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Direct EU Funds in the Visegrád Group

This study examines the absorption of direct European Union (EU) funding by the Visegrád Group (V4) countries – Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia – during the 2021–2023 period. Employing a mixed-quantitative analysis, data were sourced from the Financial Transparency System of the European Commission. The focus is on twenty-five key EU programmes, including Horizon, LIFE, Digital Europe Programme (DEP), EU4Health, European Defence Fund (EDF), Euratom, Military Mobility, Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), Erasmus+, Creative, Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV), Innovation Fund, Single Market Programme. The study reveals that 20 years after their accession to the EU, the V4 countries still receive one third of the EU average in direct EU funding. In absolute terms, their share has been 4.86% over the last three years, while their population represents 13.98% of the EU population. This means that the existing distribution of directly managed EU funds reinforces regional and national disparities and does not promote cohesion. Given the fact that the share, the number and scope of directly managed EU funds are steadily increasing and the share of the Cohesion Fund, which is jointly managed by the Commission and the Member States, is expected to decrease in the future, mainstreaming cohesion in the programming of EU direct funds will be crucial.

Keywords: direct EU funds, EU grants, sovereignty, innovation, Horizon Europe

Introduction

The European Union (EU) has long pursued a goal of reducing disparities among its regions and strengthening economic, social and territorial cohesion. This objective is enshrined in the EU Treaties, specifically Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU),² which mandates that the Union “shall develop and pursue its actions leading to the strengthening of its economic, social and territorial cohesion”.

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² Consolidated version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. OJ C 326, 26.10.2012, 47–390.

Similarly, Article 5 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU)³ outlines the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, emphasising that decisions should be taken as closely as possible to the citizens and that the EU should act only when objectives cannot be sufficiently achieved by Member States. The Protocol (No. 2) on the Application of the Principles of Subsidiarity and Proportionality of the TFEU⁴ further reinforces this obligation. Article 1 of the Protocol states that “each institution shall ensure constant respect for the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, as laid down in Article 5 of the Treaty on European Union”. These principles aim to balance the centralisation of decision-making with the autonomy of Member States, ensuring that EU actions complement rather than override local capacities and priorities.

A balanced development of regions is fundamental to ensuring that the benefits of integration are widely shared, supporting the stability and prosperity of the Union as a whole. In recent years, the structure of EU funding has evolved, with a growing share of resources being allocated through directly managed programmes. This shift raises important questions about the extent to which direct funding instruments contribute to or detract from cohesion objectives. This article analyses the direct funding absorption patterns of the Visegrád Four (V4) and assesses whether these mechanisms promote or undermine cohesion.

Direct, indirect and shared EU funds

All the programmes defined by the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) fall under one of three types of implementation modes depending on the nature of the funding concerned:

- direct management: EU funding is managed directly by the European Commission
- shared management: the European Commission and national authorities jointly manage the funding
- indirect management: funding is managed by partner organisations or other authorities inside or outside the EU⁵

A “direct EU fund” refers to financial support provided by the European Union that is managed directly by the European Commission. In this management mode, the Commission and its appointed agencies such as the European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency (CINEA), the European Health and Digital Executive Agency (HADEA), the European Research Executive Agency (REA), the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency (EISMEA), the European Research Council Executive Agency (ERCEA) are responsible for all stages of the funding process, including launching calls

³ Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union. OJ C 326, 26.10.2012, 13–390.

⁴ Consolidated version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. OJ C 326, 26.10.2012, 47–390.

⁵ European Commission s. a.



for proposals, evaluating applications, signing grant agreements, monitoring project implementation, assessing results and making payments.⁶ This approach ensures that the funding is administered centrally without the involvement of national or regional authorities. Examples of EU programmes under direct management include Horizon Europe, Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), Digital Europe Programme (DEP), European Defence Fund (EDF), LIFE, EU4Health, etc. The budget of the programmes implemented in direct management account for around one-third of the total €1,210.9 billion of the MFF 2021–2027 (in current prices).

