

The state of the art in sustainability of Central-Eastern European family firms: Systematic literature review

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of the systematic literature review was to assess the state of the art in sustainability and trajectories in Central-Eastern European family firms, identify the research gaps, and delineate future research avenues.

Research Design & Methods: We conducted a systematic literature review of 30 articles from the Web of Science and Scopus that address the subject of sustainability in Central-Eastern European family firms. To identify the state of the art, analysis of keywords co-occurrence was employed as an analytical tool, using Biblioshiny software.

Findings: We identified the most influential journals and subject areas. The research allowed for the identification of seven consistent clusters, which prove the great variety of topics in the discussion on the sustainability of family firms in Central-Eastern Europe. The findings showed vast dispersion of research interests and a lack of a single, accurate or dominant research area addressing the phenomenon in this region. Additionally, our findings revealed that the results reported in CEE countries are only partly consistent with the findings presented in Western literature or referenced in other, economically well-developed regions.

Implications & Recommendations: We recommend further research on the specific characteristics of family firms and their impact on sustainable development. Moreover, the lack of comparative studies on family and non-family businesses should be addressed. There is also a need to include the cultural context of Central-Eastern Europe countries in research.

Contribution & Value Added: Our systematic literature review systematizes the existing literature on the sustainability of family firms in Central-Eastern Europe, isolates main research interests, identifies future research avenues, and provides several important hints for researchers.

Article type: research article

Keywords: family firms; sustainable development; Central-Eastern Europe; systematic literature review; socioemotional wealth; CSR

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INTRODUCTION

The growing global concern for sustainable development has generated a great demand for research on this topic. Considering the environmental and social impacts of companies' activities accordant with the concept of 'triple bottom line' (Elkington, 1994), much attention has recently been devoted to the unique role of companies, which are often seen as key players in increasing sustainability (Kuckertz & Wagner, 2010). As a result, companies should be threefold oriented towards sustainable development, including not only entrepreneurial growth (Firlej *et al.*, 2023) but also social and environmental aspects (Schaltegger & Hansen, 2017). Consequently, the relationship between entrepreneurship, the environment and sustainable development has become the subject of growing interest among scientists representing various disciplines (Schaltegger & Wagner, 2011).

The issue of sustainability has emerged as a prominent research topic concerning family firms (FFs), because of their specific features. In numerous countries, FFs constitute the most prevalent form of enterprise (Gómez-Mejía *et al.*, 2007). They are considered invaluable drivers of economic growth (Memili *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, they improve income distribution, create employment opportunities, and form the basis for economic structure redesign (Schulze *et al.*, 2010). They generate business, employment, and social opportunities, but also severely hinder sustainable development. Given the critical role of FFs, scholars indicate that they act as active players in introducing the concept of sustainable development, as per the fact that long-term social, economic, and environmental development seems to overlap with the business philosophy of long-lived, multigenerational family firms (Boyd, 2010).

Although the concept of sustainable development has been long recognized, research in this area, with respect to FFs (Pistoni *et al.*, 2016), is scarce. The systematic literature review (SLR) supported by bibliometric analysis constitutes a significant research development (Caputo *et al.*, 2018; Dabić *et al.*, 2020; Jin *et al.*, 2019), because it enables systematisation of the knowledge on the subject currently discussed by representatives of many scientific disciplines. The adoption of this method allowed the implementation of a rigorous approach, which facilitated the assessment of the current state of knowledge, the development of the research topic, and the delineation of future research directions (Gaziulusoy & Boyle, 2013).

In recent years, several literature reviews have begun to pave the way for integrating sustainable development with research on FFs. These contributions highlight the context of the internal factors determining sustainable development (Broccardo *et al.*, 2018), as well as the significance of Italian and Spanish small and medium FFs in terms of sustainability (Curado & Mota, 2021) and corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities (Kašparová, 2018; Kuttner & Feldbauer-Durstmüller, 2018; Mariani *et al.*, 2021; Su *et al.*, 2022). These analyses cover only a part of this research area.

The regional context in which FFs operate affects their practices. In particular, interest has been growing in how and why FFs differ across contexts, which is why the need to bring cross-country context into the study of family firms has been voiced over the past decade (Welter, 2011). The majority of studies cover a Western setting (Bornhausen, 2022). Due to the specificity of Central-Eastern European (CEE) countries, *i.e.* the legacy of communism and the birth of a free market economy in the early 1990s, they are way 'behind' with respect to the more developed countries (Pakulska, 2021). The transformation of economies has led to rapid economic growth and affected all areas of life. However, this does not mean that these processes can be equated with sustainable development (Cichowicz & Rollnik-Sadowska, 2018; Steurer & Konrad, 2009.).

Central-Eastern European countries are somewhat backward compared to Western countries, which results in a literature gap. The aim of the article is to provide a systematic literature review from the perspective of the relevance of research on Central-Eastern European FFs' pursuit of sustainable development. Additionally, much attention was devoted to isolating the thematic clusters on the sustainability of CEE family firms. The validity of Western literature confirmations in the regional and cultural context of CEE was also verified. The aim of the SLR was to assess the state of the art in the sustainability of CEEs family firms, determine the differences across global literature, identify the research gaps, and delineate future research directions. Our results are based on a content analysis of 30 studies addressing this topic.

The article proceeds as follows. The literature review and theoretical framework will be described in the subsequent section, followed by an explanation of the methodology employed for the SLR. The article will conclude with results and discussion, providing some practical insights, specifying the limitations, and raising suggestions for further research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature deals with the aspects of engaging companies in sustainable development (Schaefer *et al.*, 2015; Terán-Yépez *et al.*, 2020). Researchers have examined the impact of various business and entrepreneur sustainability characteristics (Olson *et al.*, 2003; Jenkins, 2009; Hoogendoorn, 2016). They indicate that future-oriented entrepreneurs pay greater attention to the long-term consequences

of their business decisions and actions (Jahanshahi *et al.*, 2017). One of the significant goals of FFs is to transfer business to succeeding generations (Ward, 1988), which is why they avoid actions and initiatives that may negatively impact future generations' ability to meet their business needs (Dyer & Whetten, 2006). One of the reasons for this behaviour lies in the desire to preserve socio-emotional wealth (Berrone *et al.*, 2012; Gómez-Mejía *et al.*, 2007). Given this context, the response yielded a growing number of scientific publications on the role of FFs in sustainability as entities operating for long-term business success, growth, and survival (Sharma, 2004; Le Breton-Miller & Miller, 2016).

