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## Article

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## (IN)EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION ABOUT SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY? EXAMINING LARGE EUROPEAN BUSINESSES IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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**Abstract.** *Purpose* – Businesses are expected to be socially responsible by engaging in Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and even the Creation of shared values (CSV). The aim of this contribution is to critically explore whether large European businesses operating in Czechia, recognized as social responsibility leaders, effectively communicate CSR as opposed to their competitors.

*Research methodology* – A case study with three stages was conducted. First, 35 large European businesses were identified, which repeatedly ranked among the TOP 25 Czech companies with the highest social responsibility BpS synthetic index, and their 15 competitors. Second, an Internet search and content analysis of Websites of these 50 companies was performed to categorize and assess how they report about their socially responsible behaviors. Third, leading Czech disinformation websites were examined for evidence of tacit cooperation with the disinformation scene in the form of support via advertising.

*Findings* – The study revealed that large European businesses, recognized as social responsibility leaders, communicate extensively about their social responsibility. However, the effectiveness of such communications is controversial. In addition, a significant part of these businesses were found to be tacitly associated with disinformation platforms, which are completely at odds with with basic social responsibility concepts.

*Research limitations* – The qualitative nature of the case study does not allow direct generalizations.

*Practical implications* – The visualization of the juxtaposed results via comparative and complementary tables leads to pioneering propositions about the interest and lack of maturity regarding social responsibility, very diverse degrees of effectiveness of the communications, and even several alleged leaders failing in their efforts.

*Originality/Value* – It is the first study to compare CSR communications by alleged white sheep and black sheep, while having consistency tested by association with disinformation websites. The generated propositions call for further longitudinal and multi-jurisdiction studies to verify and enhance the awareness about efficient, effective, mature and consistent social responsibility in the EU.

**Keywords:** CSR, CSV, social responsibility, sustainability.

**JEL Classification:** M14, Q56.

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## 1. Introduction

A modern, successful European business is expected to be effective, efficient and legitimate, to be conducted in a sustainable manner and to properly communicate about it (MacGregor Pelikánová, 2021) while taking advantage of the multi-stakeholder model (Van Tulder et al.,

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2016; Van Tulder & Keen, 2018). Sustainable business conduct should reflect all three pillars of sustainability – economic, environmental and social – as depicted by the popular diagram of three overlapping circles (Purvis et al., 2019) and engage with responsibility towards the entire society, i.e. the Corporate Social Responsibility (“CSR”) (Bali & Fan, 2019) and reframed as the creation of shared values (“CSV”). Plainly, a successful business should do the right things (effectiveness), correctly (efficiency), and in a responsible manner towards the entire society (legitimacy). Stakeholders need to be informed about it in order to accept it (CSR), and become engaged (CSV).

EU polices and EU law have been following international legal trends in this arena as set by the United Nations via the resolution called *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (“UN Agenda 2030”) which was issued in 2015 (MacGregor Pelikánová et al., 2021a; Peña et al., 2023). UN Agenda 2030 declares 17 Sustainable Development Goals (“SDGs”) and 169 associated targets (MacGregor Pelikánová & MacGregor, 2020). The current EU Commission, under the presidency of Ursula von der Leyen, set six priorities for 2019–24, such as A European Green Deal, and all six advance SDGs. These 17 SDGs and six EU priorities are not, *per se*, detached from business realities, see, for example, the concerns about innovations, IS/IT as well as sustainability and CSR aspects for businesses as reflected by SDG 9 Sustainable industrialization and innovation (Balcerzak & MacGregor Pelikánová, 2020). A myriad of EU policies addresses these aspects, and EU law on social responsibility has been progressively mushrooming while moving away from suggestions about facultative reporting to hardcore duties (MacGregor Pelikánová & MacGregor, 2020; Petera et al., 2021). This can be demonstrated by the novelizations of the Accounting Directive 2013/34/EU in 2014 and 2022, or on the sectorial regulation by Regulation 2019/2088 on sustainability related disclosures in the financial services sector (“SFDR”) or the standardization via the Taxonomy Regulation 2020/852 (“Taxonomy Regulation”) (MacGregor Pelikánová & Rubáček, 2022).

The call for responsible business conduct and its communication to society-at-large (MacGregor Pelikánová & Hála, 2021) is magnified by crises (Carroll, 2021; MacGregor Pelikánová, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic, the War in Ukraine, high inflation, etc. have heavily impacted global society, including the EU (Cowling & Dvoutělý, 2023; MacGregor Pelikánová et al., 2021a; Vávrová, 2022). Investors and customers have become even more cost conscious and suspicious about the responsible behavior of businesses (Hála et al., 2023; Kathayat, 2022). Doubts about greenwashing called CSR waste (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020) and misplaced or uncoordinated social responsibility endeavors (Kasturi Rangan et al., 2015) need to be addressed by Environmental, Social and Governance (“ESG”), i.e. corporate policies about semi-tangible plans on sustainability and CSR satisfying the demands of external stakeholders (Balcerzak et al., 2023a). The EU wants to achieve coherence between industrial, environmental, climate and energy policies and the creation of an optimal business environment for sustainable growth, job creation and innovation based on a shared engagement (Hála et al., 2023). This should lead to the transformation of the EU economy into a circular and value-based economy advancing SDGs (Jakubelskas & Skvarciany, 2023; Ma & Xue, 2023; Van Tulder & Van Mil, 2023).

Businesses, at their end, have realized that environmental and social dimensions are integral parts of modern entrepreneurship (MacGregor Pelikánová & Sani, 2023). Prior studies

have concluded that the consistent integration of social responsibility into corporate strategy strengthens corporate growth (Fuchsová, 2022). The social responsibility means duties which can generate costs. They are not per se bad for business, provided they are effective, efficient, legitimate and well communicated (MacGregor Pelikánová, 2021; Muskehe & Phuri, 2021). The well selected and reasonable social responsibility has to be correctly communicated to the public-at-large (MacGregor Pelikánová & Hála, 2021), in particular while taking advantage of current reliable digital platforms (Turečková et al., 2023a). The currency is trust and the plague is disinformation (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Businesses tainting their alleged social responsibility by having ties to lies and manipulation are contradicting the very foundation and underlying values of social responsibility, they are not attempting to achieve real social responsibility (Fou, 2020). Businesses reducing themselves to being associated with disinformation platforms and/or supporting them by using them for paid advertisements (Rao, 2022), are a disgrace, incompatible with basic deontology and an insult to CSR.

Stakeholders need to be properly informed about the social responsibility of the given business, so their support is stimulated (MacGregor Pelikánová & Hála, 2021). Shareholder activism (Goranova & Ryan, 2014) along with investors ESG preferences and customers "green" choices should influence the dynamics of managerial discretion (Aragon-Correa et al., 2004; Hutzschenreuter & Kleindienst, 2013), reduce and/or re-shape managerial opportunism (Duong et al., 2022) and steer European businesses towards CSR and CSV, especially if the EU policy and legal framework demands it (MacGregor Pelikánová & Sani, 2023). In this perspective the concepts and models of Milton Friedman and R. Edward Freeman are not that remote (Hühn, 2023) and the expansion of corporate accountability is induced (Dillard & Vinnari, 2019). The corporate social irresponsibility is an issue (Mocciaro Li Destri et al., 2022) destroying the firm (business) value (Ma & Xue, 2023).