In shared management, both the European Commission and national authorities in Member States, such as ministries and public institutions, are in charge of running a particular programme. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Cohesion Fund (CF) are good examples for the shared management. Approximately 61% of the budget of the EU is managed in this way.

In case of indirect management, the execution is delegated to third parties, such as international organisations or national agencies. Programmes managed by the European Investment Bank, European Investment Fund and decentralised agencies such as the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) belong here. Programmes implemented under indirect management account for around 6% of the overall EU budget.

Directly and indirectly managed funds make up approximately one-third of the MFF for 2021–2027. This ratio was 22.5% of the total budget in the MFF between 2014 and 2020.

Table 1: MFF for 2021–2027

Management mode	Amount (€ billion)	Share of total (%)
Shared	749.35	61.9
Direct	388.90	32.1
Indirect	72.65	6.0
Total	1,210.90	100.0

Source: compiled by the author based on Council Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2020/2093 of 17 December 2020 laying down the multiannual financial framework for the years 2021 to 2027 (OJ L 433I, 22.12.2020, 11–22) and its amendments and the budgets of the shared, direct and indirect funds and programmes

Table 2: MFF for 2014–2020

Management mode	Amount (€ billion)	Share of total (%)
Shared	744	77.5
Direct	192	20.0
Indirect	24	2.5
Total	960	100.0

Source: compiled by the author based on Council Regulation (EU, Euratom) No. 1311/2013 of 2 December 2013 laying down the multiannual financial framework for the years 2014–2020 (OJ L 347, 20.12.2013, 884–891) and its amendments and the budgets of the shared, direct and indirect funds and programmes

⁶ European Commission s. a.



It is important to emphasise that the abovementioned figures were calculated only on the basis of the present and previous budgets of the MFF.

“A big part of the funds from NextGenerationEU, the temporary recovery instrument, will also be implemented in direct management mode, notably the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) – which will make €723.8 billion in loans and grants available to support reforms and investments undertaken by Member States”⁷

– we can read on the website of the Commission. If we add RRF to the directly managed amount, it means that €1,185.35 billion (58.73%) of the cumulated €2,018 billion budget of the MFF and RRF is either directly or indirectly managed by the Commission. Therefore, it has a growing significance how successfully the legal entities of a Member State can win directly and indirectly managed funds.

Cohesion and subsidiarity: From principles to implementation

Cohesion and subsidiarity, foundational principles enshrined in the EU Treaties, are not mere abstract ideals but operational imperatives that have tangible effects on the functioning and success of the Union. Cohesion ensures that economic and social disparities are reduced across regions, enabling all areas to contribute to, as well as, to benefit meaningfully from the single market. Subsidiarity, on the other hand, guarantees that decisions are made as closely as possible to the citizens, ensuring that interventions are tailored to regional needs and contexts.

Subsidiarity also ensures that cohesion policies do not devolve into one-size-fits-all solutions. Instead, it provides the flexibility to address unique regional challenges and leverage local strengths, thereby contributing to competitiveness in ways that resonate locally and integrate seamlessly into the broader EU strategy.

The relationship between cohesion, subsidiarity and competitiveness is inherently complex and often regionally specific. Cohesion policy successfully elevates regional competitiveness by addressing fundamental gaps in resources, infrastructure, or education. Subsidiarity ensures that these interventions are adapted to local contexts, making them more effective. Together, they create the conditions for a functioning internal market, equitable economic development and sustainable global competitiveness.

Unfortunately, as Leino-Sandberg (2024) notes, recent developments have signalled a deviation from the Treaty-based mission of Cohesion Policy:

“As a result, Cohesion Policy has lost its connection to Article 174 TFEU objectives and become a general legal basis for financing. Instead of serving as a general objective of all EU policies, as the Treaty stipulates, Cohesion Policy has become the servant of the topical institutional

⁷ European Commission s. a.



agenda in the field of economic and fiscal policy, reaching deep into areas of national competence. The most far-reaching example of this is the ‘money-for-reforms’ model, promotion of structural reforms in Member States in exchange of monetary rewards.”⁸

This trend reflects a transformation of cohesion from a unifying principle into a tool for enforcing reform conditionality, thus weakening its capacity to reduce regional disparities.

