Research Article

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ORGANISATIONAL ETHICS AND CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN EUROPEAN BUSINESS: REGIONAL VARIATIONS AND STRATEGIC IMPACTS ON SUSTAINABILITY

Andreea Feraru-Prepeliță
"Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacau,
Bacau, Romania
ORCID iD: 0009-0002-1179-5913

Liviana Andreea Nimineț*
"Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacau,
Bacau, Romania
ORCID iD: 0009-0006-7739-7677

*Corresponding author
E-mail: liviana.niminet@ub.ro

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Background. In a time marked by globalisation, environmental challenges, and rising social expectations, European businesses face increasing pressure to align profitability with ethical responsibility and sustainable development.

Purpose. This study analyses how organisational ethics and corporate social responsibility (CSR) are integrated into European business strategies and assesses their strategic impact on sustainability and competitiveness with a focus on Romania. The study analyses the conceptualisation of CSR, the evolution of sustainability reporting in Europe (2010–2025), compared regional models, and conducted a sectoral analysis that considered changes in EU legislation.

Findings. The study applies a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis of CSR indicators, such as sustainability reporting rates, performance metrics, and policy data (2010-2025), with qualitative case studies and comparative assessments at the firm and sector levels. CSR has evolved from a voluntary, philanthropic concern into a strategic necessity. Across Europe, 82% of major firms now issue sustainability reports, while Romania's reporting rate among large companies rose to 74% by 2022, signalling rapid but still incomplete convergence with Western standards and proving the persistence of significant regional differences. CSR and ethics improve innovation capacity, risk mitigation, stakeholder trust and are positively associated with long-term competitiveness.

Implications. Corporate social responsibility and organisational ethics have become core drivers of long-term competitiveness in European markets. However, persistent regional disparities mean that Western Europe operates with mature and stakeholder-oriented corporate social responsibility models. In contrast, in Romania, social responsibility remains an emerging component of organisational culture, primarily driven by EU integration and regulatory pressures. For Romania, sustainable success will depend on deepening the transition from formal compliance to genuinely embedding ethical and sustainable business practices.

Keywords: Organizational Ethics, CSR, Sustainable Governance, Stakeholder Engagement, European Business.

1. Introduction.

The operational landscape for European enterprises has undergone a fundamental transformation driven by the convergence of global economic integration, acute environmental challenges, and a radical reconfiguration of societal expectations. At the core of this shift lies the institutionalisation of organisational ethics and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which have evolved from peripheral, voluntary activities into central strategic pillars essential to long-term competitiveness and institutional legitimacy.

Despite the proliferation of reporting, existing research remains incomplete, as it predominantly focuses on compliance-based inputs rather than the substantive outcomes of CSR initiatives on environmental and social systems.

Furthermore, the role of intermediaries in disseminating these practices and the specific implementation challenges faced by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in transitional markets such as Romania have not been sufficiently studied. The period between 2022 and 2025 marks a pivotal era in this evolution, as the European Union transitions from a "comply or explain" regime to one of mandatory accountability under the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD).

This analysis investigates the integration of these ethical mandates into corporate strategy, exploring the pronounced regional variations between the mature stakeholder-oriented models of Western Europe and the rapidly converging practices in Central and Eastern Europe, with a specific focus on the Romanian market.

Implementation varies across Europe, with Western European businesses operating in mature stakeholder-oriented models. Eastern European counterparts, particularly Romania, are navigating a rapid transition from compliance-based adoption to strategic integration, heavily influenced by European Union (EU) directives.

2. Literature Review.

2.1.Theoretical Framework.

The conceptual journey of CSR reflects the dynamic interaction between academic enquiry and corporate practice.

To understand the current state of European business ethics, it is necessary to integrate several mainstream theoretical perspectives that explain why organisations align their strategies with the broader societal good (Deegan, 2019). The concept of CSR has evolved significantly from its initial perception as a philanthropic act to its recognition as an essential factor for sustainable performance and corporate reputation (Yan et al., 2022). This evolution illustrates a gradual shift from discretionary social actions toward embedded strategic responsibility.

Stakeholder theory, pioneered by Freeman, shifts the focus from the traditional bilateral relationship between a firm and its owners to a multilateral relationship involving employees, customers, suppliers, governments, and local communities (Freeman, 1984; Harrison & Bosse, 2013). This theory argues that satisfying the interests of these diverse groups is not only a moral obligation but also a strategic necessity that enhances financial performance and sustainability (Harrison & Bosse, 2013).

Empirical evidence supports this perspective, showing that well-implemented CSR strategies strengthen organisational trust and corporate reputation among stakeholders (Yan et al., 2022). Complementing this, legitimacy theory posits that organisations must demonstrate that they operate within the bounds and norms of their respective societies to maintain their social licence to operate (Deegan, 2019). In this context, sustainability reporting serves as a critical mechanism for communicating this alignment to an increasingly vigilant public (Schiopoiu Burlea & Popa, 2013).

Institutional theory offers a robust lens for analysing regional disparities observed across Europe. It focuses on how organisations conform to their institutional environment, comprising formal rules, social norms, and cultural templates, to gain legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). The concept of institutional isomorphism explains how organisations within a specific field become homogeneous (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This occurs through three distinct mechanisms.

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Coercive isomorphism is driven by regulatory pressure and laws. Mimetic isomorphism results from the tendency to imitate successful peers during uncertain times. Normative isomorphism stems from professionalisation and shared industry standards (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

2.2.The European Context.

At the European level, CSR development has been shaped by a combination of voluntary initiatives and regulatory frameworks, including the 2011 EU CSR Strategy and alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Mironescu & Feraru, 2012). These institutional pressures have accelerated the translation of academic concepts, such as the triple bottom line and stakeholder theory, into corporate practice (Mironescu & Feraru, 2013).

In post-communist regions like Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), the transition from state-controlled to market economies has created a unique hybrid institutional logic in which CSR has often been "imported" through multinational subsidiaries, leading to a tension between inherited collectivist values and Western capitalist frameworks (Zemanová & Druláková, 2020).

This has contributed to uneven CSR adoption, particularly among micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises, where CSR remains less formalised and strategically integrated (Stoyanov, 2025). Governance structures further mediate these institutional dynamics, as board diversity has been shown to positively influence environmental performance and the quality of sustainability reporting, reinforcing the strategic role of corporate governance in advancing CSR initiatives (Yardımcı & Aslanertik, 2025).