Consequently, large European businesses officially recognized as social responsibility leaders should have the resources, willingness and readiness to engage with the social responsibility and to effectively communicate about it (MacGregor Pelikánová et al., 2021). They should provide transparent and reliable information to stakeholders about both financial and non-financial information via a multitude of platforms (Kim et al., 2012; MacGregor Pelikánová, 2021). They do not have to wait for the legal imposition turning their *de facto* accountability into *de iure* liability (MacGregor Pelikánová, 2021; Schüz, 2012), instead they are expected by their stakeholders to be pro-active, especially if they are operating in certain industries (MacGregor et al., 2020; Sroka & Szántó, 2018). However there is a wide research gap and thus all these suggestions are rather theoretical propositions without the empirical verification. Consequently, it is highly relevant to critically explore this matter. Considering the particularity of the Central European market dominated by large European businesses, which operates via national companies, and the availability of a well-established and recognized social responsibility ranking with a synthetic BpS social responsibility index, a pilot case study was conducted consisting of 35 large Czech companies and 15 of their competitors. Each of these 50 Czech companies belong to a large European business active in several central European jurisdictions and uses its own domain with Websites to communicate about its social responsibility, CSR and CSV. After providing this introduction (1.), the starting point for this pilot case study is a robust theoretical background examination addressing sustainability,

CSR, CSV and social responsibility in general (2.). Such a theoretical background facilitates the selection of data, a re-adjustment of the sample and the choice of research methodology with a proper categorization to assess these 50 domains while using a manual Delphi with Likert scale scoring by a panel of independent experts, i.e. a three-stage case study (identifying 50 businesses, assessing their own Websites and examining their presence on disinformation platforms) (3.). This leads to research results, namely to the juxtaposition of information about the (in)effectiveness of communications of social responsibility and a critical comparative discussion (4.). Such a comparative and complementary content analysis and assessment provides a set of rather unexpected propositions regarding the communications about responsible behavior by large European businesses operating via Czech companies.

## 2. Theoretical background

Post-modern society is characterized by increased competitiveness, determined with the ability to face Industry 4.0 and 5.0 challenges (Lewandowska et al., 2023; Turek et al., 2023), a focus on technological innovations and IS/IT (Turečková et al., 2023b; Świadek et al., 2022; Balcerzak et al., 2023b) and financial innovations (Skalický et al., 2022, 2023; Teng et al., 2023), which with its negative consequences can result in a deep conceptual conflict linked to the very roots of our civilization and culture, the *raison d'être* and distinguishing of good and bad (Balcerzak & MacGregor Pelikánová, 2020). The reconciliation of available and often diminishing resources with the requirements of the constantly increasing and demanding world population becomes a challenge (Meadows et al., 1972). Economic life consists of a capital flow (Paksiova & Oriskova, 2020; Tasaryova & Paksova, 2021), circular flow and spontaneous innovation changes (Schumpeter, 1934) and each business to do innovation and marketing, i.e. "*Marketing and Innovation produce results, all the rest are costs*" (Drucker, 1973, 2015). Innovativeness is about the positive reception of new ideas and this reception is facilitated by the dissemination of information and marketing (MacGregor Pelikánová, 2021). The existence and future of our society and the continuation of innovations, research and development (Jančíčková & Paksova, 2023) appear even more vulnerable in the context of current crises (Carroll, 2021; MacGregor Pelikánová et al., 2021) and the individual accountability is called upon. Namely, businesses are expected to be responsible internally, vis-à-vis their shareholders and employees, as well as externally, vis-à-vis their other stakeholders (Schüz, 2012). This individual accountability of businesses towards the entire society is justified by the fact that they touch the lives of all – see the concepts developed by Howard R. Bowen (Carroll, 2016). Consequently, CSR is semi-imposed on businesses and they have the choice of how they will address it. They can either reject CSR (Kathayat, 2022) or endure CSR (Porter & Kramer, 2006) in a reactive manner, or embrace it in a proactive manner, see CSV (Porter & Kramer, 2011, 2019). A systematic and consistent integration of CSR should boost competitive advantage (Fuchsová, 2022) and update business models no matter the size (Oliveira-Dias et al., 2022; Rózsa et al., 2022; Çera et al., 2022; Belas et al., 2024). The proposed six CSR categories (environmental protection, care of employees, focus on the community, fight against corruption and bribery, advancement of human rights and drive for innovations via research and development (R&D) (MacGregor et al., 2020; Dvorský et al., 2023) represent a list (MacGregor

Pelikánová & MacGregor, 2020) from which businesses select – it is not about the menu, but about *à la carte* (Hála et al., 2022).

In addition, the all or nothing approach is a fiction, instead, each and every business considers all three pillars of sustainability and prioritizes both regarding them and in between them. Consequently, each and every business makes a strategic priority choice. Ideally, this selection matches the stakeholders' expectations and leads to the synergy of economic and societal responsibility via CSV (Jansson, 2022; Porter & Kramer, 2006, 2011, 2019), while making the ethical dimension penetrate all layers of Carroll's pyramid (Carroll, 2016). However, we do not live in an ideal world. Ill-conceived and/or poorly communicated CSR at any price is a disrespectful waste and a perfect example of anti-CSV (MacGregor Pelikánová & Hála, 2021). The traditional perspective of Milton Friedman (Friedman, 2007) should be updated and conveyed to all stakeholders, and such an ethical command is expected to be codified, e.g. via Codes of Ethics (Balcerzak & MacGregor Pelikánová, 2020; MacGregor Pelikánová et al., 2021b), materialized in daily operations and effectively communicated (Cerchia & Piccolo, 2019). Support and mutual co-operation by various stakeholders cannot prosper in the context of a lack of transparency (Kim et al., 2012), misinformation and/or significant information asymmetry (MacGregor Pelikánová & Hála, 2021). Stakeholder evaluation includes concerns about the moral and pragmatic legitimacy (Mocciaro Li Destri et al., 2022) and the information about it is provided.

The EU is aware of this, wants to increase accountability and has progressively updated its policies and law accordingly. The EU was involved in the formation of SDGs and has always endorsed them vigorously. The current European Commission pushed this even to a higher level as is obvious from the Political Guidelines 2019–2024 with their 6 ambitions aka priorities and the top interest in the synergy effect of SDGs and the multi-stakeholder model matching perfectly with SDG 17 Strengthen The Means Of Implementation And Revitalize The Global Partnership For Sustainable Development, in particular its target 17.17 Encourage and promote effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships. Consequently, the EU brought the sectorial regulation via SFDR and the pro-Green Deal standardization via Taxonomy Regulation (Rubáček et al., 2023) and keeps updating the Accounting Directive 2013/34/EU via the Non-Financial Reporting Directive 2014/95/EU and Directive (EU) 2022/2464 aka CSRD by extending the imposition of the duty to provide non-financial reporting and being socially responsible and making this more actionable (environmental, employees, social/community, human rights, no bribery) (MacGregor Pelikánová & MacGregor, 2020). For example, CSRD requires EU member states to enact measures to ensure that sustainability disclosures include information on plans and strategies to ensure that a corporate entity's business model and strategy are compatible with the transition to a sustainable economy, the global temperate target of 1.5 Celsius to limit warming, and the goal of achieving climate neutrality by 2050, as well as exposure of the entity to coal, oil and gas, see the new version of the famous Art. 19a. Legislative developments regarding green and ecolabelling, and generally climate oriented, suggests that the EU intends to consider even direct government action and environment sanctions, as materialized in other jurisdictions (Waqas et al., 2023).