Mario Draghi’s recent report on the future of European competitiveness underscores the urgent need for strategic realignment to enhance the bloc’s global standing.⁹ The report identifies several critical dimensions where cohesion policy, subsidiarity and competitiveness intersect, offering a framework to reconcile these goals.

Draghi emphasises that innovation is a cornerstone of competitiveness.

“While the EU has a longstanding tradition of programmes that foster convergence across regions, these programmes should be updated to reflect the changing dynamics of trade and innovation. The EU must ensure that more cities and regions can participate in the sectors that will drive future growth, building on existing initiatives such as Innovation Valleys, Net-Zero Acceleration Valleys and Hydrogen Valleys. This will require new types of investments in cohesion and reforms at the subnational level in many Member States. Specifically, cohesion policies will need to be re-focused on areas such as education, transport, housing, digital connectivity and planning which can increase the attractiveness of a range of different cities and regions.”¹⁰

Many lagging regions lack the absorption capacity to fully leverage investments. Bridging this gap requires a dual approach: bolstering institutional capacity in less-developed regions while ensuring that advanced regions continue to drive innovation on a global scale.

Cohesion policy, along with its funding, is at the core of the EU project, accounting for almost a third of the total EU budget.¹¹ This budget doubled over the 1994–1999 programming period, stabilised during the 2006–2013 and 2014–2020 programming periods, but decreased for the 2021–2027 programming period.¹² In addition to the investment into cohesion, Draghi also proposed to invest annually €750–800 billion equating to approximately 4.5–5% of the EU’s GDP for 1. research and innovation; 2. green and digital transitions; 3. defence and strategic industries; and 4. capital market union.¹³ *EuroStack – A European Alternative for Digital Sovereignty* is proposing €300 billion investment in the next 10 years in a European Sovereign Tech Fund.¹⁴

⁸ LEINO-SANDBERG 2024.

⁹ DRAGHI 2024.

¹⁰ DRAGHI 2024: 19.

¹¹ JANČOVÁ et al. 2024.

¹² BACHTLER–MENDEZ 2020; BACHTLER et al. 2020.

¹³ DRAGHI 2024.

¹⁴ BRIA et al. 2025.



These reports (also) rang the bell for Europe and proposed investments and spending, which may have higher priority and urgency than cohesion. Although the budget of the Union has increased a lot since its foundation, but it is around 1% of the GDP of the Member States, which is certainly not enough for all the ambitious goals, which are competing from a financial point of view.

Beside the decreasing amount for cohesion in the last two MFFs, direct EU funds do not implement in practice the principles of cohesion and subsidiarity in their present form, which have a negative impact on competitiveness, economic development and the cohesion of the Union. This is also underlined by various experts, such as Alison Hunter, who, in her paper entitled “Addressing Cohesion Policy’s Identity Crisis in a Changing European Union” recommends to “confront the reality of an eroding Cohesion Policy and Respond to the EU’s convergence stagnation challenge”. I recommend the same also in the field of the centrally managed direct EU Funds.¹⁵

Data and methodology

The data for this analysis were sourced from the Financial Transparency System, an open database managed by the Directorate-General for Budget (DG BUDGET) of the European Commission.¹⁶ This database provides comprehensive information on EU funding allocations, including contracted grant amounts, programmes, periods, beneficiaries, countries of the beneficiaries, calls, etc.