However, recent literature highlights the "Brussels Effect", in which EU regulations drive global standards. Primec & Belak (2022) noted that the shift from the Non-Financial Reporting Directive (NFRD) to the CSRD represents a paradigm shift from "comply or explain" to mandatory assurance. At the same time, Qureshi (2025) indicates that cultural factors in Eastern Europe historically prioritised economic survival over social governance. This trend has only recently reversed under pressure from foreign direct investment (FDI).

Overall, these theoretical perspectives highlight that corporate social responsibility cannot be understood in isolation but rather as a dynamic construct shaped simultaneously by institutional pressures, governance structures, and the relationships between organisations and their stakeholders.

3. Methodology.

3.1. Mixed-Methods Design.

This study adopted a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design to ensure methodological rigour. This approach comprises two phases: a quantitative phase analysing secondary macro-level data from Eurostat's Sustainable Development Indicators and the CSRHub database, encompassing over 500 large-cap European companies from 2010 to 2025; and a qualitative phase featuring in-depth case studies of leading Romanian market firms to contextualise the statistical findings.

3.2. Data Sources and Sampling Frame.

The quantitative component focuses on the frequency and quality of sustainability reporting among European firms, utilising extensive longitudinal data (2010-2025). The study references the KPMG N100 (top 100 companies by revenue across 58 jurisdictions, n=5,800) and G250 (world's 250 largest companies) to evaluate global and regional reporting rates (PrimeGlobal, 2024).

3.3. Statistical Analysis.

Employing both descriptive and inferential techniques, this analysis provides insights into progress in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) (CSR Europe, 2020). Key methods include binary regression to identify CSR drivers among 140 Romanian companies (Horváth & Csíki, 2025) and Principal Component Analysis (PCA) to construct a composite index of national ESG-economic performance for the EU-27. In contexts with limited reporting transparency, financial metrics (such as ROA and ROE) and market indicators (such as the P/E ratio) serve as proxies for sustainability and resilience (Dobre et al., 2025).

3.4. Qualitative Analysis and Case Studies.

The qualitative component explores the "how" and "why" of corporate sustainability practices through in-depth policy analyses and case studies. Detailed reviews cover Western European benchmarks, including Inditex, Danone and Nestlé based on companies' annual disclosures from 2020 to 2024.

The reviews also examine Romanian market leaders, including OMV Petrom, Sphera Franchise Group, and Purcari Wineries.

This involves evaluating key EU directives, including the Non-Financial Reporting Directive (NFRD), Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), and sector-specific initiatives such as the EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles.

Table 1. Qualitative Research Design.

Dataset / Source	Scope and Methodology	Key Indicators Tracked
KPMG Global Survey (2022, 2024)	5,800 companies (N100 and G250) across 58 countries	Reporting rates, TCFD adoption, carbon targets, biodiversity risk
Eurostat EGSS (2000–2022)	EU-27 member states; environmental economy data	Employment, Gross Value Added (GVA), output of green goods/services
CST Index Romania (2024)	Evaluation of 750+ Romanian companies	Sustainability governance, diversity, economic impact, climate strategy
Research on Romanian SMEs (2025)	140 companies; binary regression analysis	Motivation for CSR, ethics systems, sector-specific drivers

4. Results.

4.1. N100 and G250 Sustainability Reporting Trends.

Sustainability reporting has transitioned from a voluntary act of transparency to being a fundamental component of corporate disclosure. Global trends indicate that the world's largest companies are nearing full disclosure, although significant variations remain in the depth and quality of the information they provide.

KPMG's 2022 Survey of Sustainability Reporting highlights robust participation rates: 79% among the N100 globally, with Europe at 82%, ahead of the Americas at 74%, but trailing Asia-Pacific at 89%. For the G250, reporting has stabilised at a strong 96%. However, the high-participation masks shallower practices. For instance, only 13% of the G250 firms model the financial impacts of climate change through scenario analysis. Positively, the recognition of biodiversity loss as a business risk has doubled since 2020, with 56% of G250 and 49% of N100 companies now noting it (KPMG, 2022).

The shift to "double materiality" represents a pivotal advance, obliging companies to evaluate sustainability risks both to their finances and from their operations on society and the environment.

While 80% of major firms conduct materiality assessments, G250 leaders are pioneering the CSRD's stricter double materiality requirements (KPMG, 2024). The EU regulatory framework has evolved from the Non-Financial Reporting Directive (NFRD) to the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), transitioning from a model of "regulated self-regulation" to binding accountability. EU Directive 2014/95/EU (European Union, 2014) mandates environmental, social, human rights and anti-corruption disclosures for firms with over 500 employees. This spurred reporting among 11,000 entities but yielded inconsistent outputs.

4.2. Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) and ESRS.

The EU Directive (2022/2464/EU) (European Union, 2022) counters this by broadening coverage to over 50,000 firms and enforcing the European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS) for machine-readable data. In Romania, implementation occurs via OMFP 85/2024, which embeds ESG metrics into financial reports. Table 2 compares corporate sustainability reporting frameworks under the previous regime (NFRD) and the new regime (CSRD).

Table 2. Comparison of Corporate Sustainability Reporting Frameworks.

Key Feature	NFRD (Prior Regime)	CSRD (New Regime)
Scope	Entities with over 500 employees	All large companies and listed SMEs (>50,000 firms)
Standards	General guidelines (e.g., GRI, UNGC)	Mandatory European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS)
Materiality	Single materiality (primarily financial)	Double materiality (financial and impact on society/environment)
Assurance	Optional or limited	Mandatory external audit (limited assurance)
Implementation	Transposed locally (e.g., OMFP 1938/2016 in Romania)	Phased in 2024–2025; OMFP 85/2024 in Romania

This transition signifies a move toward "mandatory accountability", treating sustainability data with the same rigour as financial data (Koleva & Meadows, 2021). Figure 1 shows that large European companies (with over 100 employees) report the highest sustainability reporting rates (82%), second only in Asia-Pacific (KPMG, 2022). This reflects Europe's role in promoting transparency and accountability in sustainable business practices.

Beyond reporting, many European firms actively engage in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives and adhere to international frameworks such as the U.N. Global Compact and industry-specific sustainability standards.

Globally, 96% of the world's largest firms (the G250) now publish sustainability reports, with European multinationals being prominently represented (KPMG, 2022).