Family firms are perceived as the backbone of economic development (Zahra & Sharma, 2004) and play a significant role in creating economic stability (Astrachan, 2003). Campopiano and De Massis (2015) confirmed that FFs are sensitive to social, environmental, and economic aspects, because of their multigenerational orientation and relationships with the local community. Moreover, commitment to sustainable development can help to build a positive reputation for FFs within communities and maintain stakeholder relationships. Furthermore, since long-term social, economic, and ecological development intertwines with FFs' philosophy of long-lived, multigenerational businesses (Boyd, 2010), they continually expand their sustainable development activities (Zahra *et al.*, 2008). The aptness to pass the business on to the next generation determines the long-term plan development (Le Beton-Miller & Miller, 2006), which implies a tendency to adopt strategies guaranteeing long-term investments in line with the idea of sustainable development (James, 1999). Generally, FFs differ from non-FFs by way of their longer-term orientation to ensure business continuity (Martín & Gómez-Mejía, 2016). These longer planning horizons can result in commitment towards actions for society and the environment (Lumpkin & Dess, 2013). Hence, research suggests that FFs are more likely to engage in sustainable activities than their non-family counterparts (Berrone *et al.*, 2010; Borralho *et al.*, 2022; Cruz, 2014; Gavana, 2017; Randolph *et al.*, 2019). The potentially higher priority of sustainable development practices renders FFs a unique research object.

Although the concept of sustainable development has been long known, more research is required to identify the mechanisms associated with the sustainability of FFs (Arzubiaga *et al.*, 2019; Benavides-Velasco *et al.*, 2013; Yu *et al.*, 2015; Ernst *et al.*, 2022). Blodgett *et al.* (2011) and Setthasakko (2012) found that the cultural and regional context in which FFs operate affects their conduct in the implementation of sustainable activities. Therefore, the need to bring cross-country context into the study of FFs has been voiced over the past decade (Picone *et al.*, 2021; Welter, 2011). As the literature shows, some countries have attracted significant attention, while others are quite under-represented, with the majority of studies conducted in a Western setting (Bornhausen, 2022).

The determinants of FFs sustainability are fundamental in the context of the specificity of CEE countries (Radulescu *et al.*, 2018). These countries not only share geographical location but are also similar in terms of their shared history of the impact of the communist system (Paprotny, 2016). This period is connected with a deterioration of the environment attributable to the pressure on industrial development. The communist authorities refrained from enforcing environmental legislative standards, because they were presented as a barrier to development (Jancar-Webster, 1993).

With the fall of the Iron Curtain (Allina-Pisano, 2009) and the transition to democracy and a free market economy, the expectation of economic development in line with the environmental and social aspects of sustainability emerged (Costi, 1998). Initially, the concept of sustainable development was interpreted in terms of eco-development. The focus was on, so to speak, catching up with the more advanced environmental practices of Western European countries (Baker, 2006). Such an understanding of this idea prevailed for a long time in CEE countries, which was understandable, considering the dramatic condition of the natural environment after the previous system. Over time, insistence on environmental protection that goes hand in hand with the support of social development began to transpire (Costi, 1998). The changes that took place after the communist period resulted in an increased emphasis on research on the sustainable development of enterprises (Cichowicz & Rollnik-Sadowska, 2018). Thus, we focused on FFs as entities which may play a unique role in sustainable development. Following the call for expanded cross-country research (Picone *et al.*, 2021; Welter, 2011), we focused on CEE, which is 'behind' Western countries in implementing sustainable development

activities and research. We adopted the definition of CEE countries after Pickles (2014). The countries included in this group will be listed in the methodological part of the article.

Global research has revealed several, frequently discussed, research topics addressing FFs sustainability. One of such topics is the impact of family involvement, in terms of both ownership and management, on sustainable development (Ardito *et al.*, 2019; Arena & Michelon, 2018). Findings show that greater involvement of the family allows those companies to acquire, retain and share knowledge, as well as achieve common goals in the long term (Duarte Alonso *et al.*, 2018; Perez-Perez, *et al.*, 2019). In contrast, family firm ownership can negatively impact the firms' corporate social responsibility (Su *et al.*, 2022). It is worth verifying whether research covering CEE confirms these findings.

Some research also focuses on the topic of family values (Chou *et al.*, 2016) and family religiousness (Pieper *et al.*, 2020), which influence the level of FFs' sustainability. Considering that CEE FFs constitute a large homogeneous group with a similar cultural and religious background (Dick *et al.*, 2021), it is worth verifying whether these aspects have been investigated.

Another recent topic pertaining to FF's sustainable development entails consideration of the influence of market pressures (Curado & Mota, 2021). As pro-ecological activities are often a result of the increase in environmental regulations imposing restrictions on enterprises and encouraging the implementation of new business behaviours (Zheng *et al.*, 2019), it is worth verifying whether CEE FFs focus on sustainable development merely because they must meet the requirements of the constantly changing markets (Curado & Mota, 2021).

An interesting research topic raised by world literature involves the influence of customer awareness of sustainable goods and services on companies' activities towards sustainable practices (Zaman & Shamsuddin, 2017). Le Breton-Miller and Miller (2016) indicated that competition strengthens the level of companies' involvement in social issues.

In the proposed literature review, we seek to verify whether the research topics frequently raised in CEE, regarding FFs' sustainable development, coincide with those presented above. We shall additionally verify whether the findings presented in world literature have been confirmed by research on FFs sustainable development in CEE. This allows us to address the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the most relevant research topics addressing the sustainability of CEE family firms?

RQ2: Does CEE literature confirm the findings of Western literature?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We conducted a systematic literature review complemented with bibliometric indicators. The application of both methods to analyse new research areas provides a solid basis for identifying the key aspects of the topic and speculating on new perspectives (Rialti *et al.*, 2019). The systematic literature review opens the topic, maps the literature, and enhances academic discussion. Bibliometric analysis, in turn, identifies and recognises the potentially 'hidden patterns' in the course of the literature review process (Benavides-Velasco *et al.*, 2013; Kraus *et al.*, 2022).

Our SLR aimed to establish a framework for new findings on the sustainability of CEE FFs and link them to previous research (Randolph, 2009).

It is a kind of a hybrid review of the domains (concept-field hybrid) (Kraus *et al.*, 2022) based on the SLR within the entrepreneurship procedure developed by Kraus *et al.* (2020) adapted from Tranfield *et al.* (2003). The survey was conducted in three stages: (1) planning the review, (2) study identification and evaluation, and (3) data extraction and synthesis.

Initially, a preliminary analysis of the literature revealed that to date, no literature studies on the sustainable development of FFs in the CEE region have been published (Kašparová, 2018). We thus decided to develop a protocol which outlined the data search parameters. We decided to use a database-driven approach, which is a search approach most widely used in management research (Hiebl, 2021). The search was carried out using the Web of Science Core Collection (WOS) and Scopus database. These databases represent major academic search engines in social sciences and provide the highest quality publications (Caputo *et al.*, 2019; Raghuram *et al.*, 2019), which ensures compliance of

all selected articles with the basic requirements of theoretical and methodological rigour (Anessi-Pesina *et al.*, 2016). This approach eliminates biases or omissions that could occur when considering sets of relevant journals only (López-Fernández *et al.*, 2016) and allows for future replication of our study (Van Eck & Waltman, 2014). To cover the full range of scientific articles, the databases were searched without setting a time frame (Kubíček & Machek, 2020). The research was conducted in May 2023.

Keywords enabling identification of family businesses (Broccardo *et al.*, 2018) were used, adopting the following search criteria either in titles, keywords, or abstracts: ('family firm*') OR ('family business*') OR ('family enterprise*') OR ('family ownership*') OR ('family company*'). Additionally, to narrow the search to articles concerning CEE, various expressions and acronyms defining this geographical region had to be considered.