I analysed the figures of the direct EU funds and programmes of the first three years of the present MFF. The data for 2021–2023 makes almost half of the present MFF. Unfortunately, data are still not available for 2024 at DG BUDGET. Typically, the first years of the MFFs starts slowly, therefore the first year typically results for all Member States with a significantly smaller amount of grants, than the following years. In case of Horizon Europe, I compared the data of 2021–2023 with the data of 2014–2017, the first three years of the present and previous MFFs.

The analysis spans 25 direct EU funding programmes, including Horizon, LIFE, Digital Europe Programme (DEP), Erasmus+, EU4Health, European Defence Fund (EDF) and Creative Europe. These programmes are centrally managed by the European Commission, with funding decisions based on project competitiveness and alignment with EU-wide objectives. The data includes detailed programme-level allocations for each V4 country, alongside comparative EU-wide averages.

The study uses a mixed-quantitative approach to analyse:

1. Total and relative funding received by the V4 countries
2. Per capita funding levels compared to the EU average
3. Programme-specific allocations in the V4 countries
4. Shares of the V4 countries from each programme

¹⁵ HUNTER 2023.

¹⁶ European Commission 2024.



All data are without the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) and funds which were allocated to EU institutions in Poland, Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary such as the European Union Agency for the Space Programme (EUSPA), the European Labour Authority (ELA), European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training (CEPOL) and the European Institute of Innovation & Technology (EIT). If we would include the EIT's Horizon Europe funding to the Hungarian amount, then we would be surprised to receive a €1.3 billion amount on Horizon Europe row. Unfortunately, without EIT's funding Hungary received only €164 million and EIT received almost €1.2 billion between 2021 and 2023. The EU data also contains those amounts, which were provided to non-EU members by certain direct EU funds (e.g. Horizon, LIFE, etc.).

I calculated separately the total amount of the direct EU funds and the total amount without the Cohesion Fund (CF) contribution to the CEF Transport programme. The latter one makes up one third of the total amount of the direct EU funds of the V4 countries and is transferred from the Cohesion Fund, however in this case the EU-wide competition does not prevail. Therefore, if we want to analyse the relationship between direct EU funding and cohesion, we shall focus on the total amount without the CF contribution to the CEF Transport programme, since that figure reflects the real shares of the V4 countries in an EU-wide competition.

The V4 countries have many similarities: all of them are located in Central Europe, they have similar historical experiences, including periods under the Habsburg Monarchy, significant roles in medieval Europe, and a shared experience of Soviet influence during the Cold War. After the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, all four countries underwent similar transitions from communist regimes to democratic governance. All V4 countries joined the European Union twenty years ago in 2004 and all of them are members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). They have similar levels of economic development and they share a commitment to regional integration and cooperation within the EU. The V4 countries leverage these similarities to enhance cooperation and advocate for common interests within the EU and on the global stage.

Share of the V4 countries from direct EU funds

Despite the principles of subsidiarity and cohesion, the actual allocation and distribution of direct EU funds appear to contradict them. Rather than reducing disparities, these funds are exacerbating regional inequalities. The Visegrád Group (V4) – comprising Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia – offers a striking case study. The V4 countries collectively represent 62.6 million citizens in 2023, equivalent to 13.98% of the EU's total population,¹⁷ and remain key players in the Union's economic and political structure. Yet, their access to direct EU funding, even after a 20-year-long membership, remains disproportionately low. Over the 2021–2023 period, the V4 countries received 4.86% of total direct EU funds, a striking disparity given that they constitute 13.98% of the EU's population. Moreover, per capita funding levels in the V4 are only one-third of the EU average.

¹⁷ Eurostat s. a.