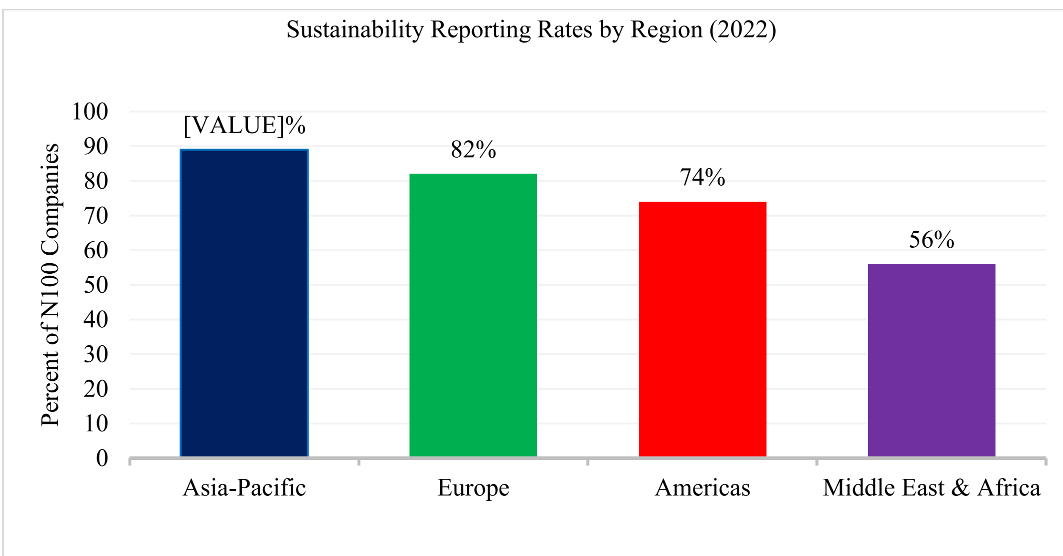

Fig. 1. Sustainability Reporting Participation in Europe Compared to Other Regions, 2022.
Source: based on KPMG (2022)

European companies are increasingly integrating CSR into their core strategies, not merely as philanthropy or compliance, but as part of value creation and risk management. Research shows that 76% of companies believe CSR reduces risks to brand reputation, and CSR-related activities contribute to over 40% of corporate reputation scores in some surveys (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012). In Europe's competitive markets, robust CSR engagement has become a strategic differentiator that strengthens brand trust and long-term customer loyalty. Several factors drive CSR adoption in Europe. Regulatory frameworks are exerting a growing influence, and market demand is playing an equally significant role.

A recent global survey found that 77% of consumers prefer to purchase from companies with active CSR commitments, and nearly 80% have modified buying habits to support socially and environmentally responsible businesses (Nielsen, 2022). Simultaneously, employees, particularly younger generations, prefer employers who share their organisational values and principles.

A total of 83% of employees would consider leaving a company that fails to uphold CSR principles. Thus, poor ethical practices pose reputational and talent-retention risks, whereas strong CSR performance attracts committed employees, loyal customers, and responsible investors. The rise in Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) investing further illustrates this trend. By 2025, 78% of investors reported that CSR or sustainability disclosure influenced their investment decisions (Nielsen, 2022).

Market, regulatory, and societal pressures in Europe create a compelling CSR business model. Ethical behaviour is increasingly linked to performance outcomes, such as mitigating risks, enhancing brand value, and fostering innovation. As Qureshi (2025) highlights and as Cioca et al. (2019) demonstrate a case study of European green start-ups, sustainability challenges can drive innovation and operational efficiency. This strategic integration of ethics and business value aligns with Porter and Kramer's (2011) concept of shared value, where addressing social and environmental issues generates mutual economic benefits: improving energy efficiency reduces costs and enhances operational resilience (Cioca et al., 2019); ensuring fair labour practices increases productivity and retention (Qureshi, 2025); and maintaining ethical supply chains fosters stability and customer trust.

The synergy between these studies underscores a broader trend: Corporate Social Responsibility is no longer a peripheral concern but a core pillar of enterprise strategy integrated into risk management and opportunity-seeking frameworks. While providing a macroeconomic perspective, Cioca et al. (2019) offer micro-level evidence of how ethical innovation translates into competitive advantage, particularly in high-growth sectors.

The evolution of CSR or sustainability reporting among large companies reveals critical insights into regulatory adoption and market maturity. This analysis compares the reporting rates between the EU and Romania from 2010 to 2025, highlighting convergence patterns, inflexion points, and underlying drivers. The data underscore Romania's accelerated progress since 2016, although a persistent gap with EU averages persists. The chart below shows the evolution of CSR/sustainability reporting rates among large companies in the EU and Romania.

Figure 2 traces the evolution of CSR and sustainability reporting rates for large EU and Romanian companies from 2010 to 2022, using biennial data points.

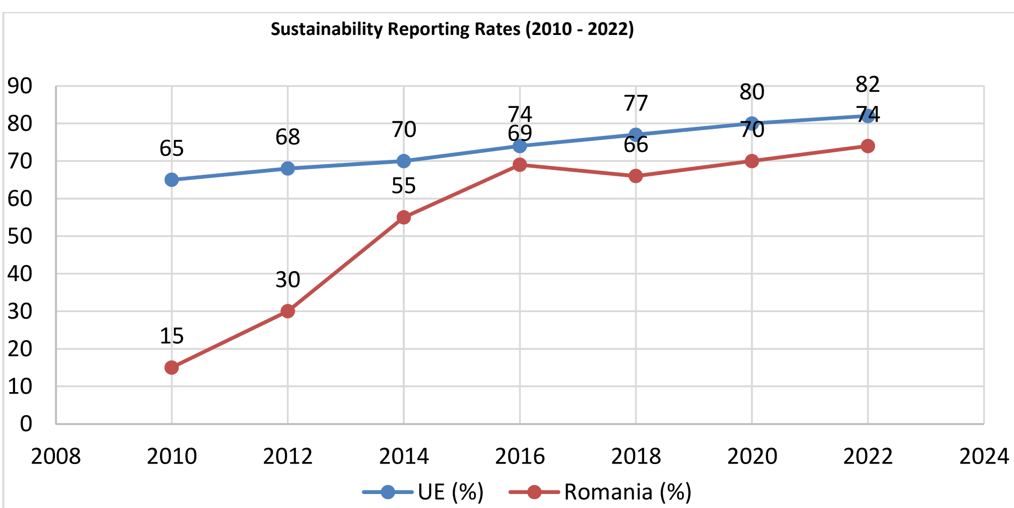

Fig. 2. Sustainability Reporting Rates: EU Average Compared with Romania (2010–2022).
Source: based on CSR Europe (2020), Eurostat (2025), and KPMG (2022).

EU firms show consistently higher engagement, driven by the early adoption of standards and greater institutional maturity. Romania started from a lower base but accelerated sharply after 2016, propelled by EU Directive 2014/95/EU on non-financial reporting and pressures from international investors and global supply chains (European Union, 2014).

