Entrepreneurs in V4 countries demonstrated a relatively high sense of business ethics. The average rate of agreement with the statements ranged from 86.25% to 92.25%.
- In the context of business ethics, it can be seen as a positive fact that up to 92.25% of entrepreneurs consider business ethics important, and up to 90% of entrepreneurs consider the ethical consequences of their decisions when managing a company. Entrepreneurs have confirmed that emotions also influence them because they feel good when they behave ethically.
- Undoubtedly, the best results in the field of business ethics were found in Hungary; in contrast, Czech entrepreneurs demonstrated the worst results.

The results of the research are primarily compatible with the results of our earlier study, where we examined business ethics in the Czech Republic on a sample of 454 respondents and in Slovakia on a sample of 368 respondents. The most important finding was that business ethics is considered extremely important by SMEs in both countries - up to 90% of SMEs agreed with the statement that companies should take into account the ethical consequences of their decisions. (Belas et al., 2020).

When evaluating the research results, the level of "subjectively better self-evaluation's effect" needs to be considered. It is evident that this effect could have played a specific role and affected the objectivity of the results. Nevertheless, we assume that its impact is minimal, and the results provide an appropriate picture of the perception and application of practices in the field of business ethics.

Lašáková et al. (2021) examine the occurrence of unethical practices in the industry sector in the context of company membership in professional networks, company ownership, and company age in Slovakia. According to the authors, there are major differences between the companies in this area. "The construction sector is significantly more exposed to unethical practices than other sectors in the sample, while the finance sector is not. Companies with membership in professional networks report a significantly lower occurrence of unethical practices." The authors found no differences between public and private sectors in this area. Their results showed that "particular attention should be paid to young companies, especially when the company grows in size rapidly in the early stage of its development". The authors emphasise that the everyday reality of unethical business practices in Central and Eastern Europe is still a somewhat under-researched phenomenon.

Owner-managers of SMEs attach great importance to business ethics (Fassin et al., 2010). For long-term survival, these companies should start creating strategies and procedures that stimulate ethical values. (Mazharul & Alharthi, 2020). SMEs can improve their image in society and build trust among socially sensitive and interested parties through appropriate practices in the field of business ethics (Mazharul & Alharthi, 2020), which is very important in their case due to internal characteristics because social interaction with stakeholders represents an important part that shapes the responsible and ethical behaviour of SMEs (Fuller & Tian, 2006).

In this context, Mayanja and Perks (2017) recommend implementing appropriate management procedures to ensure the ethical behaviour of all employees in the company, and at the same time, their activity should be rigorously monitored to prevent the escalation of illegal actions. There are several elements in creating various components of ethical infrastructure in SME. The effectiveness and implementation of these elements depend on factors, such as the personality and inner values of the owner-manager, the size of the company and its structure, the period of operation on the market, the field of business, or other factors (Fernandez & Camacho, 2016).

Zsigmond et al. (2021) highlight the concept of "ethical corporate governance" that originated in Switzerland. According to this concept, companies' activities must be economically rational and, at the same time, must use business ethics practices. "Ethics is the foundation on which the company's success is built. A higher profit does not justify a company to engage in or perform unethical practices."

This can also be compared to the opinion of Sunil (2017), who states that examples play a central role in SME owners' business ethics and ethical decision-making. The author emphasises the importance of using positive models of ethical behaviour, teaching moral behaviour in business, and various forms of inspiration to apply business ethics. Managers who use moral compasses and moral models are more sensitive to ethical problems in business, and it can be assumed that they will not agree to unethical intentions. These ethical role models, which the authors describe as "real gentlemen", possess rare personality traits such as "honesty, reliability, personal integrity, leadership, knowledge, emotional courage, personal ethics".

In the context of supporting SMEs' ethical framework, owner-managers should establish ethical standards in the company, clearly communicate within the company that unethical behaviour is not tolerated, introduce sanction procedures for unethical behaviour, and allow employees to express themselves in case of critical ethical problems (Ibanez & Fernandez, 2021).

Conclusions

The aim of the research was to evaluate the level of selected ethical areas in the countries of the Visegrad Four (V4) and to quantify the differences in the attitudes of entrepreneurs in the field of business ethics in these countries. The preliminary results of this study can be evaluated as follows. The ethical level of entrepreneurs in V4 countries is high because the dominant part showed a positive attitude towards the defined areas in the field of business ethics. The attitudes of these entrepreneurs showed that they not only perceived the importance of business ethics, but also implemented and enforced these practices in their management decisions. Moreover, they feel good when they behave ethically, which is a significant motivating factor.

As part of the research, it was found that Hungarian SMEs presented the highest level in the field of business ethics, and on the contrary, the lowest level of perception and enforcement of business ethics was found in the Czech Republic.

Obviously, the presented research results need to be perceived with certain limits, for example, the period in which the questionnaire research was conducted. During this period, worsening economic and political conditions (enormous increase in inflation, rising energy prices, military conflict in Ukraine, etc.) had a significant impact, and resulted in a limited sample of respondents. Nevertheless, our conclusions can stimulate scientific discussion in the field of business ethics.

Future research will focus on identifying differences in the attitudes of entrepreneurs based on demographic data, such as company size, company age, education, and gender of entrepreneurs, and a more detailed mapping of motives for applying business ethics tools.

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