The selection of CEE countries for the research sample was justified on the following grounds:

1. Political and economic transformation. In the early 1990s, as a result of the collapse of socialism (Allina-Pisano, 2009), these countries underwent similar transformation processes, transitioning from a communist to a democratic system, and moved from centrally planned to market-based economies. The disintegration occurred simultaneously throughout the region, despite the diverse political and economic situation in individual countries, prompting some commentators to accept the thesis that all Eastern European countries were basically identical political regimes, kept in power by the presence of the Soviet Union military (Ekiert, 2011).
2. Geographical and cultural positioning. The CEE countries share similar geographical, cultural, and historical contexts. Therefore, studies may provide information about patterns, phenomena, and trends specific to this region.

Based on the above, we decided to include Albania, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Ukraine (Pickles, 2014), as well as adjectives of nationality, *e.g.* Albanian* etc. We have additionally included terms frequently used in the studies from the region, *i.e.* 'CEE,' 'post-soviet,' 'communist,' 'Visegrad Group,' 'Balkan*.'

Due to its size, history, diverse ethnoculture, and geopolitical positioning, Russia should not be compared with other CEE countries, as this could distort the results on account of its unique characteristics (Verdery, 2003; Wallerstein, 2004; Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008).

The search queries yielded an initial list of articles ($n = 676$). Firstly, the WoS and Scopus search results were merged, and duplicates were removed, which allowed the isolation of 520 unique publications for further screening. We chose to include articles published in peer-reviewed journals, because these can be considered to present validated knowledge, as observed by Podsakoff *et al.* (2003). We decided not to exclude conference proceedings, as proposed by Jiang *et al.* (2018) and (Kraus *et al.*, 2020), because CEE authors often publish their work in that wise. The exclusion of these articles would affect the final quality of the analysis.

In the next stage, we identified and evaluated the studies. The method of searching the articles selected was consistent with a systematic review process (Pukall & Calabrò, 2014; Goel & Jones III, 2016; Hernández-Linares & López-Fernández, 2018; Fries *et al.*, 2021). With respect to the publication language, in keeping with the best SLR practices (Michiels & Molly, 2017; Combs *et al.*, 2020), as well as the nature of our research, only articles written in the English language were selected, to avoid translation-related problems. Subsequently, 416 articles remained, which were reviewed with regard to titles, abstracts, and keywords, by double-checking the selection criteria (Araya-Castillo *et al.*, 2021, Kraus *et al.*, 2020). We excluded articles not dealing with the topic of 'family firms' (38). Ultimately, a list of articles discussing issues of CEE family firms was outlined. This constituted the basis for data extraction. To ensure the systematicity and transparency of the data extraction, we drafted a dedicated extraction sheet in the form of a table. Tables are considered useful overview support and offer a clear matrix for subsequent synthesis of results (Kraus *et al.*, 2020). To prevent bias, ensure objectivity, and avoid the omission of important data, data extraction was carried out. For this purpose, the articles selected were checked manually and categorised through a more detailed analysis of the content, to verify they addressed sustainable development (Broccardo *et al.*, 2018). More specifically,

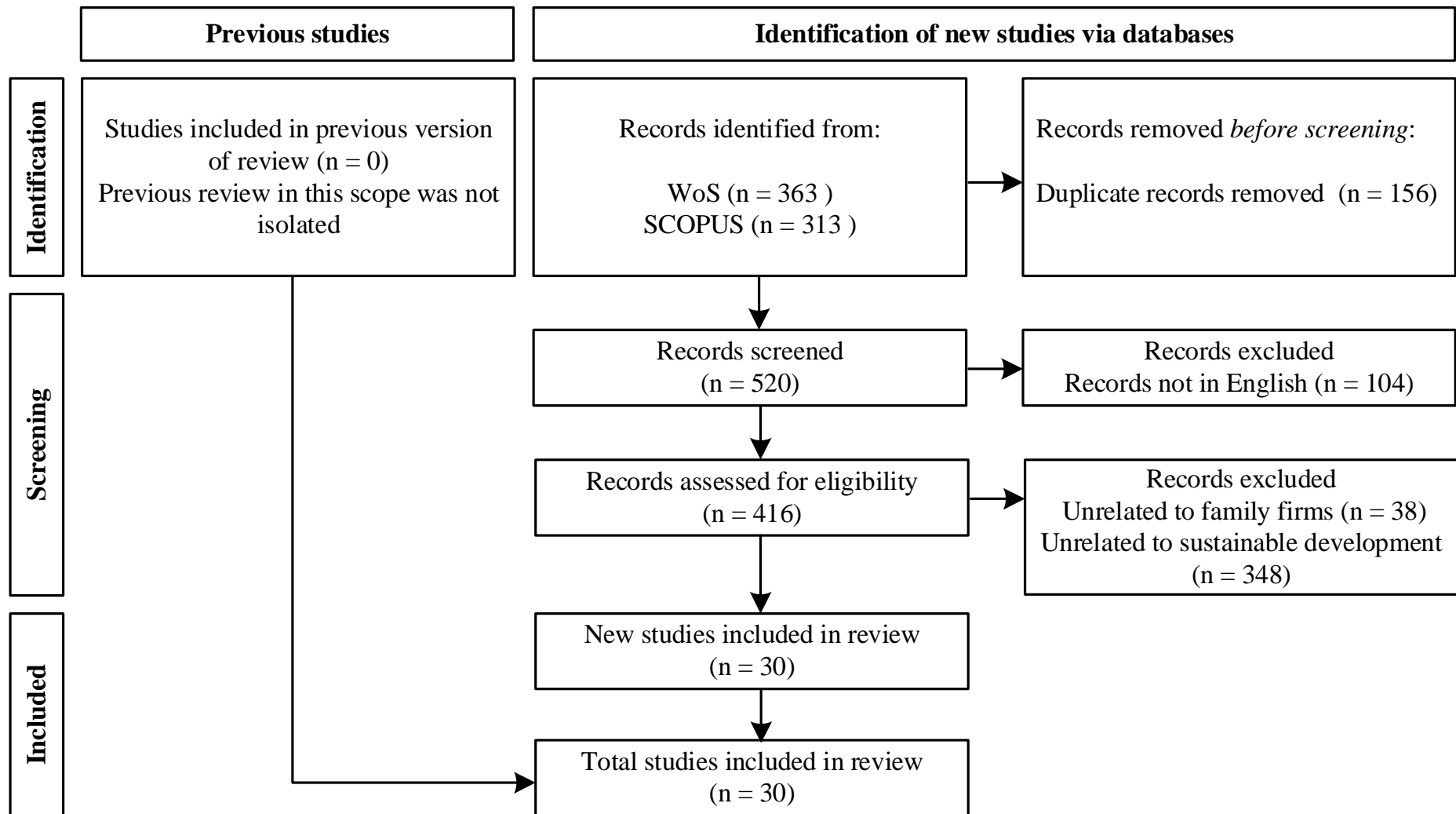


Figure 1. Schema of article selection

Source: own elaboration.

since sustainable development entails a combination of environmental, social, and economic aspects, articles discussing businesses' social commitment, their environmental and sustainable-development issues, as well as environmental, social, and governance (ESG) problems or CSR aspects, were selected. At that stage, 30 articles remained for further detailed analysis (see Figure 1). Despite the small size, the sample resembles those of previous SLR studies on FFs sustainable development (Block & Wagner, 2014; Campopiano & DeMassis, 2015; Broccardo *et al.*, 2018). Based on the 30-item database of full texts obtained, each article was read, examined, and coded by at least two authors. Inconsistencies in coding were discussed with other authors to ensure credibility and resolve discrepancies.