While EU rates advanced steadily between 2014 and 2016, Romania's rates remained flat. Post-2016, Romanian reporting surged from approximately 20% in 2016 to roughly 50% by 2020, underscoring the impact of domestic regulations and multinational mandates. The increase in subsidiary reports further indicates how global enterprises are propagating sustainability practices to their local affiliates.

The study examines the evolution of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability reporting rates among large companies in the European Union (EU) and Romania over 15 years (2010–2022), with data collected at two-year intervals.

EU companies consistently report higher CSR engagement, reflecting the earlier adoption of sustainability standards and institutional maturity. Romania, while initially lagging, has made accelerated progress since 2016, primarily due to the implementation of EU legislation (European Union, 2014) on non-financial reporting and growing pressure from international investors and global supply chains. Between 2014 and 2016, EU reporting rates grew moderately, whereas Romania's remained relatively stagnant.

After 2016, however, Romania experienced a marked increase, from approximately 20% in 2016 to about 50% in 2020, suggesting the influence of national regulations and multinational corporate requirements. The growing number of subsidiary reports indicates that multinational enterprises are extending their sustainability practices to local operations. Table 3 presents the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reporting rates across selected EU member states, ranging from 96% in Finland to 59% in Greece.

Table 3. Comparative CSR Reporting Rates in the European Union Countries (2020).

Country	CSR Reporting Rate (%)
Finland	96
France	90
Netherlands	88
Poland	77
Romania	66
Greece	59

Source: based on CSR Europe (2020).

Romania, with a reporting rate of 66%, is in an intermediate position. These data support the conclusion that emerging EU economies tend to adopt CSR practices more gradually but exhibit accelerated progress after EU accession and the implementation of common reporting frameworks.

The sustainability reporting trends chart (2010–2022) and Table 4 offer complementary insights into CSR adoption across Europe. Figure 3 highlights the temporal evolution of CSR engagement, while the table details both the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of these patterns.

Table 4. Summary of Key CSR Metrics (2010–2022).

Metric	European Union	Romania
Large Companies with CSR Reports (%)	~65% (2010); ~82% (2022)	~10–15% (2010); ~74% (2022)
ESG Performance Score	~80/100 (2024)	Lowest in EU-27 index
NFRD/CSRD Compliance	Improving, though gaps remain	Below EU average
Environmental Sector GDP Share	1.6% → 3.3% (2000–2022)	~1% → ~2% (estimated)

Source: based on KPMG (2022).

The European Union maintains one of the highest sustainability reporting rates globally, at 82% in 2022, reflecting its strong regulatory influence, particularly through the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) (KPMG, 2022). Romania's CSR reporting has advanced rapidly, reaching 74% in 2022. However, while adoption has accelerated, reporting quality and strategic depth remain below EU standards (Sustainability Index, 2023).

Romania's lower performance is primarily linked to weaker corporate governance, limited green investment capacity, and slower economic decarbonisation, which is consistent with its continued reliance on coal (Eurostat, 2023a). The CSRD is expected to expand reporting obligations to approximately 50,000 EU firms by 2025, posing implementation challenges for emerging economies, including Romania (Sustainability Index, 2023). Between 2010 and 2022, CSR reporting evolved from a niche practice to a near-standard in Europe. In 2010-2012, roughly two-thirds of large EU companies (the "N100", top 100 by revenue per country) issued sustainability reports. This figure rose steadily to 82% by 2022, driven by regulatory reforms and stakeholder expectations. Romania's trajectory, though slower, shows steady convergence: 54% of the top Romanian firms reported CSR activities in 2011, increasing to 69% in 2013, 74% in 2017, briefly declining to 66% in 2020, and then returning to 74% in 2022. This post-2016 surge aligns with Romania's transposition of the EU's Non-Financial Reporting Directive 2014/95/EU (European Union, 2014). The "EU Directive Transposition" rate rose from 30% in 2015 to 80% in 2020.

However, Romania's low green innovation investment rate (15% compared to the EU average of 45%) illustrates why the growth in sustainability performance remains gradual. The share of foreign firms active in Romania's CSR reporting (40% versus the EU average of 25%) further indicates that multinational corporations play a key role in diffusing sustainability practices locally. Thus, while Romania's CSR progress is largely compliance-driven, EU firms increasingly treat CSR as a strategic instrument for innovation, competitiveness, and building stakeholder trust. Across Europe, the ESG performance gap reinforces these findings. As of 2024, major EU firms reported an average ESG score of 80.6/100, while Romania ranked among the lowest in the EU-27. Despite this, early adopters such as OMV Petrom and Banca Transilvania illustrate growing domestic engagement with sustainability. Overall, the chart illustrates the growth of CSR adoption, while the table clarifies why disparities persist, linking Romania's progress to regulatory alignment rather than proactive strategic transformation.

CSR integration varies significantly across European industries, reflecting differences in regulatory exposure, stakeholder expectations, and market maturity.

1. The financial sector remains a CSR frontrunner. Nearly all central EU banks now publish ESG reports that align with sustainable finance frameworks, such as the EU Taxonomy and the Sustainable Finance Disclosure Regulation (SFDR). Romanian banks are increasingly complying with these standards, thereby aligning domestic financial practices with EU sustainability goals.

2. CSR adoption is extensive due to high environmental scrutiny. European energy firms emphasise carbon reduction, renewable investment, and transparent governance. In Romania, companies such as OMV Petrom have emerged as leaders in sustainability reporting, integrating CSR principles into strategic planning and community engagement processes.

3. The performance across the services sector is mixed. Telecommunications companies demonstrate firm CSR commitments, while retail and small service-oriented SMEs lag due to limited resources. The Romanian service sector is showing gradual improvement, particularly in telecommunications and IT, driven by digitalisation and investor pressure.

4. Firms operating in the environmental protection sector naturally align with CSR objectives. The Environmental Goods and Services Sector (EGSS) expanded from 1.6% to 3.3% of the EU GDP between 2000 and 2022 (Eurostat, 2023b). In Romania, the sector is expanding through EU-funded initiatives that focus on waste management, biodiversity conservation, and renewable infrastructure.

5. The textile industry and CSR implementation have intensified under EU directives, promoting sustainable fashion and labour transparency. Large European brands now demand full supply chain traceability and social compliance. Romanian textile producers are increasingly adopting eco-certifications, such as OEKO-TEX and GOTS, and improving labour standards to remain competitive. However, wage transparency and the adoption of a circular economy remain key challenges.

6. The food sector faces growing expectations to reduce waste and ensure responsible sourcing. EU initiatives, such as the Farm to Fork Strategy, have accelerated the transition to sustainable production models. In Romania, leading food producers and retailers have implemented CSR frameworks that prioritise reducing packaging, supporting local agriculture, and promoting nutrition education. However, smaller firms encounter barriers related to cost and ESG expertise.