Table 3: Share of the V4 countries from direct EU funds between 2014 and 2016 and between 2021 and 2023

	Direct EU funds (2014–2016)	Direct EU funds without Cohesion Fund contribution to CEF Transport (2014–2016)	Direct EU funds (2021–2023)	Direct EU funds without Cohesion Fund contribution to CEF Transport (2021–2023)
Poland	€1,321,375,002	€618,655,425	€4,903,291,078	€3,486,516,491
PL/EU	2.47%	1.22%	3.81%	2.82%
PL per capita (€)	€36	€17	€133	€95
PL per capita (%)	30%	15%	46%	34%
Czechia	€420,039,574	€227,447,467	€2,080,972,830	€1,205,501,811
CZ/EU	0.79%	0.45%	1.62%	0.98%
CZ per capita	€39	€21	€192	€111
CZ per capita (%)	33%	19%	67%	40%
Slovakia	€287,682,520	€106,375,179	€997,209,914	€550,201,129
SK/EU	0.54%	0.21%	0.78%	0.45%
SK per capita (€)	€53	€20	€184	€101
SK per capita (%)	44%	17%	64%	37%
Hungary	€744,034,482	€220,963,727	€1,008,787,400	€756,597,422
HU/EU	1.39%	0.44%	0.78%	0.61%
HU per capita (€)	€78	€23	€105	€79
HU per capita (%)	65%	20%	37%	29%
V4 Countries	€2,773,131,578	€1,173,441,798	€8,990,261,222	€5,998,816,853
V4/EU	5.19%	2.32%	6.99%	4.86%
V4 per capita (€)	€44	€19	€144	€96
V4 per capita (%)	37%	17%	50%	35%
EU (€)	€53,410,919,352	€50,610,491,278	€128,654,120,000	€123,451,400,000
EU per capita (€)	€119	€113	€287	€276
EU per capita (%)	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: compiled by the author based on the Financial Transparency System and DG BUDGET data (November 2024)

Each citizen of the EU received, on average, €276 from the direct EU funds (without the CF contribution to CEF Transport) between 2021 and 2023. It is sad that 20 years after the EU accession of the V4 countries a Hungarian citizen receives €79, a Polish €95, a Slovakian €101, a Czech €111, which is between 29 and 40% of the amount of an average EU citizen.

In the first three years of the previous MFF, between 2014 and 2016, the EU average per capita was €113, while the V4 average was €19, which was 17% of the EU average. The good news is that V4 countries receive now 35% of the EU average from the direct EU funds, but it is still only just one third after 20 years of EU accession.



During the same period, Poland, Czechia and Slovakia were able to double their share from the direct EU funds calculated on a per capita basis, while Hungary grew only with 45%: from 20% of the EU average to 29%.

The increase was even higher in absolute terms, with less than half the amount of the direct EU funds in the first three years of the previous MFF compared to 2021–2023. Then €50.6 billion was distributed, now €123.4 billion. Poland received more than six times, Czechia and Slovakia more than five times and Hungary more than 3.4 times more than they received between 2014 and 2016.

The V4 countries received almost €6 billion out of the total €123.4 billion of the EU between 2021 and 2023 without the Cohesion Fund (CF) contribution to the CEF Transport programme. With the CF to CEF Transport they received €9 billion out of the €128.6 billion. However, the total amount which contains the CF contribution to the CEF Transport column is a less objective figure since this amount was taken from the CF and there is no EU level competition in case of CF like in case of the direct EU funds. But it is worth noting that one-third of the total amount of the direct EU funds were received by the V4 countries from the CF contribution to CEF Transport, which highlights the importance of CF.

Table 4: Share of the Cohesion Fund contribution to CEF Transport in the direct EU funding of the V4 countries

	Total (2021–2023) (€)	Cohesion Fund contribution to CEF Transport (€)	Total without Cohesion Fund contribution to CEF Transport (€)	Cohesion Fund contribution to CEF / Total (%)
Poland	4,903,291,078	1,416,774,587	3,486,516,491	28.89
Czechia	2,080,972,830	875,471,019	1,205,501,811	42.07
Slovakia	997,209,914	447,008,785	550,201,129	44.83
Hungary	1,008,787,400	252,189,979	756,597,422	25.00
V4 Countries	8,990,261,222	2,991,444,370	5,998,816,853	33.27
EU	128,654,120,000	5,202,720,000	123,451,400,000	4.04