Data synthesis constitutes one of the most important steps in SLR, as it necessitates analysis and comparison of the existing literature, rather than mere summarisation (Jones & Gatrell, 2014). As suggested by Kraus *et al.* (2020), the focus needs to be placed on concepts, not authors. For this reason, bibliometric analysis, specifically co-occurrence analysis, was applied. Using Biblioshiny software, seven thematic clusters were created. All articles in each cluster were analysed by two authors to identify their distinctive contribution to the description of sustainable development of FFs operating in CEE.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis revealed that articles on the sustainability of CEE FFs were published between 2014 and 2022, though the outset of the search period was not limited to any particular timeframe. There has been visible growth in the number of articles in recent years, with the fewest articles published in the first years under analysis and the greatest number published in 2021 (Figure 2). This increase indicates that the topic has become more popular over the last two years. To the best of our knowledge, the analysis unfolds that family firm sustainability represents a relatively new research subject for scholars in CEE.

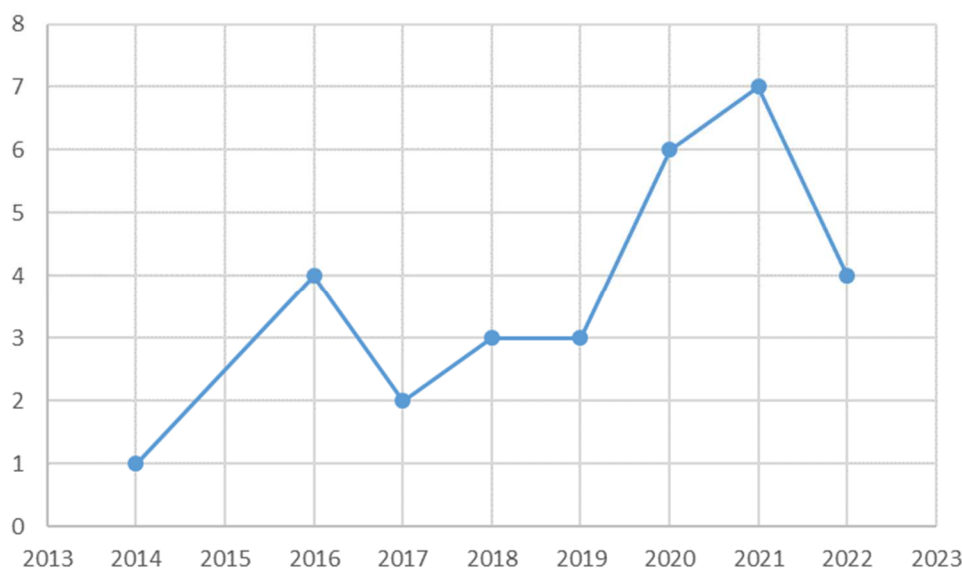


Figure 2. Articles per year

Source: own elaboration.

We identified 18 journals with articles in this field (Table 1). It is worth noting that the results of the sustainable development research of CEE family firms were published in numerous journals of various fields and are not limited to the mere context of business, management, and family businesses. Only one journal, *i.e. Sustainability*, which is dedicated to issues of sustainable development, environment, and business ethics, included more than one article. It may be surprising to note that only one article from the sample was published in one of the leading and most relevant family business journals, *i.e. Family Business Review*. Four articles were published in conference proceedings.

The significant number of authors, *i.e.* 65, who dealt with the sustainability of FFs in CEE, possibly indicates that this topic is not the main subject of those authors' interest and was only addressed on

the occasion of other research. Moreover, only two authors are listed more than once, which may indicate a certain randomness of the study.

Table 1. Journals presenting research on the sustainability of CEE family firms

List of journals	Numbers of articles
Sustainability	9
Acta Facultatis Xylogologiae Zvolen res Publica Slovaca	1
Amfiteatru Economic	1
Business Strategy and the Environment	1
E a M: Ekonomie a Management	1
Economics & Sociology	1
Ekonomika Poljoprivreda-Economics of Agriculture	1
Entrepreneurship and Sustainability Issues	1
Energies	1
Family Business Review	1
Forum Scientiae Oeconomia	1
Geographia Polonica	1
Journal of East European Management Studies	1
Journal of EU Research in Business	1
Quality-Access to Success	1
Scientific Papers-Series Management Economic Engineering in Agriculture and Rural Development	1
Studies in Agricultural Economics	1
Technological Forecasting and Social Change	1

Source: own elaboration.

Noteworthy, the study did not cover all CEE countries (Table 2). Out of the 20 countries included in the search queries, only seven yielded results. This means that FFs sustainability has not been studied in the remaining 13 countries, *i.e.* 1. Albania; 2. Belarus; 3. Bosnia and Herzegovina; 4. Estonia; 5. Hungary; 6. Kosovo; 7. Latvia; 8. Lithuania; 9. Slovenia; 10. Macedonia; 11. Moldova; 12. Montenegro; 13. Ukraine or that research on this topic has been published in articles not indexed in the Web of Science or Scopus. This presents a research gap that needs to be filled. Most articles discussed the sustainability of family firms in Poland (Bielawska, 2021; Bukalska *et al.*, 2021; Dacko-Pikiewicz, 2019; Dick *et al.*, 2021; Domańska *et al.*, 2022; Górska-Warsewicz *et al.*, 2020; Haddoud *et al.*, 2021; Pijet-Migoń & Królikowska, 2020; Sadkowska, 2018; Szczepkowska, 2018), the Czech Republic (Horváthová *et al.*, 2020; Jurásek *et al.*, 2021; Kašparová, 2017; Mikušová *et al.*, 2020; Myšáková *et al.*, 2016; Rydvalová *et al.*, 2016); and Croatia (Horvatinčić *et al.*, 2016; Kopecki *et al.*, 2014; Svetlačić *et al.*, 2017).

Table 2. Countries under analysis

Country	Frequency
Poland	10
Czech Republic	6
Croatia	3
Serbia	2
Slovakia	2
Bulgaria	1
Romania	1
Slovenia	1

Source: own elaboration.

The division of the research avenues in CEE countries involved the use of the Biblioshiny software, by the adoption of the methodology referred to above. Ultimately, seven clusters were isolated (see Figure 2). Due to the diversity of the issues presented in the analysed articles, certain articles were included in more than one cluster.