CSR integration has advanced substantially in Europe. Policies such as the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) are institutionalising sustainability practices and expanding transparency obligations. Romania continues to narrow the gap with the EU average, as sector leaders, particularly in finance and energy, set benchmarks for responsible corporate conduct. Traditional industrial and consumer-facing sectors, such as textiles and food, are undergoing structural transformations under combined regulatory and market-driven pressures.

4.3. Comparative Analysis of CSR in the European Textile and Food & Beverage Sectors.

This section compares CSR practices in the European textile and food and beverage industries, highlighting a pronounced East–West divide.

1. Textile and Apparel Industry: Western Europe leads in sustainable practices, driven by the EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles (2022) and initiatives such as recycled fibres, eco-design, circular business models, and transparency reporting.

Companies such as Inditex, H&M, and C&A have set ambitious sustainability targets. Eastern Europe, including Romania, is transitioning from low-cost production to CSR adoption, with larger firms implementing eco-certifications and labour due diligence, although SMEs face compliance and expertise challenges.

2. Waste management: Waste management is a critical issue: Western countries achieve approximately 50% textile collection, while Romania records only 2-3%, emphasising the need for circular economy infrastructure.

3. Food and Beverage Industry: Western European firms (Nestlé, Danone, Unilever) strategically integrate CSR, focusing on sustainable sourcing, low-carbon supply chains, and food waste reduction, aligned with the EU Farm to Fork Strategy. In Romania, leading companies are adopting CSR through packaging reduction, local sourcing, and nutrition initiatives, whereas smaller firms struggle with costs and technical capacity.

Overall, CSR in Western Europe is mature, innovation-driven, and supported by strong regulations and consumer awareness. Romania and other emerging economies primarily follow compliance-driven CSR, but EU directives (CSRD, Textile Strategy, Farm to Fork) are accelerating convergence, with sector leaders modelling proactive sustainability.

The EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles (2022) aims to make products more durable and recyclable by 2030. Western European brands like Inditex have committed to 100% renewable energy by 2025 and over 50% emissions reductions by 2030.

LPP S.A. (Poland), which is active in Romania, updated its human rights risk mapping and implemented a unified ESG strategy across EU markets. However, circularity infrastructure in Romania is significantly lacking, with a textile collection rate of only 2-3%. Initiatives like MADE in RO indicate emerging ethical entrepreneurship; however, persistent challenges remain, such as low recycling rates, limited infrastructure, and gaps in labour standards.

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Overall, Western multinationals lead in sustainable fibre production, waste reduction, and social audits, while Romanian producers progress mainly through EU-supported programs and partnerships. Circular production is growing, and its success depends on consumer behaviour, supply chain coordination, and investment in clean technologies. Case studies demonstrate that ambitious CSR targets, such as material traceability and transparent reporting, are achievable and provide roadmaps for sector-wide sustainable transformations.

4.4. Corporate Social Responsibility in the European Food and Beverage Sector.

The European food and beverage industry faces significant CSR challenges, including high greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity loss, and health impacts from dietary patterns.

The EU's Farm to Fork Strategy (2020) and related frameworks (SDG 12.3, Circular Economy Package, Food Donation Regulation, CSRD/NFRD) drive companies to reduce waste, manage resources efficiently and enhance social responsibility.

The EU food waste averages 132 kg per capita annually, with households accounting for the majority (72 kg), followed by manufacturing (25 kg) (Eurostat, 2023a, 2023b). Leading multinationals such as Danone and Nestlé have institutionalised sustainability through regenerative agriculture programs. In Romania, the Sphera Franchise Group (KFC) formalised its social commitment through the "Harvest" programme, which donated 4.94 tons of food in 2023. Figure 3 shows households generate the most waste per capita (72 kg), exceeding manufacturing (25 kg), restaurants (15 kg), retail (11 kg), and primary production (10 kg).

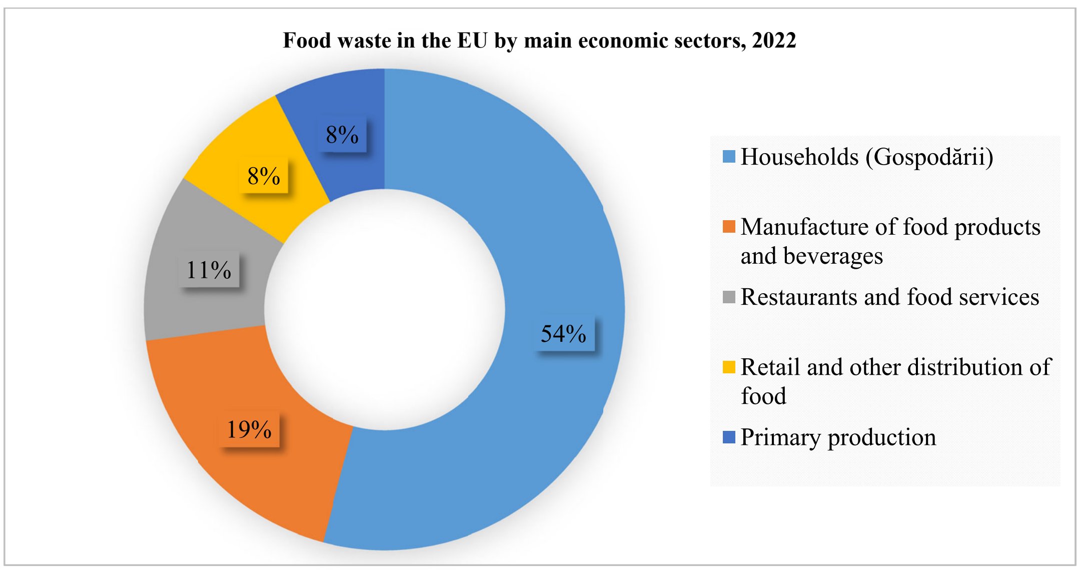

Fig. 3. European Union Food Waste Distribution by Sector, 2022.
Source: based on Eurostat (2023a).

In Western Europe, leading food and beverage multinationals have developed advanced CSR and sustainability programs.

• Danone (France) implements its Nature 2030 plan, promoting regenerative agriculture, eliminating deforestation from supply chains, and pursuing Science-Based Targets to reduce emissions (Danone, 2023).

• Nestlé (Switzerland) actively advances its Creating Shared Value initiative by investing in regenerative coffee and cocoa farming and aiming for net-zero emissions (Nestlé, 2024).