The EU is working towards turning at least certain aspects and categories of the CSR of businesses towards society, and their reporting into a legal responsibility, aka liability, endorsed through enforcement by the state machinery. However, whether this regulative framework is having positive or negative effects on value creation is debateable, and is the subject of recent studies (Díaz Tautiva et al., 2023). Responsible behavior typically requires up-front costs, but does not translate, per se, automatically into a more effective, efficient and legitimate product. The direct or indirect support by various stakeholders is critical and the multi-stakeholder model and approach highly relevant (Van Tulder et al., 2016; Van Tulder & Keen, 2018). Stakeholders must be provided with information about the responsible conduct of the business so that they can make an educated decision to support such a business by working for it, investing in it, selecting its products or services and/or paying a (circular) premium, aka the CSR bonus, for products of such a business (D'Adamo & Lupi, 2021). Providing them only with financial indicators via classic financial reports is insufficient, because they are about the past (Hálek et al., 2020) and stakeholders want to know about the future (MacGregor Pelikánová & Hála, 2021). Indeed, non-financial indicators are critically important (Hálek et al., 2020) and should be published in an ongoing and transparent manner (MacGregor Pelikánová, 2021; Petera et al., 2019). The platform par excellence to do so is the internet domain with Websites of each involved business (MacGregor Pelikánová, 2021). This digital setting is immune to health and other crises such as COVID-19, and available to all businesses (Carroll, 2021), especially those emphasizing their extraordinary resources and intellectual property (Paksiova & Kubascikova, 2015), such as, for example, luxury fashion businesses (MacGregor Pelikánová & Sani, 2023). Information about responsible behavior should be easily and smoothly communicated to their customers (Olšanová et al., 2018), as well as their investors and other stakeholders (MacGregor Pelikánová & MacGregor, 2020). This should contribute to the synergy effect of the commitment to sustainability and a good investor, transparency and/or investor experience (Calza et al., 2022), see for example the positive relationship between pollution prevention and financial performance (Jansson, 2022), i.e. being green and transparent reduces risks and corporate misconduct (Kim et al., 2012). Similarly, it is an internal source of information which might lead to the threat of greenwashing (MacGregor Pelikánová & Rubáček, 2022) and other types of misinformation and disinformation.

A crisis means a moment of intense challenge questioning the previous state of affairs, and pushing for change, often a bouleversement (MacGregor Pelikánová, 2021). Businesses facing a crisis need to (re)consider and re(state) their identity, priorities and self-presentation (Carroll, 2021; MacGregor Pelikánová & Sani, 2023) Pursuant to Albert Einstein, crises have a key positive role in humanity's progress, because they stimulate inventiveness and innovations (D'Adamo & Lupi, 2021). Recent and current crises have magnified prior differences and pushed businesses to go even more to their very roots. Some businesses have perceived this as a call for openness and a willingness to change, to engage in individual or collective initiatives (Małys, 2023), and to "Evangelize" their supply chain (Fontoura & Coelho, 2020). They seriously consider sustainability demands pushed by the UN and EU, including full engagement with digitalization and the projection of SDGs in daily operations (Van Tulder & Van Mil, 2023). Being responsible towards society and informing about it in one's own digital setting has become highly relevant (Ma & Xue, 2023; MacGregor Pelikánová, 2021).

At the same time, it has increased the use of media and instruments undermining, or even threatening, our civilization, based on individual responsibility and democratic principles, either intentionally or unintentionally.

Since communication means “to share” information and values, it is critical for involvement and co-operation and arguably is one of the most important entrepreneurial skills (Musheke & Phiri, 2021). Effective communication entails common understanding and the resulting sharing minds and wills is strategic for organizational goal achievement, including the competitive advantage and genuine mutual collaboration (Gamil & Abd Rahman, 2023). In contrast, ineffective communication means that the message is lost and this leads to uncertainty, apprehension, dissatisfaction, and perhaps even frustration, dispute and conflict (Hossain, 2009), i.e. ineffective communication is very contra-productive and often worse than a mere neutral lack of communication (Henderson et al., 2016). The effective communication of social responsibility is manifestly critical for businesses and several studies have explained, in particular, that such a communication on the Internet can have a myriad of positive effects on business reputation, brand attitude and purchase intention, consumer engagement, etc. (Fernández et al., 2021; Hála et al., 2023; MacGregor Pelikánová, 2021). For over one decade, the CSR communication is not only a rather popular subject of academic articles and scientific studies, but as well systematic reviews underlying the critical aspect of disclosure (Golob et al., 2013) and the multitude of forms and purposes of CSR communication, such as informative, persuasive, aspirational and participatory (Elving et al., 2015). Recent EU studies have not only confirmed the evolutionary nature of CSR communication but as well have revealed new trends due to digitalization (Verk et al., 2021). This is further magnified by new demands by the EU law and consequently, the social responsibility is to be communicated by a growing pool of businesses and the Websites are to be used for it (MacGregor Pelikánová, 2021). Therefore, the Internet is the arena where basically all European businesses present themselves, their social responsibility and their products and these presentations are to be posted both on the own Websites of businesses as well as on (paid) Websites of other subjects (Coupand, 2005; MacGregor Pelikánová & Sani, 2023). European businesses typically use their own Websites but in addition, in hopes of reaching more consumers and/or investors, or by negligence in purchasing advertising packages which consist of a combination of reputable and disreputable Websites, can become associated with, and/or finance, hostile disinformation or conspiratorial themes. Unlike a mere misinformation, the disinformation entails the presence of intent, i.e. disinformation platforms are done by orchestrated activities intentionally advancing strategic deceptions (Diaz Ruiz, 2023). Currently, deceptive content circulates on digital platforms in or related to the EU (Venturini, 2022) and contributes to media manipulation (Diaz Ruiz, 2023), society polarization (Kreiss & McGregor, 2023), undermining of democratic institutions (McKay & Tenove, 2021) and values (MacGregor Pelikánová et al., 2024). Financial and other incentives behind the spread of disinformation via digital platforms have been identified (Diaz Ruiz, 2023), or to put it differently, financial and other incentives reward the spread of disinformation via digital platforms (Braun & Eklund, 2019). Obviously, honest businesses recognizing the rule of law and democratic values, including transparency and respect, should neither support disinformation platform nor being associated with them, and this means even staying away from the tempting prospects of advertising via such platforms

(MacGregor Pelikánová et al., 2024). However previous studies about European businesses have revealed that some of them, either intentionally or by (gross) negligence, succumb this temptation and even go for fake news (Selakovic et al., 2020).

It is difficult to exaggerate the impact that the emergence of a globally active, locally pertinent environment of aggressive computational propaganda has had, and is having, on trust in democratic societies (Woolley & Howard, 2019). Typically vindicated in the realm of media and politics for influencing the outcomes of elections ranging from the United States to France and beyond (Tenove, 2020), the snowballing decline of trust in the news media (Newman et al., 2022), and respect for public institutions (Bennet & Livingston, 2018), the corporate community has not emerged unscathed from criticism for its contributions, even in the popular media (Fou, 2020). Since one of the primary incentives to spread disinformation is financial (besides political), with a significant source of funding possible via advertising (Rao, 2022), a direct CSR-related issue concerns, on one hand, the agnostic approach of companies towards the indirect funding of disinformation campaigns via corporate advertising, and, on the other hand the failure of companies to conduct due diligence to ensure that their advertising is not supporting anti-democratic or hate-based initiatives (Li et al., 2021). Brought to the attention of civil society due to activist initiatives – most prominently Sleeping Giants, an online activist organization which organizes pressure campaigns to entice businesses to stop advertising on disinformation Websites (Sleeping Giants, n.d.), studies have found that, regardless of these and similar pressure groups, the corporate world has been slow to incorporate practices into their activities which would prevent the funding of hate (Kshetri & Voas, 2017). The global market in disinformation advertising has been estimated at a quarter of a billion dollars (Global Disinformation Index, 2019) with a great deal of major corporate entities, often unwittingly, complicit. Locally, income for top Czech disinformation Websites from corporate advertising has been estimated at almost CZK 200,000 crowns per month, making it a relatively lucrative business (Syróvatka et al., 2020). Recent international initiatives with local engagement, like the connection between the Global Disinformation Index (<https://www.disinformationindex.org/>) and Nelez (<https://www.nelez.cz/>), show promise. Regardless, it is clear that the rabid Czech disinformation scene, estimated to reach well over half of the population, with nearly half of those unable to judge when they are consuming disinformation, can only be confronted by CSR initiatives (Nadační fond nezávislé žurnalistiky, 2021). Recent events and crises have revealed these issues in an even larger magnitude, and led not only to economic and social consequences (Carroll, 2021), but to criminal proceedings, as well as perhaps contributing to the erosion of the rule of law and sustainability awareness and readiness.