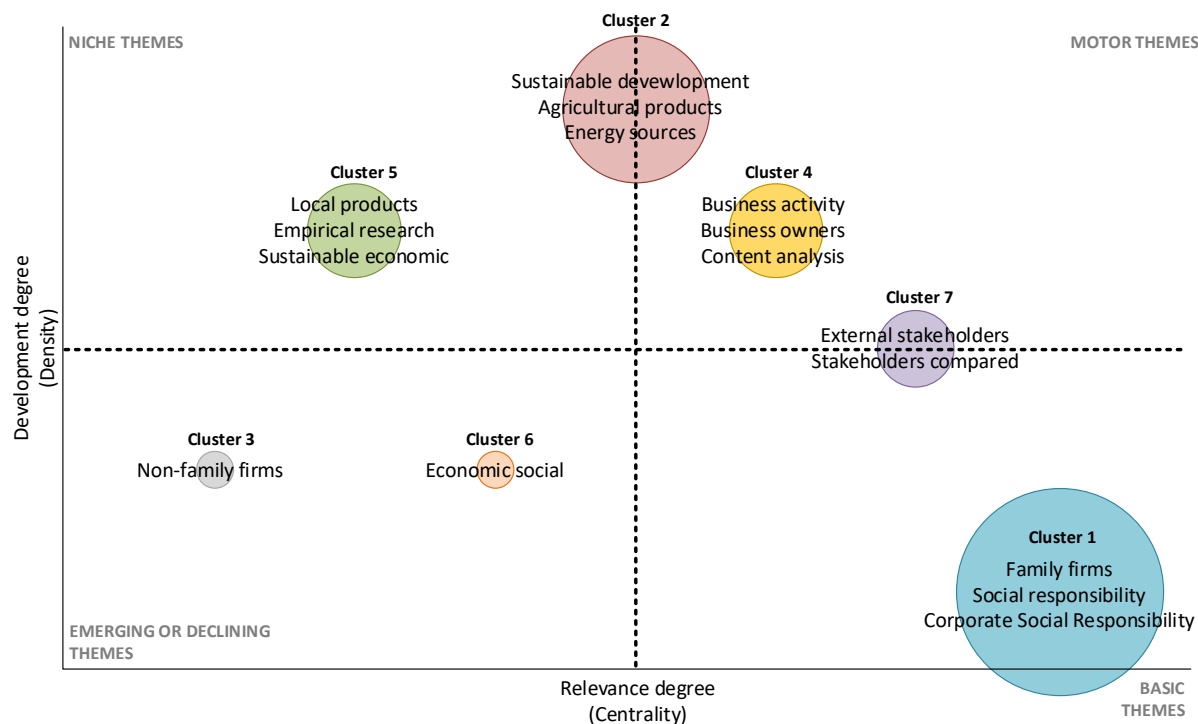


Figure 3. Clusters extracted

Source: own elaboration.

Each article in each cluster was analysed by two authors to identify their distinctive contribution to the description of sustainable development of FFs operating in CEE.

The more profound and contextual analyses allowed for the recognition of individual Clusters as the following:

- Cluster 1, roots of sustainable development.
- Cluster 2, inclusion of sustainable development.
- Cluster 3, the lens of family vs non-family firms.
- Cluster 4, pro-sustainable activities.
- Cluster 5, regional embeddedness.
- Cluster 6, issues of small scale.
- Cluster 7, external stakeholders' outlook.

The clustering provided evidence leading to an answer to RQ1, *i.e.* what are the most relevant research topics addressing the sustainability of CEE family firms?

The first cluster 'roots of sustainable development' reveals the existence of numerous studies on the impact of 'familiness' on sustainable development, which is the basic theme. Various aspects related to family ownership, family involvement, and characteristic features of a family firm were analysed.

The first debate (article published in 2014) pertained to the possibility of transforming FFs into companies of Economy of Communion (EoC; Kopecki *et al.*, 2014), due to their focus on long-term development and survival as well as numerous relationships with external stakeholders. Other studies confirmed the propensity of CEE family firms to undertake socially responsible activities (Szczepkowska, 2019). Moreover, Kašparová (2017) shows that FFs most often provided information on their socially responsible activities within the community. Subsequent research dealt with the issue of the impact of FFs on local development through their social and image-enhancing activities (Rydvalova *et al.*, 2016). Myšáková *et al.* (2016) and Pijet-Migoń and Królikowska (2020) confirmed that development in municipalities, especially rural ones, can be largely based on FFs.

Another stream of research investigated the impact of familiarity, individual approach, and close relations between the owner and customers (Horská *et al.*, 2020; Lulcheva, 2021) on the change of mindset about business in countries with a history of a centrally controlled economy (Górska-Warsewicz *et al.*, 2020). Research also showed the importance of implementing the concept of heritage interpretation into business strategy, which is a relatively new trend in Europe (Svetlačić *et al.*, 2017), and preserving tradition (Tošović-Stevanović *et al.*, 2021), as these activities support the long-term perspective of FFs operating in harmony with the society. Moreover, researchers noticed that, in the previous economic system of CEE, decisions on socially responsible activity were implemented by state-owned enterprises. Currently, decisions concerning social involvement are personal decisions of entrepreneurs, with support from the family, successor, and a team of competent and committed employees, whereas good social relations with stakeholders make the decisions to *e.g.* engage in philanthropic activities and voluntarily donate a part of assets to those in need much easier (Bielawska, 2021). Similarly, Rožman and Tominc (2022) confirmed that leadership structure, employee relations, and intergenerational synergy positively affect family firms' sustainable management. In turn, Sadkowska (2018) provided empirical evidence that family involvement decreases the likelihood of establishing good partnerships with customers, suppliers, vendors, competitors, non-profit organizations, and local communities, but only in the case of FFs not managing projects.

Other research focuses on the context of FFs' socio-emotional wealth (SEW) in supporting socially beneficial activities within their environment. Family members involved in business often prioritise social and affective factors in the decision-making process. This encourages ethical and socially responsible activities as well as builds interest in public well-being (Jurásek *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, Bukalska *et al.* (2021) verified that FFs play a pivotal role in achieving sustainable development goals, justifying their findings with the combination of these companies' SEW, family endowment, CEO attitudes, and conservative financial strategies.

Compared to relevant global research addressing the above issues (Anderson & Reeb, 2003; Cleary *et al.*, 2019; Cordeiro *et al.*, 2020; Denison *et al.*, 2004), the findings regarding CEE do not differ. However, some examples show a cultural connotation in the approach to SEW. The richest American families are not always sentimental about family firms and socio-emotional wealth, and often financial benefits are more important than the social aspects (Haque *et al.*, 2019; Nason *et al.*, 2019). This aspect can serve as an interesting research thread in relation to family firms in CEE.

Surprisingly, the research conducted by (Rumanko *et al.*, 2021) did not confirm the findings of Western literature regarding the differences between family and non-family firms in terms of sustainable development implementation (Meroño-Cerdán & López-Nicolás, 2017; Naldi *et al.*, 2017; Zellweger, 2017). Research has only proven that non-family entities show a higher degree of formal processing of social activities and social responsibility. Similarly, Korauš *et al.* (2020) indicated that there are no differences between non-family and family SMEs in the perception of the importance of various elements related to innovation activities aimed at sustainable entrepreneurship. Subsequently, Horváthová *et al.* (2020) demonstrated that non-family and family firms do not substantially differ in human resource management, which contradicts the findings from other countries (Chopra *et al.*, 2017; Gauci *et al.*, 2019; Lin *et al.*, 2012; Michiels, 2017).