• Heineken (Netherlands) targets carbon-neutral brewing, water stewardship, and sustainable sourcing of key ingredients.

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• Fast-food and retail leaders, such as McDonald's Europe, Starbucks Europe, Carrefour, Tesco, and Aldi, focus on plant-based menus, waste reduction, and local sourcing, including large-scale food donation programs.

These firms link CSR directly to brand strategy and EU regulations, notably through the Responsible Food Business Code of Conduct, which commits them to halve food waste and improve nutrition by 2025.

CSR integration is still emerging in Eastern Europe. Romania's food sector includes local SMEs and subsidiaries of Western corporations. Many local firms provide limited CSR disclosures, but progress is visible.

Romanian F&B firms are progressively aligning themselves with EU CSR and circular economy standards.

The Sphera Franchise Group (KFC, Pizza Hut, Taco Bell) publishes GRI-aligned reports, donates surplus food, sources 80% of its ingredients locally, and improves energy efficiency. Purcari Wineries and Coca-Cola HBC Romania demonstrate growing sustainability governance, local sourcing, renewable energy use, and participation in recycling programs.

Western European companies remain leaders in CSR sophistication, with institutionalised environmental, social, and governance programmes, high recycling rates, and robust labour and community engagement. Eastern European firms, including Romanian operators, are catching up through formal CSR committees, renewable energy adoption, food donation programs, and partnerships with NGOs, illustrating the gradual convergence of CSR standards across the region (Table 5).

Table 5. Romanian and Eastern European Companies' Efforts to Align with EU and Global CSR Standards.

Company / Organisation	Country / Region	CSR Focus Areas	Notable Initiatives
Danone	France (EU-wide)	Climate, agriculture	Climate Plan (SBTi targets); regenerative farming for 64,000+ farmers by 2030
Nestlé	Switzerland / EU	Health, climate	Product reformulation (less sugar/salt); 20.38% GHG reduction achieved early (2018–2025 target)
Unilever (Ben & Jerry's, Magnum)	EU / Romania	Fair trade, sourcing	Supports cocoa & dairy cooperatives in Romania; sustainable farming training programs
Arla Foods	Denmark / Eastern EU	Local communities, cooperatives	Investments in farmer education and cooperatives in Eastern Europe
Coca-Cola HBC Romania	Greece / Romania	Energy, recycling, education	100% renewable energy in plants; 80% local sourcing; PET recycling; public education campaigns
Sphera Franchise Group (KFC)	Romania	Waste, energy, food security	"Harvest" food donation (4.94 tonnes, 2023); 100% LED lighting; 80% local procurement
Purcari Wineries	Moldova / Romania	Governance, ESG systems	ISO 26000 CSR assessment; ESG committee established in 2023
C&A	EU	Materials, education	80% sustainable sourcing; 36% plastic reduction; healthy diet education
NGOs / Cooperatives	Romania	Awareness, collaboration	"Romania Against Food Waste"; CAP-supported cooperative CSR charters

Source: based on available data from company reports and European Commission (2025).

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A CSR maturity gap exists between Western European multinationals and Romanian and regional firms. Companies such as Danone, Nestlé, and Unilever embed CSR across governance, reporting, and innovation, with advanced environmental and social programs. Romanian firms, including the Sphera Franchise Group and Purcari Wineries, are increasingly integrating CSR into corporate governance, resource efficiency, and community engagement with support from NGOs and EU initiatives. The gap is narrowing as Western best practices are transferred regionally.

However, challenges remain, including low recycling rates, underdeveloped food waste systems, higher costs of sustainable sourcing, and evolving social awareness. Emerging initiatives, such as "ugly produce" programs and discounted-expiry sections in supermarkets, indicate a gradual cultural and operational convergence with Western standards.

Overall, this comparative analysis confirms that both the textile and food and beverage industries are undergoing profound transformations driven by EU policy, consumer expectations, and sustainability imperatives.

• In textiles, Western European companies lead with circular production models, sustainable fibres, and social auditing, aligned with the EU Textile Strategy (2022). Eastern producers, including Romanian firms, are adapting through certification and traceability systems.

• In food and beverage, Western corporations focus on packaging reduction, ethical sourcing, and supply chain transparency, while Romanian firms, such as Purcari Wineries, are formalising ESG governance and expanding social programs.

In conclusion, the analysis of aggregated data revealed a high overall adoption rate across the EU, yet significant regional disparities persisted. Western Europe maintained a reporting rate of over 90% for large caps since 2018, while Eastern Europe's rate grew from 65% in 2018 to 78% in 2024. An independent samples t-test confirms that this East-West gap remains statistically significant for the 2020-2024 period ($t(df) = 4.23$, $p < .01$).

The results confirm that the difference in CSR maturity is statistically significant and not random. However, the growth rate (velocity) in Eastern Europe is 1.5x faster than that in the West, indicating convergence driven by legislative compulsion.

4.5. Macroeconomic Impact of the Environmental Economy (EGSS).

The growth of the environmental economy, including goods and services used for environmental protection, is a significant indicator of Europe's green transition.

Eurostat data show that the gross value added (GVA) of the EU green economy grew from €125 billion in 2000 to €538 billion in 2022 (Table 6). Since 2014, the sector has grown by 4.9% per year, outpacing the overall EU gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate of 3.2%.

Employment in this sector has doubled to 6.7 million full-time equivalents, mainly due to renewable energy and energy efficiency improvements. This growth is primarily driven by resource management, particularly renewable energy production and energy efficiency measures, which reached a GVA of 258 billion EUR in 2022.

Table 6. EU Environmental Economy Metrics.

EU Environmental Economy Metric	2000	2010	2022
Gross Value Added (GVA, € billions)	125	210	538
Share of Total GDP (%)	1.6	2.1	3.3
Employment (Millions FTE)	3.0	4.1 (est.)	6.7

Source: based on the Eurostat (2025).

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4.6. Cultural Factors and Regional Differences in CSR.

Cultural values significantly shape CSR adoption, implementation, and organisational ethics across Europe. Western European countries have a long history of formal CSR, influenced by post-war social models and corporate governance traditions that emphasise stakeholder welfare, such as co-determination in Germany and the social market economy ethos. In these contexts, CSR is often viewed as a natural extension of business, supported by strong social safety nets and environmental awareness (Matten & Moon, 2008). In contrast, Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries face a different historical context.

As Panainte et al. (2020) note, CSR in CEE reflects a dual institutional legacy, blending residual collectivist values from the communist era with imported Western capitalist frameworks to create unique hybrid models. Under socialism, social functions were largely state-provided.