The iconic statement that *“sustainability requires the consideration of time”* and obliges businesses *“to make intertemporal trade-offs to safeguard intergenerational equity”* (Bansal & DesJardine, 2014, p. 70) is pushed forward. Consequently, businesses should achieve all of that in a synergetic manner without trade-offs (Van Tulder & Van Mil, 2023), i.e. to be profitable, innovative and altruistic by exploring all sustainability pillars – economic, environmental and social, and all six CSR categories – economic, environmental, social, employment, Human Rights, Research and Development, contributing to CSV themes such as respect and no waste. With the guidance of SDGs and EU, they should be genuinely accountable to all

stakeholders in a global (from the whole world) and perpetual (for future generations) and over anthropocentric (not only human beings, see affective ecology) manner. It is about building bridges between generations while demanding both individual and collective responsibility, which should not only entail human centric sustainability (Calza et al., 2022) but as well consider the entire biosphere (Fitzpatrick, 2023) and be built upon moral values going together with a love for life (biophilia) (Barbiero, 2021). Successful and progressive European businesses should be getting closer to this vision and communicate about it in an illustrious and convincing manner, correctly and effectively. What is the reality? How far or close are social responsibility leaders in their effective communications about their social responsibility via their own Internet domains with Websites?

### 3. Research methodology

The aim of this contribution is to critically explore whether large European businesses operating in the Czech Republic, officially recognized as social responsibility leaders, effectively communicate social responsibility as opposed to their competitors. The underlying hypotheses, as implied by theoretical and conceptual expectations, are that CSR leaders communicate effectively and efficiently about CSR and they do not engage with disinformation platforms, as opposed to their competitors. Due to its inherent nature and features, an analysis and assessment of social responsibility is rather an ephemeral task with subjective features, and lacking an axiomatic pre-disposition to classic mathematical and statistical processing. The selection of the sample (data) as well as the selection of the processing tools (methods) is neither obvious nor well-established. Nevertheless, prior studies have demonstrated that the selection of a heterogenous sample of at least 20 businesses predisposed to social responsibility, and basically inclined to its proclamation, has the potential to provide sufficient data (MacGregor et al., 2020). The relevancy can be further increased based on their size or based on their industrial particularism (MacGregor et al., 2020). Hence, the aim is to be addressed by a pilot three stages case study from April 2023 regarding data from the Internet concerning 50 large Czech companies.

The first stage was about the identification of the sample entailing white and black sheep, while taking advantage of official rankings provided by a well-known Czech non-profit organization, BpS, forming an alliance which has engaged, for over two decades, in selecting responsible companies in the Czech Republic and in enhancing awareness about social responsibility and related commitments. In particular, BpS provides the only independent sustainable entrepreneurship rating in the Czech Republic, and annually selects the top 25 large responsible Czech businesses ("TOP 25") in the strategic category. This category is open to Czech companies employing more than 250 employees and/or having an annual turnover exceeding EUR 50 million and/or with assets exceeding EUR 43 million. Annually, a professional panel including representatives of various experts and key stakeholders rates these businesses via a BpS synthetic index built upon five criteria: (i) sustainability and CSR strategy, (ii) responsible approach to employees, (iii) integration across supply chains, (iv) environmental responsibility, and (v) support of communities and involvement of employees. The annual rating is done in two rounds, the results are posted online and reveal 25 large Czech companies

with the highest BpS index, see <https://www.odpovednefirmy.cz/cena-top/vysledky.html>. During 2018–2022, 35 Czech companies appeared among these TOP 25, i.e. there are very few changes in the composition of this body, and the majority of companies from the TOP 25 in one year reappear among the TOP 25 in subsequent years. They conduct, predominantly, their business in seven fields where they are competing with 15 other large Czech companies which were never selected in the TOP 25 by BpS during 2018–2022, e.g. in telecommunications it is O2, Vodafone v T-Mobile, while in retail it is Albert, Tesco v Billa, Kaufland, Penny, etc. In addition, each of these Czech 50 companies belong to a large European business active in several central European jurisdictions and uses its own domain with Websites to communicate about its social responsibility, CSR and CSV. The list of both cohorts, these (alleged) 35 socially responsible white sheep and (alleged) 15 socially responsible black sheep, with their URL addresses is provided in the Table 1.

**Table 1.** 35 Czech companies among “Top 25 responsible” and their 15 competitors (source: own research)

1 <sup>st</sup> cohort – Companies belonging in the “Top 25 responsible”		
1	Accenture	<a href="https://www.accenture.com/us-en/services/sustainability-index#block-what-we-think.html">https://www.accenture.com/us-en/services/sustainability-index#block-what-we-think.html</a>
2	Albert	<a href="https://www.albert.cz/vyhledavani\$a151449?query=odpov%C4%9Bdnost&amp;limit=30">https://www.albert.cz/vyhledavani\$a151449?query=odpov%C4%9Bdnost&amp;limit=30</a>
3	Coca-Cola	<a href="https://www.coca-cola.cz/tiskove-zpravy/coca-cola-vydala-pravidelny-report-udrzitelnosti">https://www.coca-cola.cz/tiskove-zpravy/coca-cola-vydala-pravidelny-report-udrzitelnosti</a>
4	ČEZ	<a href="https://www.cez.cz/udrzitelnost-a-etika?from=udrzitelnost-hp">https://www.cez.cz/udrzitelnost-a-etika?from=udrzitelnost-hp</a>
5	Česká podn. pojiš.	<a href="https://www.cpp.cz/o-spolecnosti/spolecenska-odpovednost">https://www.cpp.cz/o-spolecnosti/spolecenska-odpovednost</a>
6.	ČSOB	<a href="https://www.csob.cz/portal/csob/spolecenska-odpovednost">https://www.csob.cz/portal/csob/spolecenska-odpovednost</a>
7	Direct Par. Distrib.	<a href="https://www.dpd.com/cz/cs/o-nas/spolecenska-odpovednost/">https://www.dpd.com/cz/cs/o-nas/spolecenska-odpovednost/</a>
8	EdenRed CZ	<a href="https://www.edenred.cz/">https://www.edenred.cz/</a>
9	GEFCO ČR	<a href="https://cz.gefco.net/cs/newsroom/tiskove-zpravy/">https://cz.gefco.net/cs/newsroom/tiskove-zpravy/</a>
10	GlaxoSmithKline	<a href="https://www.gsk.com/en-gb/locations/czech-republic/cs-cze/">https://www.gsk.com/en-gb/locations/czech-republic/cs-cze/</a>
11	HP Inc.	<a href="https://www.hp.com/cz-cs/search.html#qt=odpov%C4%9Bdnost">https://www.hp.com/cz-cs/search.html#qt=odpov%C4%9Bdnost</a>
12	Hyundai	<a href="https://www.hyundai.com/cz/cz.html">https://www.hyundai.com/cz/cz.html</a>
13	IKEA	<a href="https://www.ikea.com/cz/cs/this-is-ikea/sustainable-everyday/">https://www.ikea.com/cz/cs/this-is-ikea/sustainable-everyday/</a> <a href="https://www.ikea.com/cz/cs/this-is-ikea/community-engagement/">https://www.ikea.com/cz/cs/this-is-ikea/community-engagement/</a>
14	ING Bank	<a href="https://www.ing.com/Czech-Republic-1.htm">https://www.ing.com/Czech-Republic-1.htm</a>
15	Kooperativa pojiš.	<a href="https://www.koop.cz/pojistovna-kooperativa/spolecenska-odpovednost">https://www.koop.cz/pojistovna-kooperativa/spolecenska-odpovednost</a>
16	Komerční banka	<a href="https://www.kb.cz/cs/o-bance/podnikame-udrzitelne">https://www.kb.cz/cs/o-bance/podnikame-udrzitelne</a>
17	KPMG	<a href="https://kpmg.com/cz/cs/home/o-nas/spolecenska-odpovednost.html">https://kpmg.com/cz/cs/home/o-nas/spolecenska-odpovednost.html</a>
18	Letiště Praha	<a href="https://www.prg.aero/udrzitelnost-esg">https://www.prg.aero/udrzitelnost-esg</a>
19	LIDL	<a href="https://spolecnost.lidl.cz/odpovednost">https://spolecnost.lidl.cz/odpovednost</a>
20	L'OREAL	<a href="https://www.loreal.com/cs-cz/czech-republic/articles/group/our-purpose-cz/">https://www.loreal.com/cs-cz/czech-republic/articles/group/our-purpose-cz/</a>
21	Microsoft	<a href="https://www.microsoft.com/cs-cz/sustainability/?rtc=1">https://www.microsoft.com/cs-cz/sustainability/?rtc=1</a>
22	MIELE	<a href="https://www.miele.cz/domacnost/trvale-udrzitelny-rozvoj-445.htm">https://www.miele.cz/domacnost/trvale-udrzitelny-rozvoj-445.htm</a>