Source: compiled by the author based on Financial Transparency System and DG BUDGET data (November 2024)

The ratio of the CF contribution to CEF Transport is significantly different among the V4 countries. Hungary received the smallest amount between 2021 and 2023: less than a quarter billion of euro and it is less than 25% of its total amount. Slovakia with a 5.4 million population received more than twice as much CF contribution to CEF Transport as Hungary did with its 9.6 million citizens and it makes 45% of its total amount. Czechia (10.8 million inhabitants) has a similar ratio as Slovakia in respect of CF contribution to CEF Transport but on a per capita basis it received the most: €875 million. Poland (38.5 million inhabitants) received €1.4 billion almost half of the total €3 billion that the V4 countries received which is less than its population ratio compared to the V4 population.



Share of the V4 countries from the largest direct EU programmes

There are 40 different direct EU programmes,¹⁸ their number depends on how we define their independence. Out of the 40 programmes, I calculated the share of the V4 countries in case of the largest 25 programmes. The population share of the V4 countries of the EU is 13.98%, which ratio is only reached in the case of Military Mobility, CEF Energy, Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, Integrated Border Management Fund programmes. This means that only in case of these four programmes the V4 countries receive subsidies more than the EU average (on a per capita basis).

Unfortunately, in case of the remaining 21 programmes the share of the V4 countries is below the EU average (on a per capita basis). They receive at least 50% of the EU average in the case of LIFE, European Instrument for International Nuclear Safety Cooperation, Erasmus+, Creative, Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values, EU Anti-Fraud Programme and the Single Market Programme. In case of 14 programmes, including by far the largest two: Horizon and Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument Global Europe the V4 receive less than 50% of the EU average (on per capita basis), and in many cases far less!

Table 5: Share of the V4 countries from the largest direct EU programmes between 2021 and 2023

No.	Code	Programme	V4 (€)	V4/EU (%)	EU (€)
1	1.0.11	Horizon	1,041,301,789	2.42	43,056,950,000
2	3.2.21	LIFE	199,471,652	9.36	2,131,230,000
3	1.0.23	Digital Europe Programme (DEP)	129,210,493	4.04	3,196,440,000
4	2.2.25	EU4Health	50,708,920	3.91	1,295,700,000
5	5.0.211 5.0.212	European Defence Fund (EDF) (Research and Non-Research)	57,064,261	2.53	2,255,400,000
6	1.0.12	Euratom	15,777,135	2.90	544,190,000
7	6.0.112	European Instrument for International Nuclear Safety Cooperation (INSC)	7,051,243	7.31	96,410,000
8	5.0.22	Military Mobility	109,745,693	18.64	588,780,000
9	1.0.221	Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) Transport	350,047,951	5.30	6,599,700,000
10	2.1.122	Cohesion Fund (CF), contributing to the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) Transport	2,991,444,370	57.50	5,202,720,000
11	1.0.223	Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) Digital	20,622,559	3.36	613,530,000
12	1.0.222	Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) Energy	467,701,661	17.65	2,649,150,000
13	2.2.32	Erasmus+	1,262,070,712	12.18	10,365,570,000
14	2.2.34	Creative	75,752,046	7.65	990,580,000

¹⁸ At the time of writing this study, the Funding and Tenders portal listed 40 programmes (<https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/programmes>).



No.	Code	Programme	V4 (€)	V4/EU (%)	EU (€)
15	2.2.352	Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV)	48,872,293	11.19	436,870,000
16	2.2.351	Justice	6,318,102	4.64	136,220,000
17	O.0.1	Innovation Fund	309,430,310	4.68	6,608,740,000
18	4.0.11	Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF)	206,997,774	16.91	1,224,000,000
19	4.0.211 4.0.212	Integrated Border Management Fund (IBMF)	148,713,200	30.60	486,030,000
20	5.0.11	Internal Security Fund (ISF)	12 324 583	4.49	274,560,000
21	1.0.32	EU Anti-Fraud Programme	5,552,851	8.29	66,970,000
22	1.0.33	Cooperation in the field of taxation (Fiscalis)	904,430	0.83	108,800,000
23	1.0.34	Cooperation in the field of customs (Customs)	871,725	0.23	375,520,000
24	1.0.31	Single Market Programme (incl. SMEs)	214,784,252	11.86	1,811,030,000
25	6.0.111	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI – Global Europe)	215,702,401	0.86	25,168,700,000