Therefore, voluntary corporate philanthropy was rare. When multinational companies and EU norms entered CEE markets in the 1990s and the 2000s, Western CSR concepts had to be integrated with local practices (Grigore et al., 2021). This historical and cultural background explains the East-West gap in CSR practices.

Western European governments and firms have historically promoted CSR more intensively, whereas newer EU member states have initially lagged. EU policy initiatives, such as the 2014 Non-Financial Reporting Directive, aimed to harmonise CSR by requiring large companies in all member states to disclose environmental, social, and governance (ESG) data, gradually fostering convergence. Nonetheless, high-quality CSR reporting in the CEE region is often driven by multinational subsidiaries rather than domestic firms. Cultural differences shape CSR priorities. The Nordic countries lead, with Finland's environmental economy accounting for 6.2% of its national GDP. In contrast, in Romania, the primary sector (agriculture/forestry) still accounts for 29% of the environmental economy's value added, reflecting a more traditional model compared to the tech-intensive Western approach.

4.7. Regulatory Framework and National Policies.

A combination of voluntary corporate actions and binding public regulations shapes the CSR in Europe. The EU has progressively moved from guidelines to mandatory standards, with key directives such as the Non-Financial Reporting Directive (NFRD, 2014) and the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD, 2022), requiring large companies to disclose environmental, social, and governance performance. Over the past decade, the EU has introduced several directives that embed CSR and sustainability into the law (Tables 4 and 5 for key policies).

These measures effectively standardise reporting, promote transparency, and integrate sustainability into corporate decision-making. In addition, individual countries also often go further in this regard. Notably, Western European nations maintain strong environmental laws, corporate governance codes, and sector-specific standards (e.g., Responsible Care for chemicals and the Equator Principles for finance), which encourage firms to adopt proactive CSR strategies. The Nordic countries exemplify collaborative models, with governments and businesses partnering on social responsibility initiatives (Table 7).

In contrast, Romania has historically focused on awareness and guidance, as exemplified by its 2011-2016 National Strategy for Promoting Social Responsibility. However, EU directives are driving local firms toward compliance and alignment with broader European standards. Even mid-sized Romanian suppliers adopt improved environmental practices when required by larger Western clients, illustrating how EU regulations cascade through supply chains.

Table 7. Key EU CSR andSustainability Policies.

Policy (Year)	Scope and Requirements	Effect on Businesses
EU Non-Financial Reporting Directive (European Union, 2014)	Required large companies (generally >500 employees) to disclose non-financial information in annual reports. Reporting covered environmental, social, employee, human rights, and anti-corruption matters.	Made CSR reporting mandatory for thousands of European firms, significantly increasing transparency. Companies had to establish data collection and governance processes for ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) issues, moving CSR from a voluntary practice to compliance for large firms. Helped standardise reporting, enabling comparisons and improving investor and public access to CSR information.
EU Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD, 2022)	Expands mandatory sustainability reporting to all large companies and listed SMEs, requiring adherence to detailed European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS). The new framework introduces the principle of double materiality, which requires organisations to disclose both the impact of sustainability factors on their financial performance and the effects of their activities on society and the environment. External assurance for reported data is required. Implementation began in 2024-2025, replacing the NFRD.	It broadens the number of companies required to report CSR/ESG issues from approximately 11,000 under the NFRD to over 50,000 under the CSRD. It harmonises reporting standards, improving data quality and comparability. Mandatory assurance ensures that sustainability data are treated with the same rigour as financial data, embedding CSR into corporate governance and likely enhancing sustainability performance.
EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD, 2024)	Requires relevant companies to identify and manage adverse human rights and environmental impacts across their operations and global supply chains. Applies to large EU companies and some non-EU companies conducting substantial business in the EU. Companies must implement due diligence policies, monitor suppliers, and be accountable for harms.	Business ethics and human rights are embedded in the law. Firms must manage ethical risks across supply chains, including preventing child labour, deforestation, and toxic pollution. It provides a harmonised legal framework across member states, creating legal certainty and a level playing field. Short-term compliance costs (supplier audits, procurement adjustments) are offset by long-term benefits: improved risk management, increased stakeholder trust, avoidance of scandals, and the cross-functional integration of CSR across compliance, procurement, and sustainability departments.

4.8. CSR in Romanian Businesses within the European Context.

Romania presents a unique CSR case as a post-communist EU member since 2007, navigating internal transformation while aligning itself with EU regulations. Historically, under the centralised economy, CSR was absent and viewed as a state responsibility.

Post-1990s, foreign direct investment and EU accession catalysed CSR adoption, introducing reporting standards, ethical codes, and philanthropic initiatives. Government programs, such as the National CSR Strategy (2011-2016), provided guidance, though integration into corporate strategy remained limited, and CSR was often “promotional, bureaucratic, short-term, and externally driven”.

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Romanian companies may adopt CSR Western frameworks, such as GRI reporting, but implement them in locally influenced ways, for example, through charitable donations to community institutions or reactive compliance rather than a proactive strategy. EU regulations (NFRD, CSRD, Due Diligence Directive) accelerate formal CSR adoption. Large firms, subsidiaries of multinationals and export-oriented companies are more likely to comply with and internalise CSR practices, whereas smaller enterprises often engage in informal, unsystematic efforts.

Research shows that leadership commitment, written ethical codes, and company size strongly correlate with CSR activity: larger firms and those with explicit ethical frameworks are far more active, while micro-enterprises lag. Sectoral differences also exist; services and agriculture tend to adopt CSR more readily than industrial firms. Examples illustrate progress and gaps: OMV Petrom and Romanian banks demonstrate mature reporting and community programs, whereas many SMEs engage in CSR informally.

Romania's CSR journey is a compelling case of rapid institutionalisation, driven by its 2007 EU accession. While internal ethics and community embeddedness are primary drivers, company size remains a critical factor; larger firms are significantly more likely to have formal CSR committees and codes than smaller firms. Despite its lower overall scores, Romania is an "overperformer" in ESG growth relative to GDP per capita.

The revised Bucharest Stock Exchange (2025) Corporate Governance Code now incorporates explicit ESG considerations, signalling a national shift toward board-level sustainability responsibility (Table 8).

Table 8. Romanian ESG and Environmental Context Indicators.

Romanian ESG Context (2024)	Indicator / Rank	Impact on Business
National EPI Rank	30th globally	Environmental standards improving
R&D Expenditure	0.95% of GDP (2020)	Limited innovation in sustainable tech
PM2.5 Air Pollution	16.19 μg/m³ (2020)	High exposure relative to EU peers

5. Conclusions.

5.1. Key Findings and Policy Implications.

This analysis of ethics and corporate social responsibility in European sustainable businesses highlights that CSR in Europe is both a pervasive priority and a multifaceted practice. Across Europe, companies are increasingly embedding ethical considerations into their strategies, as evidenced by high sustainability reporting rates, widespread adherence to international CSR frameworks, and proactive stakeholder engagement. In Europe's business environment, cultural norms, regulatory mandates and market pressures converge to shape CSR implementation.