End of Table 1

23	MONETA M. B.	<a href="https://clementia.cz/">https://clementia.cz/</a>
24	Nestlé	<a href="https://www.nestle.cz/cs/nestle-pro-spolecnost">https://www.nestle.cz/cs/nestle-pro-spolecnost</a>
25	O2 Czech Rep.	<a href="https://www.o2.cz/myslme-na#_il=cz-osobni-footerlink-udrzitelnost">https://www.o2.cz/myslme-na#_il=cz-osobni-footerlink-udrzitelnost</a>
26	Orlen Unipetrol	<a href="https://www.orlenunipetrol.cz/cs/zodpovedna_firma/Stranky/default.aspx">https://www.orlenunipetrol.cz/cs/zodpovedna_firma/Stranky/default.aspx</a>
27	Pivovary Starop.	<a href="https://pivovary-staropramen.cz/udrzitelnost">https://pivovary-staropramen.cz/udrzitelnost</a>
28	Plzeňský Prazd.	<a href="https://udrzitelnost.prazdroj.cz/">https://udrzitelnost.prazdroj.cz/</a>
29	PwC	<a href="https://www.pwc.com/cz/cs/o-nas.html">https://www.pwc.com/cz/cs/o-nas.html</a>
30	Saint Gobain A.	<a href="https://www.saint-gobain.cz/o-nas#spolecenska-odpovednost">https://www.saint-gobain.cz/o-nas#spolecenska-odpovednost</a>
31	Skanska	<a href="https://www.skanska.cz/kdo-jsme/sustainability-esg/">https://www.skanska.cz/kdo-jsme/sustainability-esg/</a>
32	Škoda Auto	<a href="https://www.skoda-auto.cz/o-spolecnosti/udrzitelnost">https://www.skoda-auto.cz/o-spolecnosti/udrzitelnost</a>
33	Tesco	<a href="https://corporate.itesco.cz/udrzitelnost/">https://corporate.itesco.cz/udrzitelnost/</a>
34	VELUX	<a href="https://www.velux.cz/nase-spolecnost/">https://www.velux.cz/nase-spolecnost/</a>
35	Vodafone	<a href="https://www.vodafone.cz/udrzitelne-podnikani/">https://www.vodafone.cz/udrzitelne-podnikani/</a>
2 <sup>nd</sup> cohort – Competitors of companies belonging to “Top 25 responsible”		
36	Allianz ČR	<a href="https://www.allianz.cz/cs_CZ/pojisteni/vse-o-allianz/informace-o-udrzitelnosti.html">https://www.allianz.cz/cs_CZ/pojisteni/vse-o-allianz/informace-o-udrzitelnosti.html</a>
37	Bayer ČR	<a href="https://www.bayer.com/en/cz/social-responsibility">https://www.bayer.com/en/cz/social-responsibility</a>
38	Billa	<a href="https://planbilla.cz/">https://planbilla.cz/</a>
39	Budějovický Bu.	<a href="https://www.budejovickybudvar.cz/">https://www.budejovickybudvar.cz/</a>
40	Central Group	<a href="https://www.central-group.cz/page/tiskove-zpravy">https://www.central-group.cz/page/tiskove-zpravy</a>
41	Česká spořitelna	<a href="https://www.csas.cz/cs/o-nas/udrzitelnost">https://www.csas.cz/cs/o-nas/udrzitelnost</a>
42	Ernst &Young	<a href="https://www.ey.com/cs_cz/sustainability">https://www.ey.com/cs_cz/sustainability</a>
43	Kaufland	<a href="https://www.kaufland.cz/">https://www.kaufland.cz/</a>
44	Metrostav	<a href="https://www.metrostav.cz/cs/udrzitelny-rozvoj">https://www.metrostav.cz/cs/udrzitelny-rozvoj</a>
45	Penny ČR	<a href="https://www.penny.cz/spolecenskaodpovednost/pomahamehezkycesky">https://www.penny.cz/spolecenskaodpovednost/pomahamehezkycesky</a>
46	Pepsi-Cola ČR	<a href="https://www.pepsi.cz/">https://www.pepsi.cz/</a>
47	Raiffeisen ČR	<a href="https://www.rb.cz/o-nas/spolecenska-odpovednost">https://www.rb.cz/o-nas/spolecenska-odpovednost</a>
48	TEVA ČR	<a href="https://www.teva.cz/about-teva/our-values/">https://www.teva.cz/about-teva/our-values/</a>
49	T-Mobil	<a href="https://www.t-mobile.cz/microsites/udrzitelnost/index.html">https://www.t-mobile.cz/microsites/udrzitelnost/index.html</a>
50	Zentiva	<a href="https://www.zentiva.cz/who-we-are/we-care">https://www.zentiva.cz/who-we-are/we-care</a>

The second stage was about the Internet search of own domains, with Websites, of these 50 companies and the categorization and assessment about how they report about social responsibility. In order to do such sustainability-CSR-CSV category-based scoring, it was necessary to extract categories from the literature review (see Theoretical Background) and summarize them, i.e. to consolidate them by merging overlapping categories. These social responsibility assessment categories were implied by the three-pillar structure of sustainability (economic, environment, social), six categories of CSR (environment, employment, social, human rights, against corruption, R&D and innovations) and two key values of CSV (respect, no waste). The overview table below was used as a supportive methodological tool leading to the eight social responsibility assessment categories – economic (ECO), environmental (ENV), social (SOC), employees and employment matters (EMP), Human Rights (HRs), Research and Development along with innovations (RD), respect (RES) and no waste (NOW) (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Responsibility typology and structure – 8 social responsibility assessment categories (source: own research)