Differences between the determinants of firms' greenness, depending on the country group, were also shown by Horbach *et al.* (2022), who surveyed Eastern European Union (EU) countries, other Eastern countries, Balkan countries, and South European countries. These results confirmed the positive influence of family ownership on firms' greenness but indicated a negative correlation of female top managers. Importantly, in Eastern EU countries, this negative effect of female managers is smaller. Moreover, Kocianová *et al.* (2022) presented results that are inconsistent with other findings. Family and its cohesion are a prerequisite for a company's sustainability activities. An important element that can push them in this direction is strategic planning (Ittner *et al.*, 2003). This relationship was not confirmed in the research on CEE family firms, because the surveyed enterprises, despite the lack of strategic planning, perceived themselves as more environmentally friendly than other enterprises (Kocianová *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, CEE managers are not as used to strategic planning as their Western counterparts. Due to the experience (nationalization of FFs in 40'), a

sort of uncertainty may still exist in the mindset of managers, which means that other factors that are pushing CEE family firms towards sustainability may be at play.

Furthermore, Haddoud *et al.* (2021) discussed certain differences between findings from CEE and literature from other parts of the world, showing that commitment to environmental issues is likely to boost both product and process innovation (Chang, 2016; Suasana & Ekawati, 2018; Surroca *et al.*, 2010). Research conducted in Poland confirmed this for process innovation only. This may stem from the resource insufficiency typical for CEE companies, which translates into a greater propensity towards savings strategies, which explains the preference for labour-reducing process innovations, as opposed to product innovations (Ingram *et al.*, 2020).

In turn, Dick *et al.* (2021) found that some FFs limit socially responsible activities, because it affects control and thus their socioemotional endowment. This relationship is true only in founder-controlled firms. The important role of younger generations has been confirmed by Domańska *et al.* (2022), who have demonstrated that the second generation positively affects the implementation of sustainable development principles by FFs. Similarly, Hategan *et al.* (2019) observed a positive correlation between social responsibility and succession. Given that CEE family firms are at a stage of transferring from the founders to the next generation, this group constitutes a great homogeneous sample of a similar cultural background, in terms of research on the changes in the company during the succession process. Moreover, the influence of different SEW, associated with successor generation and psychological traits, on sustainable development activities could serve as an interesting research topic.

The second cluster, 'inclusion of sustainable development,' encompasses publications based on a variety of sustainability-related studies, primarily emphasizing the environmental aspect, assessed within a societal context. This includes organic food production, renewable energy sources, small family hotels, and the sustainable financing thereof.

The impact of investments on the profitability of organic food production was studied by Barjaktarović *et al.* (2016). Their findings were compared with those from international studies by Halberg *et al.* (2006), and Kasperczyk and Knickel (2006). Tošović-Stevanović *et al.* (2021) utilized the analytic hierarchy process (AHP) model to investigate the principal economic determinants of small farm profitability in Serbia. Their study indicates that the highest-ranked determinants of profitability are agricultural product prices, followed by well-structured agricultural product distribution channels. Horvatinčić *et al.* (2016) focused on identifying new competencies and the knowledge necessary for sustainable food production in Croatia. They underscore the importance of agricultural education to help farmers meet green development standards. Related studies were conducted by Kwasek (2012) and Gold (2009). Korauš *et al.* (2020) stress the significance of innovative activities in Slovakian agricultural SMEs and identify key factors directing these activities towards sustainable development. Myšáková *et al.* (2016) examined the role of biogas plants as a renewable energy source in the Czech Republic, emphasizing their substantial environmental protection impact. They discuss the current state of the country, highlighting the potential for development in this area. Domańska *et al.* (2022), in turn, categorize FFs based on their commitment to sustainable development realization, indicating that there are different types of enterprises and institutions supporting sustainable development which should adapt their offer to a given stage of family firm development.

Cluster 3, 'the lens of family vs non-family,' pertains to the differences between family and non-family firms. Bukalska *et al.* (2021) showed that FFs, in contrast to non-FFs, are characterized by a much greater potential to implement activities related to sustainable entrepreneurship. Similarly, Kašparová (2017) indicated that FFs managers show great interest in sustainable intergenerational development, which is why they strive to build a positive company image and/or continue to protect it. These results confirmed the Western findings (Meroño-Cerdán & López-Nicolás, 2017; Naldi *et al.*, 2017; Zellweger, 2017). It should be borne in mind, however, that other studies examining in detail the relationship between family involvement in business and sustainable development have produced conflicting results (Rumanko *et al.*, 2021; Korauš *et al.*, 2020; Horváthová *et al.*, 2020).

Socio-emotional wealth is a unique resource for FFs, and attention to it, particularly in terms of family reputation in the view of various stakeholders, leads FFs to intuitively undertake pro-sustainable

activities. Cluster 4, 'pro sustainable activities,' includes articles indicating how family values and behaviours support the performance of FFs. In tourism, such aspects support sustainable development practices and a particular pattern of business growth (Presas *et al.*, 2011; 2014). Górska-Warsewicz *et al.* (2020) confirmed this in a study of Polish FFs providing accommodation services, which build their company brand by highlighting their family character. Despite much smaller financial and organisational resources, compared to large hotel chains, they do benefit from their individual approach to guests, close relationships with clients, family atmosphere, and hospitality. This also confirms American results (Craig *et al.*, 2008), which show that family-based brand identity positively impacts customers' decision-making. As a part of marketing campaigns, FFs refer to the unique social, psychological, and emotional values resulting from SEW. Jurásek *et al.* (2021) confirmed that, regardless of the firm size, the owners of Czech FFs declare the same values as Western FFs, *i.e.* they show interest in public well-being and socially responsible conduct. Moreover, one way to create an image of a responsible and ethical organization is to present information on CSR activities via the company's website. Czech FFs presented the most extensive information on their community activities, followed by employee and environmentally-focused activities (Kašparová, 2017). This information was scattered, however, and not very visible to stakeholders, as opposed to the information presented on the websites of family businesses owned by European billionaires (Palma *et al.*, 2022). Nevertheless, it should be noted that the two studies were conducted at different time periods, during which corporate CSR reporting obligations in EU countries have changed significantly, which is why the current analysis of sustainable reporting on Czech FFs' websites may yield dissimilar results.