Western European companies often lead CSR initiatives due to cultural expectations of social responsibility and the early adoption of sustainability as a competitive strategy.

Businesses in Eastern Europe, such as in Romania, have made significant strides in the past two decades, transitioning from viewing CSR as an external imposition to recognising it as a component of their long-term success. Differences remain in maturity and approach, with some Eastern firms still in a reactive or compliance-driven ESG state.

Robust regulatory frameworks at the EU level (such as CSR reporting and due diligence directives) ensure that CSR is not merely optional philanthropy but a requirement of governance. These regulations have raised the floor on corporate behaviour, ensuring that transparency and accountability are standard practices for large companies. Policy support has been crucial for steering companies towards issues that might otherwise be neglected (e.g. supply chain human rights). The Romanian case demonstrates how EU membership can accelerate domestic CSR adoption through regulatory alignment.

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Market and stakeholder forces complement this law. European consumers, employees, and investors demand ethical conduct, effectively rewarding companies that lead CSR and punishing those that lag. This market-driven incentive structure means that even in areas not covered by formal regulation, companies have strategic reasons to pursue CSR, for example, tech companies addressing data privacy (an ethical issue) or retailers ensuring animal welfare in their products due to consumer concerns.

Company-specific factors, such as leadership values, company size, and industry sector, play a crucial role in CSR success. As seen in Romanian firms, those with leadership that champions ethics and community engagement are far more likely to implement substantial CSR programs. Large companies have led the way (partly due to resources and scrutiny), while engaging small and medium enterprises remains an ongoing challenge in the CSR movement.

From an interdisciplinary standpoint, the findings confirm theories in business ethics (that ethical climates set by leadership are key), principles of economics (that addressing externalities and stakeholder interests can coincide with improved performance), and tenets of environmental law and policy (that well-crafted regulations can shift corporate behaviour without stifling business competitiveness by actually spurring innovation and levelling the playing field).

The evolving European experience with CSR has several policy implications. First, a combination of mandatory disclosure and voluntary action is effective. Transparency requirements, such as reporting directives, make corporate impacts public, and when coupled with market scrutiny, drive companies to improve, even without prescriptive commands on how to do so.

Policymakers in Europe and elsewhere might consider similar hybrid approaches (sometimes termed "regulated self-regulation"). Second, as seen in the due diligence law, policy increasingly extends CSR to global supply chains. This recognition indicates that ethical responsibility does not stop at the national borders.

Other jurisdictions may follow the EU's lead, creating a web of requirements that multinational businesses are likely to incorporate into their general best practices. Third, support for SMEs and capacity building is important; the EU and national governments could provide more guidance, incentives, or pooled resources (such as templates, consultancy support, or recognition programs) to help smaller companies engage in CSR and ensure that they are not left behind as standards rise. Finally, ongoing dialogue among regulators, businesses, and civil society is crucial for raising ambition while maintaining the practicality of the measures. Europe's policies often emerge from consultation processes (the EU, for example, held multi-stakeholder forums on CSR), which help to balance interests and produce broadly acceptable solutions.

Specifically, policy efforts in Romania might focus on embedding CSR into educational curricula (so future managers view it as integral) and encouraging public-private partnerships that address local issues (to demonstrate how companies can play a constructive role in society beyond profits). Fighting the perception of CSR as merely a PR exercise will require showcasing tangible impacts and developing local standards or awards for genuine CSR excellence.

5.2. Future Directions and Research Opportunities.

Several areas are likely to evolve at the intersection of ethics, CSR, and sustainable business in Europe. One is the increasing emphasis on climate change and environmental sustainability; with the EU Green Deal aiming for carbon neutrality by 2050, companies will be expected to ramp up climate action as a core part of CSR. This could mean more innovation in renewable energy, the adoption of circular economy models (designing waste out of systems), and climate risk disclosure. Another area is social equity and inclusion; issues such as gender equality, diversity, and pay equity are gaining prominence in the CSR agenda, and European companies may be called upon to lead in combating inequality (both within their workforce and in the communities they affect).

The digital revolution also poses new ethical questions; for instance, ethical AI and data protection could become part of CSR for tech-oriented companies, linking business ethics with technological responsibility.

For academics and practitioners, there is a need for continued research on the impact of CSR, not on inputs but outcomes (how CSR contributes to environmental quality, social well-being, or financial performance). In the European context, comparative studies (Western Europe vs. Eastern Europe or Europe vs. other continents) can provide insights into how context shapes CSR effectiveness. The case of Romanian businesses, as highlighted in this study, underscores the importance of context; thus, tailored strategies are necessary. Future research could examine the roles of intermediaries, CSR consultants, industry associations, and stock indices in disseminating best practices in Romania.

Ethics and CSR are entrenched as pillars of sustainable business in Europe, supported by a tapestry of cultural expectations, laws and stakeholder engagement. Companies that embrace this reality and integrate responsible practices into their operations are likely to thrive in the long run, enjoying reputational benefits, stakeholder loyalty, and resilience. Those who resist may find themselves on the wrong side of public opinion and, increasingly, the wrong side of regulation. The European experience, with Romania as a part of it, illustrates a broader lesson: sustainability and profitability need not be at odds; with enlightened leadership and supportive policy, they become mutually reinforcing. Businesses, regulators, and society at large all have a role in ensuring that the momentum behind ethical and sustainable business continues.

This momentum must continue to build in Europe and beyond. Integrating ethics and CSR has emerged as a key driver of sustained competitiveness, with 76% of companies viewing it as a safeguard against reputation risks. Under the EU Green Deal's 2050 target, companies face pressure to pioneer circular economy models and decarbonisation innovations. Investors are increasingly focused on gender equality, diversity, and inclusive practices.

The digital era raises new ethical challenges, elevating digital corporate responsibility as an essential domain for ethical algorithm design and data stewardship. This analysis affirms the central role of sustainability in European corporate strategy. Western firms maintain leadership via established stakeholder engagement, while Eastern markets, such as Romania. Swiftly narrow the maturity gap through regulatory convergence and the adoption of global best practices.

Ethical Considerations.

This study relies on secondary data from corporate disclosures and reputable international databases. Since the data were publicly available and non-identifiable, formal IRB approval was not required. However, data provenance is rigorously documented to ensure data integrity.

Conflict of Interest Statement.

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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