Responsibility	Category	Abbreviation	Source
Responsibility layers aka responsibility pyramid	Philanthropy	SOC	Carroll 2016, 2021; MacGregor Pelikánová & Sani, 2023
	Ethical	SOC	
	Legal	ENV	
	Economic	ECO	
Public (law) responsibility = Sustainability	Economic	ECO	MacGregor Pelikánová & Sani, 2023; Purvis et al., 2019
	Environmental	ENV	
	Social	SOC	
Private (law) individual responsibility = CSR	Environmental	ENV	MacGregor Pelikánová & MacGregor, 2020
	Employees	EMP	
	Community	SOC	
	Human Rights	.HRs	
	xCorruption	ECO + SOC	
	R&D	R&D	
Intersection responsibility making economic and social win-win = CSV aka creating economic value by creating societal value	Reconceiving products and markets aka turning social in economic = honesty	ECO + SOC	Moon et al., 2014; Porter & Kramer, 2006, 2011, 2019
	Redefining productivity in the value chain = no waste, transparency	NOW	
	Building supportive industry clusters = respect, collaboration	RES	

A holistic assessment by content analysis of these 50 Websites was done by a panel focusing on these eight social responsibility categories (ECO, ENV, SOC, EMP, HRs, RD, RES, NOW), employing the Delphi-manual approach and Likert style scale scoring and coding system. This social responsibility scoring methodology to explore Website and assess each specific criterion while using the evaluation scale is based on previous research (Cosma et al., 2020; Hategan et al., 2021), but considering particularities of the given sample instead of 5-point scale (from 0 to 4) used previously for report analysis (Hąbek, 2017; Matuszak & Róžańska, 2017) a 3-point scale was used. Namely, a professional panel consisted of three experts who have a strong background in law and economics and who have been providing assessments in the field of CSR and CSV assessment based on Internet resources – two males and one female (RKM, DR, LM). This professional panel explored, extracted and analyzed data from Internet Websites placed on the Internet domains of these 35 + 15 companies in April 2023, while focusing on these eight categories and one control category. Then, the professional panel scored the information while using the three-level Likert scale (Allen & Seaman, 2007) and consequently grading them (0 for no information, 1 for general/basic information, 2 for advanced and detailed information) based on guidelines prepared by the authors, and following the methodology for scoring based on the (lack of) capacity to be verified and concrete and actionable nature (Van Tulder et al., 2016). Therefore, the professional panel followed an open-minded, respectful and co-operative approach (Van Tulder & Keen,

2018) needed for the conduct of an advanced content analysis (Kuckartz, 2014), emphasizing more on qualitative than quantitative aspects (MacGregor Pelikánová, 2021). In particular, the professional panel engaged in contextual reading with synonym recognition and homonym rejection, i.e. they intentionally entirely disregarded automatic word scanning, which has an inherent inclination to misleading and confusing results. Their scoring of such information met the panel member's expectations, and possible heuristic shortcomings were overcome after mitigating scoring discrepancies in the first and second rounds (MacGregor Pelikánová, 2021). Considering the EU setting and continental law tradition, they relied predominantly on the teleological interpretation of the collected data and they partially (as appropriate) took advantage of Meta-Analysis, which is a prime analysis entailing knowledge not yet realized (Silverman, 2013). It is founded upon the conviction that more information is available than conventionally admitted and realized (Schmidt & Hunter, 2014), especially considering the scientific model of both direct and indirect causality (Heckman, 2005).

The third stage was about the identification of leading Czech disinformation Websites (CMV, 2023) and a verification whether the selected 50 companies are not mentioned on these Websites, in particular whether they do not use these Websites for paid advertisements and so indirectly financially support disinformation, misinformation and various anti-social responsibility practices, such as greenwashing (MacGregor Pelikánová & Rubáček, 2022). In sum, five disinformation domains with Websites were identified via monitoring provided by *konspiratori.sk*, an acclaimed public database of conspiratorial and propagandistic content that uses a methodology to compile their list, *Nelez.cz*, part of the Global Disinformation Index, and while considering seven sites famously blocked by the Czech Domain Registry in February of 2022 in their attempt to block disinformation at the outset of the invasion of the Ukraine. Using data provided by Fair Advertising (*fairadvertising.cz*), a Czech organization which monitors advertising on Czech disinformation Websites, evidence was gathered of advertising by any of these 50 companies on any of these five disinformation Websites showing complicity in the support of the spread of disinformation in the Czech Republic. These five disinformation Websites and companies present on them and/or using (and paying) them for advertisement are indicated in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Disinformation/Conspiratorial Webs where ads by companies in the study were found (source: *Konspiratori*, n.d.; *Fair Advertising*, n.d.)

Domain (Web)	Connection to disinformation scene	Companies with ads on pages
<i>Ac24.cz</i>	9.1 ranking on <a href="https://konspiratori.sk/zoznam-stranok/en">https://konspiratori.sk/zoznam-stranok/en</a>	CSOB, CEZ, Tesco, Velux
<i>alternativnimagazin.cz</i>	9.1 ranking on <a href="https://konspiratori.sk/zoznam-stranok/en">https://konspiratori.sk/zoznam-stranok/en</a>	Lidl, Miele, O2, Saint-Gobain, Raiffeisen
<i>Czechfreepress.cz</i>	8.6 ranking on <a href="https://konspiratori.sk/zoznam-stranok/en">https://konspiratori.sk/zoznam-stranok/en</a>	CSOB, Hyundai, KB, Raiffeisen
<i>Ceskezpravy.eu</i>	Listed on the <i>Nelez</i> list of disinformation websites <a href="https://www.nelez.cz/en/">https://www.nelez.cz/en/</a>	CEZ, IKEA, Letiste Praha, L'Oreal, Moneta, O2, T-Mobile
<i>ceskobezcenzury.cz</i>	One of seven sites blocked by CZ.NIC in February 2022 for spreading disinformation	T-Mobile

The effectiveness of communications about social responsibility by large Czech companies was established and, for the sake of consistency, tested while using two sets of companies – the TOP 25 and their competitors, while indicating their newest BpS index, the satisfaction of eight social responsibility assessment categories based on their domains and their (lack of) use of Websites incompatible with social responsibility. Namely, the consistency of the identified and assessed social responsibility was verified by the fact of whether the pertinent company is involved with disinformation and conspiratorial platforms/Websites which undermine the very foundation of democratic, pro-sustainability and transparency-oriented platforms. Collected data was placed in comparative tables and a chart allowing for comparison and juxtaposition. This critical and contextual content analysis permitted an empirical field observation, critical glossing (Hyland, 2007) and Socratic questioning (Areeda, 1996). Such a battery of tools and processes is acceptable for the synthesis of heterogenous and otherwise hardly reconcilable data, and satisfies the aim to critically explore whether large Czech businesses, officially recognized as social responsibility leaders, effectively communicate about their social responsibility activities. Since this methodological format has been employed repeatedly in similar studies (MacGregor et al., 2020), this case study not only has the potential to explore the (in)effectiveness of communications about social responsibility by large businesses in the Czech Republic but, as well, becomes suitable for a comparison with prior similar studies about CSR and/or CSV.

#### 4. Research results and discussion

Based on the provided background and methodology, the three stages were completed and the yielded and processed data was placed into comparative tables and a chart in three steps. First, the BpS index of all 35 companies from the TOP 25 in 2018–2022 was identified and placed in the first column (Table 4). Second, the Delphi-manual approach and Likert style scale scoring and coding system based on eight categories reflecting social responsibility vested in sustainability, CSR and CSV (Table 2) led to a 0–2 ranking for each of these eight categories for each of the observed 50 businesses, namely their Websites declaring their social responsibility. This data was placed in the following eight columns (Table 4). Third, a search via <http://fairadvertising.cz/> was done to determine whether these companies are involved with advertising on five pre-selected disinformation and conspiratorial Websites (Table 3). In such worrisome cases three exclamation marks (!!!) were placed in the last column – DIS. (Table 4). The tables below summarize the results for 35 businesses belonging to TOP 25 (Table 4) and for their 15 competitors (Table 5).