Source: compiled by the author based on Financial Transparency System and DG BUDGET data (November 2024)

Share of the V4 countries from Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe programmes between 2014–2016 and 2021–2023

With the budget of €95.5 billion for the present 2021–2027 MFF, Horizon is by far the largest direct EU fund. It makes up one quarter of the amount of all the direct EU funds €388.9 billion, without the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF).

Between 2014 and 2016 the V4 countries received 2.12% of all Horizon 2020 funds. Unfortunately, this ratio only increased to 2.42% between 2021 and 2023. On per capita basis, the V4 received €7 per inhabitant in 2014–2016 and €16 per inhabitant in 2021–2023. Similarly to other direct funds, the size of Horizon Europe is also more than twice as much as the size of Horizon 2020, which is reflected in the per capita EU average figures: €43 in 2014–2016 and €96 in 2021–2023. Unfortunately, both in the periods of 2014–2016 and 2021–2023 the V4 countries received one-sixth of the EU average on per capita basis from the largest R&D programme of Europe. Therefore, the V4 countries could not increase their share on a per capita basis from the Horizon funds and they are still far from the 13.98% share of their population of the EU.

Unfortunately, Hungary is the only country out of the V4 countries, whose share decreased from 0.55% to 0.38% of the Horizon funds, which trend can be only partly explained with that fact that most of its universities and colleges were excluded from the direct EU funds by the Council's Implementing Decision 2022/2056 of 15 December 2022.



Table 6: Share of the V4 countries from Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe programmes between 2014–2016 and 2021–2023

	Horizon 2020 (2014–2016) (€)	Horizon 2020 share from total (%)	Horizon 2020 per capita (€) (2014– 2016)	Horizon Europe (2021–2023) (€)	Horizon Europe share from total (%)	Horizon Europe per capita (€) (2021– 2023)
Poland	185,861,945	0.85	5	458,707,634	1.07	12
Czechia	120,345,103	0.55	11	331,775,686	0.77	31
Slovakia	38,359,252	0.18	7	86,814,395	0.20	16
Hungary	120,189,944	0.55	12	164,004,073	0.38	17
V4	464,756,244	2.12	7	1,041,301,789	2.42	17
EU*	21,877,867 793	100.00	49	43,056,950,000	100.00	96

* EU data contains the total contracted Horizon grants including with non-EU members.

Source: compiled by the author based on Financial Transparency System and DG BUDGET data (November 2024)

The one-sixth per capita share from the Horizon funds cannot be reasoned with any scientific indicators such as the R&D intensity rate, researcher ratio, researcher ranking, patent applications rate, top cited publications rate, etc.¹⁹ as it was examined by Pató et al. (2023) in “Cohesion or Widening Disparities: R&D Performance vs. EU Funding of the Regions”.

Table 7: R&D indices of the V4 countries and their rank in net EU contribution from Horizon Europe till 8 November 2024

Country	R&D intensity (%)	Researcher ratio	Researcher ranking	Rank in net EU contribution
Austria	3.20	6,538	5	9
Belgium	3.43	6,838	4	6
Bulgaria	0.77	2,713	22	23
Croatia	1.43	2,567	23	24
Cyprus	0.77	1,714	26	17
Czechia	1.96	4,532	16	15
Denmark	2.89	8,607	2	10
Estonia	1.78	4,549	15	19
Finland	2.95	7,993	3	11
France	2.18	5,053	11	2
Germany	3.13	5,810	7	1
Greece	1.48	4,805	12	7
Hungary	1.39	4,775	13	20
Ireland	0.96	5,213	10	13
Italy	1.33	2,725	21	5
Latvia	0.75	2,267	24	26

¹⁹ PATÓ et al. 2023.