Studies included in cluster 5, 'regional embeddedness,' refer to FFs as pro-sustainability players in the regional context. The first study presents Lower Silesia's viticulture and winemaking industry as an example of a rural area in Poland (Pijet-Migoń & Królikowska, 2020). The authors presented a general profile of the local winemakers and their contribution to the regional economy. The main findings confirmed that wine-makers could enrich the regional economy and change the economic landscape by implementing sustainable aspects of regional truism development. Other examples of local FFs are dairy farms in Slovakia (Horská *et al.*, 2020). The authors emphasised that short supply chains are seen in rural and food policies as a driver of the transition to sustainability in the agri-food system. More sophisticated studies refereeing to the wood-processing FFs in Slovakia (Kocianová *et al.*, 2020) have confirmed the hypothesis that most wood-processing enterprises in Slovakia perceive themselves as more environmentally friendly than enterprises from other industries. The relationship between the EoC and sustainable development was the subject of a study by Kopecki *et al.* (2014). Following the considerations of Freeman (2010), Kopecki *et al.* argue that the leaders of multinational companies should consider new external stakeholders, *i.e.* the local community and environmental activists, in addition to their current shareholders, customers, employees, and suppliers. Based on previous findings, the authors provide evidence that the new value of post-material management (*e.g.* culture of giving, gratuitousness, profit distribution, ecology, and responsibility for future generations) can impact the sustainable development of FFs. The regional or local context of family firm research was the subject of numerous Western studies. Colli *et al.* (2003), for instance, have indicated the need to consider FFs in Britain, Spain, and Italy, both in the perspective of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in national and regional contexts, in order to better understand their various capabilities and characteristics. Karlsson (2018) provides evidence that FFs grow more slowly than the average non-family firms across the urban-rural context. Baù *et al.* (2019) stated that FFs benefit more than non-family firms from local embeddedness and thus achieve higher levels of growth. Similar results were presented by Backman and Palmberg (2015), who claim that urban-rural context influences FFs and non-FFs employment growth differently, with FFs exhibiting greater employment growth, compared to non-FFs in rural areas.

Cluster 6, 'issues of small scale,' encompasses studies addressing matters of the obstacles faced by small-scale business entities. Tošović-Stevanović *et al.* (2021) emphasized that farms are crucial in creating new jobs (self-employment), providing family income, adjusting to local resources and preserving tradition. This multifunctional nature is translated into actions taken to maintain the sustainability of rural areas and largely shape the economic tradition. Kopecki *et al.* (2014) go further in their article and propose that the idea of EoC is associated with a culture of giving, profit distribution, ecology, and responsibility for future generations. The authors mention that EoC can positively impact smaller firms in new job and

business creation and, therefore, can contribute to the development of sustainable systems able to exist for centuries, provided that they successfully overcome the transfer of ownership to the next generation.

Cluster 7, 'external stakeholders' outlook,' covers articles related to pivotal family firms' success factors related to external stakeholders. With the concept of an EoC (Kopecki *et al.*, 2014), FFs operate responsibly towards primary stakeholders (*i.e.* employees, customers, and suppliers). Additionally, special attention is given to environmental protection. As a result, family firms receive a level of trust and unity, developing sustainable systems that can exist over decades. However, Sadkowska (2018) examined the impact of the difficulties in building relationships with external stakeholders and revealed that project-managing FFs devote greater attention to the management of people in projects compared to building the relations with groups of external project stakeholders. Rumanko *et al.* (2021) found that the concept of social sustainability is strongly connected with a considerable number of stakeholders, compared to the environmental and economic aspects of sustainability. They concluded that the examined FFs cannot be distinguished as bearers of social sustainability in Slovakia, since they generally process the monitored activities at a lower level, compared to non-family businesses. In the context of sustainable development engagement of FFs, relationships with external stakeholders were also the subject of extensive studies. For example, García-Sánchez *et al.* (2021) suggest that in comparison with non-family firms, FFs exhibit higher CSR performance and are more likely to integrate external and internal stakeholders' expectations into their strategic choices, to protect their family identification and image. There is no clear evidence, however, of whether FFs are more oriented towards internal stakeholders (Mayo & Gómez-Mejía *et al.*, 2016), or favour external stakeholders (Carney, 2005; Gómez-Mejía *et al.*, 2011). We extracted relevant confrontations from the articles analysed, to answer RQ2 regarding the question of whether CEE literature confirms the findings of Western literature. Two aspects were distinguished, *i.e.* comparison of the results presented in the articles against other (Western) findings and the question of whether they align with the 'Western' literature results. The findings from this analysis are presented in Table 3.

Given the data in Table 3, only ambiguous answers to RQ2 could be obtained. The results related to CEE countries are not continually compared to other findings, mainly in Western publications. This observation leads us to formulate the following recommendation for the authors: 'If you present your findings, you should provide comparisons to other research, to enrich your contribution.' Additionally, in terms of comparisons, CEE results were only partly consistent with Western findings. If there was at all a reference to the specifics of the CEE region, it most often pertained to the relatively shorter period of FFs' operation (30 years), and therefore management was still in the hands of the founder generation or assumed involvement of at most second generations. Few articles indicate that the long-term perspective of FFs in CEE entails a change from past behaviour when private entities operated under constant threats to ownership rights from the State.

In terms of comparison of the results obtained in CEE countries against those from Western Europe, FFs show similar attentiveness to SEW and engage in activities conducive to their sustainability. These activities are mainly aimed at achieving sustainable development goals and interest in public well-being. Nevertheless, it seems that the differences and similarities identified, juxtaposed against Western studies, still need to be verified, since there are no large-scale and international studies. In our opinion, the isolation of contrary results requires more profound studies or perhaps an exciting avenue for further research.

CONCLUSIONS

Different contributions emerge from the exploration of the topic of sustainability in CEE family firms. The impact of 'familiness' on sustainable development is a complex subject. Western literature has been addressing this research topic for more than 30 years (Lank, 1991; Post & Altma, 1994). In turn, CEE literature began to explore this topic relatively recently. The oldest article isolated via SRL was published in 2014. Thus, there is a significant time gap between publications in Western countries and CEE.

Table 3. Confrontation of CEE findings with Western results

Author/s	Is the regional/cultural context considered?	Are comparisons made against the 'Western' results?	Are the findings consistent with 'Western' results?
Barjaktarović <i>et al.</i> , 2016	Yes	n/a	n/a
Bielawska, 2021	Yes	No	No
Bukalska <i>et al.</i> , 2021	No	Yes	Yes, not directly
Dacko-Pikiewicz, 2019	No	No	n/a
Dick <i>et al.</i> , 2021	Yes	No	Yes
Domańska <i>et al.</i> , 2022	No	Yes	n/a
Górska-Warsewicz <i>et al.</i> , 2020	Yes	Yes	Yes
Haddoud <i>et al.</i> , 2021	Yes, indirectly	Yes	No
Hategan <i>et al.</i> , 2019	Yes	Yes	No
Horbach <i>et al.</i> , 2022	Yes	Yes	Yes
Horská <i>et al.</i> , 2020	No	No	No
Horváthová <i>et al.</i> , 2020	No	No	No
Horvatinčić <i>et al.</i> , 2016	Yes	No	n/a
Jurásek <i>et al.</i> , 2021	Yes	Yes	Yes
Kašparová, 2018	No	No	No
Kašparová, 2017	No	No	n/a
Kocianová <i>et al.</i> , 2022	No	Yes	Yes, partially
Kopecki <i>et al.</i> , 2014	No	No	No
Korauš <i>et al.</i> , 2020	No	No	Yes
Lulcheva, 2021	No	No	n/a
Mikusová <i>et al.</i> , 2020	Yes	No	n/a
Myšáková <i>et al.</i> , 2016	No	No	No
Pijet-Migoń & Królikowska, 2020	Yes	No	n/a
Rožman & Tominc, 2022	No	No	Yes
Rumanko <i>et al.</i> , 2021	No	Yes	No
Rydvalová <i>et al.</i> , 2016	Yes	No	n/a
Sadkowska, 2018	Yes	No	Yes
Svetlačić <i>et al.</i> , 2017	No	No	n/a
Szczepkowska, 2019	No	No	No
Tošović-Stevanović <i>et al.</i> , 2021	No	No	n/a

Source: own elaboration.