Czech companies belonging to the TOP 25 communicate about their social responsibility by using their domains and Websites, address all eight sustainability-CSR-CSV categories and, in particular, their focus on environmental, social and employee aspects is the strongest, and on waste avoidance the weakest. The underplaying of the importance of the rejection of waste is rather surprising, especially the disinterest by reputable and financially strong businesses such as CEZ or CSOB. Even more shocking is the fact that these two companies, as well as eleven other companies from the TOP 25, are complicit in being present or having their advertisements placed on disinformation and conspiratorial platforms – in total, 13 out of 35.

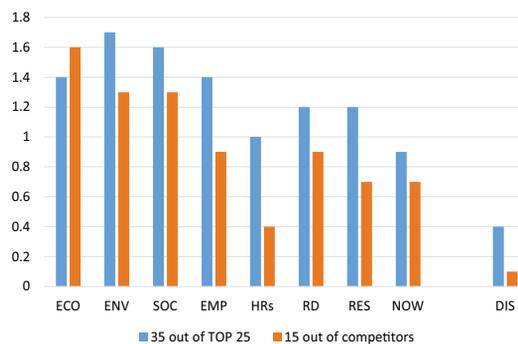
**Table 4.** 35 companies belonging to TOP 25, their BpS Index, their eight social responsibility assessment categories and the disinformation involvement (source: own research)

	BpS	ECO	ENV	SOC	EMP	HRs	RD	RES	NOW	ALL	DIS
Accenture	94.3	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	14	
Albert	86.8	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	5	
Coca-Cola	85.1	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	13	
ČEZ	90.6	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	0	11	!!!
Česká pod. pojišťov.	80.0	1	2	1	1	0	0	0	0	5	
ČSOB	94.9	2	1	2	1	1	0	1	0	8	!!!
Direct Parcel Distrib.	85.4	1	2	2	1	1	0	2	2	11	
EdenRed CZ	88.0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
GEFCO Česká rep.	85.0	1	0	0	0	0	2	1	1	5	
GlaxoSmithKline	81.0	2	2	2	2	1	2	1	1	13	
HP Inc.	84.0	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	10	
Hyundai	80.3	2	2	0	0	0	2	1	1	8	!!!
IKEA	77.9	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	16	!!!
ING Bank	80.5	0	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	11	
Kooperativa pojišť.	87.1	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	15	
Komerční banka	86.2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	16	
KPMG	86.6	2	2	2	2	1	1	2	1	13	
Letiště Praha	85.6	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	1	14	!!!
LIDL	81.2	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	13	!!!
L'OREAL	81.7	1	2	2	1	1	1	2	0	10	!!!
Microsoft	81.0	2	2	1	0	0	2	1	1	9	
MIELE	85.0	1	2	1	1	0	2	1	1	9	!!!
MONETA Money B.	92.8	2	1	2	1	0	0	2	1	9	!!!
Nestlé	89.2	1	2	2	1	2	1	2	1	12	
O2 Czech Republic	80.8	1	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	13	!!!
Orlen Unipetrol	84.6	1	2	2	2	1	2	1	1	12	
Pivovary Staropram.	86.6	1	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	10	
Plzeňský Prazdroj	91.4	1	2	1	1	1	2	1	2	11	
PwC	86.5	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	11	
Saint Gobain Adfors	90.0	1	1	2	2	1	2	1	1	11	!!!
Skanska	91.0	1	2	2	1	0	1	1	0	8	
Škoda Auto	90.0	2	2	2	2	1	2	1	1	13	
Tesco	92.8	1	2	2	2	0	0	0	0	7	!!!
VELUX	93.8	1	2	1	2	0	2	2	1	11	!!!
Vodafone	97.9	1	2	2	1	1	1	2	1	11	
TOTAL		49	61	57	48	35	43	42	33	368	13
AVERAGE		1.4	1.7	1.6	1.4	1.0	1.2	1.2	0.9	10.5	0.4

**Table 5.** 15 competitors of TOP 25, their eight social responsibility assessment categories and the disinformation involvement (source: own research)

	ECO	ENV	SOC	EMP	HRs	RD	RES	Now	ALL	DIS
Allianz ČR	2	2	2	1	2	1	1	1	12	
Bayer ČR	1	1	2	1	1	2	1	1	10	
Billa ČR	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	5	
Budějovický Budvar	1	1	1	2	0	1	2	1	9	
Central Group	2	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	5	
Česká spořitelna	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	11	
Ernst &Young	2	2	1	1	0	1	1	0	8	
Kaufland	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	
Metrostav	1	2	2	1	0	1	1	1	9	
Penny ČR	1	2	2	1	0	1	1	2	10	
Pepsi-Cola ČR	2	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	4	
Raiffeisen ČR	2	2	1	1	0	1	1	0	8	!!!
TEVA ČR	2	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	6	
T-Mobil	2	2	2	1	2	1	1	1	12	!!!
Zentiva	2	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	7	
TOTAL	24	20	19	14	6	13	11	10	117	2
AVERAGE	1.6	1.3	1.3	0.9	0.4	0.9	0.7	0.7	7.8	0.1

Similarly, large Czech companies competing with those belonging to the TOP 25 address all eight sustainability-CSR-CSV categories, and they focus especially on environmental, social and employee aspects as the strongest, and little on waste avoidance. Their responsibility focus appears rather local with low interest regarding atypical issues in the Czech Republic, such as Human Rights, see Table 5. Two of these 15 companies were found with advertisements on disinformation platforms (Raiffeisen and T-Mobil) and interestingly, they both fit in the picture presenting the Czech economy as a part of German/Austrian distribution channels (Taušer et al., 2015). It is even more interesting to compare the combined results regarding each category for each of these cohorts. The comparative chart below, summarizing and juxtaposing the averages results, brings out a number of highly pioneering propositions, see Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** Comparative chart – the average for each of these eight categories and for disinformation regarding both cohorts – 35 companies belonging in TOP 25 and their 15 competitors (source: own research)

To start, it must be emphasized that the average results for all eight categories combined reached 10.5 for companies from the TOP 25 and only 7.8 for their competitors. This might induce the suggestion that large Czech companies, officially recognized as socially responsible, communicate more effectively about social responsibility via their internal domains and Websites than their competitors. Such a suggestion might look both logical and expected. However, the above comparative chart reveals many more shades and shadows, and ultimately rather suggests that it is the other way around. Hence, let's recapitulate all ten propositions as exposed by the Tables and especially this Comparative chart – the first four are rather positive and expected, the four following are rather negative and unexpected and the last two very pioneering.

First of all, all companies in both groups aka cohorts (35 + 15) communicate about their social responsibility via their internal domains, even if this might not be their legal duty. This means that reporting about social responsibility is the reality for large Czech companies. Second, almost all companies from both cohorts (35 + 15) cover, in their communications about their social responsibility, the majority of the eight categories implied by the pillar structure of sustainability, CSR and CSV (ECO, ENV, SOC, EMP, HRs, RD, RES, NOW). This cements the proposition that reporting about social responsibility is a reality for large Czech companies, and might even invite the impression of the maturity of understanding and embracing of social responsibility and reporting about it. Reporting about social responsibility is becoming a must, it is not anymore a mere outcome of managerial opportunism (Duong et al., 2022). Third, for all companies the most important and the most communicated categories from these eight are ECO, ENV and SOC, i.e. the classic triad of sustainability prevails. This suggests a certain form of conservatism and reluctance to "experiment" with social responsibility. Perhaps this might be interpreted as an endorsement of similar business models (Oliveira-Dias et al., 2022). Fourth, for all companies, the least important and the least communicated categories from the eight are HRs, RES, NOW. This might be perceived as not ideal, but still understandable considering the background (Czech society, culture, and economy).

After this rather positive and expected quartet, four propositions follow and bring concerns. Fifth, the first cohort has a higher average regarding these eight categories (10.5) than the second cohort (7.8), but the gap is much smaller than expected, i.e. companies repeatedly belonging into the TOP 25 should logically massively overshadow their competitors, who never managed to get in the TOP 25, in their CSR commitment and communications about it. There are even companies from the second cohort reaching a total of eight categories of results much higher than businesses from the first cohort, see e.g. Hyundai (8) and Tesco (7) v. Allianz (12) and Česká spořitelna (11). In addition, Hyundai and Tesco are tainted by DIS, but not Allianz and Česká spořitelna. Sixth, the most important category for the first cohort is ENV, while for the second cohort it is ECO. Certainly, environmental concerns and projects such as the Green Deal are extremely important for business operations, but are they genuinely more important than economic sustainability? Maybe large Czech businesses officially recognized as social responsibility leaders are pushing the pendulum to another extreme, or maybe their communications are not exactly reflecting their genuine preferences... both of these options are wrong. Seventh, the lowest priority for the 1<sup>st</sup> cohort is NOW, while for the 2<sup>nd</sup> cohort it is HRs. It is understandable that Czech large companies (from the 2<sup>nd</sup> cohort) do

not communicate extensively about HRs, because fortunately they do not represent the top target issue in the Czech rather liberal and democratic society. However, the lack of interest in fighting against waste is, *prima facie*, repugnant, and it is hardly understandable why Czech social responsibility leaders do not fight against waste. Eighth, the gap between the highest and lowest average for one category is smaller for the 1<sup>st</sup> cohort – 0.8 (ENV 1.7 – NOW 0.9) and bigger for the 2<sup>nd</sup> cohort – 1.2 (ECO 1.6 – 0.4 HRs). This contributes to the proposition that perhaps pragmatism and honesty is more on the side of businesses from the 2<sup>nd</sup> cohort.

Ninth, considering the importance of SDGs vision, which is heavily endorsed by the EU, in particular pro-innovation SDG 9 and pro-partnership SDG 17, it is disappointing that the combined results of three categories critical in this respect for both cohorts, i.e. RD, RES and NOW are behind. Speculatively, it can be proposed that the 1<sup>st</sup> cohort prefers to partner only with inside stakeholders (EMP) while the 2<sup>nd</sup> cohort prefers to “do it by yourself” (high three pillars related ECO, ENV, SOC) while basically avoiding any partnership (low CSV related EMP, HR, RD, RES, NOW). Tenth, only two companies from the 2<sup>nd</sup> cohort (2 out of 15, i.e. 13%), but 13 companies from the 1<sup>st</sup> cohort, i.e. businesses from the TOP 25 (13 out of 35, i.e. 37%) are implicated with disinformation platforms. Despite the limited size of both cohorts and qualitative aspects of the performed pilot case, it can be suggested that if social responsibility is about moral integrity and consistency, then perhaps the officially ranked winners are losers, and their competitors are winners. This might go with the biblical propositions that actions count more than words, and that the (self-proclaimed) first might end as the last, see *“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven”* (Mt 7:21) and *“But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.”* (Mt 19:30).

These propositions are reconcilable with prior studies. As already established, there are dramatic differences between businesses in how they understand (MacGregor Pelikánová & MacGregor, 2020), and perceive current legal frameworks on social responsibility (Diaz Tautiva et al., 2023), whether they address their social responsibility actively/passively and independently/collectively (Małys, 2023) and how (MacGregor Pelikánová, 2021) and where they report about it (MacGregor Pelikánová et al., 2021b). The importance of non-financial indicators in the valuation process and reporting about it has been established (Hálek et al., 2021) as well as the ongoing hesitations of Czech businesses, even reputable businesses with resources, and their managements about it (MacGregor et al., 2020). However, Czech studies revealed the importance of the systematic and strategic approach to CSR as opposed to the intuitive approach (Fuchsová, 2022), and the need to communicate about ethical and societal aspects (MacGregor Pelikánová et al., 2021b). This perfectly blends with the tenor of the above nine propositions – social responsibility is about an educated, reasonable, appropriate, consistent and well communicated approach. As already established, a truly sustainable business leadership is capable of promoting social responsibility with a SDG commitment (MacGregor Pelikánová & Sani, 2023) along the entire supply chain (Fontoura & Coelho, 2020) and even beyond (Van Tulder et al., 2016), while facing the task to address challenging complex problems by aligning different backgrounds, values, ideas and resources (Van Tulder & Keen, 2018). Such an endeavor requires a partnership and a partnership in Western civilization jurisdictions is to be built upon individual accountability, trust and information. This makes SDG 17, in particular 17.17, critically relevant.

## 5. Conclusions

The aim of this contribution was met with rather surprising findings. The underlying hypotheses, as implied by theoretical and conceptual expectations, that CSR leaders communicate effectively and efficiently about CSR and they do not engage with disinformation platforms, as opposed to their competitors, were only partially confirmed. Namely, the critical exploration of whether large European businesses operating in the Czech Republic, officially recognized as social responsibility leaders, effectively communicate social responsibility, as opposed to their competitors, led to ten pioneering propositions indicating a rather fragmented situation and scenery.

These businesses should have the resources, willingness and readiness to effectively communicate their social responsibility via their internal platforms – domains with Websites. The performed pilot case study revealed that 35 of them, which are officially recognized as social responsibility leaders, aka the TOP 25 in the Czech Republic, communicate extensively about their social responsibility, and all eight categories implied by sustainability, CSR and CSV demands. However, the effectiveness of such-communications is, at the very least, problematic. The pragmatic need for the economic sustainability and for the battle against waste is underplayed, while environmental and Human Rights concerns have a prime role. In addition, a significant part of these businesses (37%) were found to be associated with disinformation platforms, which are manipulative and hardly in compliance with basic social responsibility values and concepts. In contrast, their 15 competing counterparts appear much more pragmatic, realistic, honest and local-oriented. Their communications about social responsibility are more modest, but clearly reveal the need for economic sustainability along with realistic environmental and social concerns. Building-respect and avoiding waste is more important for them than addressing ephemeral Human rights. They are more likely to be sure to avoid any association with disinformation platforms, and only two of them failed in this respect (13%). Considering the harmonized EU framework advancing SDGs and the multi-stakeholder model for partnership and accountability, vis-à-vis sustainability, and the fact that they all operate, either directly or via companies' holdings in several central European jurisdictions, provided propositions are not only strictly national, but have as well a potential for the significance on the EU level.

In sum, this pilot case study from April, 2023, consisting of the holistic assessment of these 50 Websites by a content analysis done by a panel employing a Delphi-manual approach and Likert style scale scoring and coding system, has brought ten propositions – four expected, four less expected and two unexpected. It pointed to the immaturity and/or inconsistency in communications about social responsibility and revealed that pragmatism and honesty as natural ingredients of effective communications might be rather on the side of large Czech companies which are not in the TOP 25. These propositions about the diversified effectiveness of communications concerning social responsibility are reconcilable with prior studies, but still not conclusive. Considering their seriousness, and their theoretical and practical impact, particularly in the context of new EU legislation (see ESG issues and SFRD, Taxonomy and CSRD), further longitudinal and multi-jurisdiction studies with a larger pool of both observed businesses and disinformation Websites are needed to verify these propositions, and

to enhance awareness about not only efficiency, but as well effective, mature and consistent social responsibility and the communications about it. However, even at this very early stage, it is highly appropriate for both, businesses and their stakeholders, to pose, reconsider and find the compromise about the expected, or even desired, social responsibility and its communication in the current EU. Indeed, the society is marked by the need and desire regarding the effective communication about genuine, pragmatic and practical social responsibility. Arguably, this drive can be summarized in the Biblical „Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled“ (Mt 5-7).

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