Firstly, let us make a crucial remark on the number of publications. While only 30 articles on FFs sustainability indexed in the WoS and Scopus have been published in CEE countries since 2014, in countries with a longer history of free market development, the set of publications is visibly wider. This could lead to the conclusion that sustainability in CEE is still a 'fresh' subject of scientific interest. Considering the fact that sustainable development is set to become an inevitable business philosophy (Curado & Mota, 2021; Delmas & Gergaud, 2014; Zheng *et al.*, 2019), a parallel growth of works devoted to this issue must emerge.

The above conclusion is supported by the fact that many research topics have not yet been addressed, as most articles focus only on specific sustainability issues, *i.e.* the social (Bielawska, 2021; Kašparová, 2017; Kašparová, 2018) or environmental aspects (Haddoud *et al.*, 2021; Horvatinčić *et al.*, 2016; Myšáková *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, the research covers only a part of the complex research area of sustainable development.

The results of studies in CEE largely cover the findings from different parts of the world. However, some differences can be observed. Research shows that family involvement constitutes the starting point for the sustainable development of FFs across the world (Ardito *et al.*, 2019; Arena & Michelin, 2018) and in CEE (Domańska *et al.*, 2022; Kopecki *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, global research indicated

that solid family values (Chou *et al.*, 2016) and family religiousness influence the level of FFs' sustainability (Pieper *et al.*, 2020). Bielawska (2021) also concluded that social involvement in CEE derives from the values and attitudes of the owners' families. Similarly to the findings of Broccardo *et al.* (2018), the SRL also indicated that deep attachment to the local community fosters such sustainable initiatives as environmental protection, social commitment, and CSR (Horská *et al.*, 2020; Kocianová *et al.*, 2020; Kopecki *et al.*, 2014; Pijet-Migoń & Królikowska, 2020). The context of regional embeddedness is more detailed in CEE than in studies conducted in Western countries (Backman & Palmberg, 2015; Baù *et al.*, 2019; Karlsson, 2018). This may result from the fact that FFs in this region are operating regionally rather than internationally.

Findings distinguishing CEE literature from other studies are related to the cultural connotation in the approach to SEW. In the USA, for example, FFs are not always sentimental about the social aspects, and often the financial benefits are more prioritized (Haque *et al.*, 2019; Nason *et al.*, 2019), whereas a different attitude in this regard is observed in CEE (Bukalska *et al.*, 2021; Jurásek *et al.*, 2021). This difference may result from the fact that in the USA, FFs are now managed by the generation succeeding the founders. This generation is not as emotionally attached to the firms as their founders. In CEE, the founders still manage or influence the management of FFs, thus non-financial goals still play a significant role.

Dick *et al.* (2021) and Domańska *et al.* (2022) also highlight the differences in sustainable development activities related to the founder generation in CEE family firms. Similarly, the context of the succeeding generation has been investigated by Hategan *et al.* (2019) and Szczepkowska (2019). Because FFs in CEE constitute a large homogeneous group of founders with a similar cultural and religious background (Bielawska, 2021; Domańska & Zajkowski, 2022; Hadryś-Nowak, 2020), they can serve as an interesting sample for research on the impact of family firms' long-term orientation on sustainable development, especially in the context of the successive generations of owners.

Furthermore, Western findings indicate that increased customer awareness of sustainable goods and services boosts companies' focus on sustainable business practices (Zaman & Shamsuddin, 2017), which has been confirmed for CEE by Kopecki *et al.* (2014) and Rumanko *et al.* (2021). Similarly, the impact of market pressures (Curado & Mota, 2021) and regulations (Zheng *et al.*, 2019) as factors prompting sustainable development of FFs was confirmed by CEE research (Kašparová, 2017; Sadjkowska, 2018). The presentation of information on socially responsible activities to stakeholders depends largely on the legal requirements. In the CEE countries that are part of the EU, the legal regulations are the same as for other EU members. The situation may differ for CEE countries outside the EU. Taking this into consideration, it seems that cross-country studies on how FFs communicate their sustainability measures to stakeholders would pose an interesting research direction.

Importantly, some of the studies comparing CEE family and non-family businesses did not confirm the Western findings (Horváthová *et al.*, 2020; Korauš *et al.*, 2020; Rumanko *et al.*, 2021). Considering the conflicting results and the fact that only nine out of the 30 analysed articles presented a comparison of aspects concerning the sustainable development of non-family and family enterprises, this may also indicate an interesting research gap.

To sum up, the results contradicting the findings in the world literature encourage to undertake research on the sustainable development of FFs in CEE. As Kašparová (2018) notes in her bibliometric review, existing research mainly focuses on FFs in Western Europe, Asia, and the USA, thus there is a lack of CEE-relevant research in this field. Since FFs in CEE constitute a large homogeneous group with a similar cultural and religious background, they may also present as an interesting group for future research (Bielawska, 2021; Dick *et al.*, 2021), especially in the context of generational ownership change.

The identification of differences between Western and CEE findings can direct scholars towards future research directions. Moreover, new research trends can offer theoretical and practical implications for businesses, managers, and other scholars. We conclude this SLR with a general call for further research in the field of sustainable development of FFs in CEE.

Furthermore, if we were to assume that sustainable development and implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals will gain momentum in the coming years, our findings could provide some guidance for practitioners, mainly in relation to the design of a business environment capable of supporting and facilitating the pursuit of this development path.

Our SLR attempted to follow the guidelines recommended by Kraus (2020), although some limitations surfaced. The use of two databases (WoS and Scopus) may have resulted in the inclusion of non-relevant articles in the sample (Hiebl, 2021), especially since, as noted by Mongeon and Paul-Hus (2016), the social sciences are underrepresented in the WoS and Scopus. Moreover, authors of studies within the CEE region often publish their research in non-indexed journals or in their native languages; such studies were not included in our review. The use of other databases (e.g. EBSCO or CEJSH) could enrich the study. As with any SLR, subjectivity cannot be completely excluded from our review. Nevertheless, our SLR identified research gaps and recommend directions for future research in the context of sustainable development of FFs in CEE countries. Regrettably, our conclusions and recommendation are based on a small number of existing studies (30). Short *et al.* (2016) suggest 50 articles as the minimum number of research items to be included in a literature review, although Hiebl (2021) consider the setting of such limits arbitrary. In this case, research on the sustainability of FFs in post-socialist countries is still at a preliminary stage, thus the resultant number of research items is justifiable. Certainly, an assessment of the state of knowledge in the entire CEE region remains difficult, as some countries are not represented in our sample. Nevertheless, the above shortcomings do not significantly affect the quality of our SLR.

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The contribution share of authors is equal and amounts to 20% for each author. AD – conceptualisation, methodology, discussion, AG – literature writing, calculations, discussion, OM – methodology, calculations, discussion, EWJ – conceptualisation, literature writing, discussion, RZ – methodology, discussion, conclusions.

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Conflict of Interest

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