Country	R&D intensity (%)	Researcher ratio	Researcher ranking	Rank in net EU contribution
Lithuania	1.02	3,908	17	22
Luxembourg	0.98	4,687	14	21
Malta	0.69	2,242	25	27
Netherlands	2.30	6,404	6	4
Poland	1.46	3,857	18	14
Portugal	1.70	5,560	8	12
Romania	0.46	1,004	27	18
Slovakia	0.98	3,391	19	25
Slovenia	2.11	5,372	9	16
Spain	1.44	3,327	20	3
Sweden	3.40	9,836	1	8

Source: compiled by the author based on Horizon Dashboard and RTD Cordia BI Reporting data (8 November 2024)

There is a significant discrepancy between the R&D indicators and the direct EU funding received not just in case of the V4 countries but also among all Member States. However, the scope of this study does not allow for a full analysis of Horizon funds for all Member States. I just wanted to point out that the share of the V4 countries from the Horizon programme is even less than their share from other direct EU funds. From the Horizon Europe the V4 countries received only 2.42% contrary to all of the direct EU funds (without the CF to the CEF Transport), where their share is 4.86%. On a per capita basis, the V4 countries receive 35% of the EU average in case of the direct EU funds in general, while from Horizon they receive only 17%. Given the importance of R&D resources for economic growth and well-being, this situation and trend is very worrying for the V4 countries.

Recommendations to policymakers of the V4 countries

The analysis of the distribution and absorption of direct EU funds reveals a persistent disparity in access and allocation among the Visegrád Group (V4) countries – Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia – despite their two-decade membership in the European Union. The per capita funding levels received by these countries remain significantly below the EU average, with particular deficiencies in high-impact programmes such as Horizon Europe. To address these discrepancies and align national strategies with the principles of cohesion and subsidiarity, a comprehensive policy response is required.

A first area of focus must be the strengthening of institutional and administrative capacities at both national and regional levels. Many entities in the V4 countries lack the operational expertise and bureaucratic agility to compete effectively for direct EU funds. Investing in capacity building through targeted training and resource allocation is therefore imperative. In parallel, simplifying internal administrative procedures would enhance efficiency in project preparation, approval and implementation. Establishing or



reinforcing centralised EU funding offices could provide technical guidance and support to public and private stakeholders throughout the entire funding lifecycle.

In the domain of research, development and innovation (RDI), a structural transformation is required to improve the competitiveness of V4 countries in research-intensive funding mechanisms such as Horizon Europe. National governments should significantly increase RDI expenditures in both the academic and private sectors, with the aim of improving research outputs and their alignment with EU priorities. Moreover, incentives for transnational collaboration, especially with institutions in higher-performing Member States, would promote knowledge transfer and increase visibility within European research networks.

Strategic alignment with EU policy priorities is a third essential pillar of reform. Funding applications should concentrate on sectors of strategic relevance to both the EU and the V4 region. In this context, the geographical positioning of the V4 – particularly their proximity to Ukraine and external EU borders – should be leveraged to secure funding in cross-border infrastructure, energy security and border management programmes.

Effective stakeholder engagement is another critical component of enhanced fund absorption. Awareness of funding opportunities remains low among eligible entities in the V4 countries, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), civil society organisations and subnational public institutions. Governments should invest in awareness campaigns and offer tailored technical assistance, including seed money for preparing grant applications, preferential loans to cover own contributions, additional national grants to increase grant intensity rate, workshops, application support, etc.

In addition to domestic reforms, V4 countries must collectively pursue advocacy at the EU level to address systemic inequities in the distribution of direct funding. Evidence-based policy dialogue with European institutions is necessary to highlight the persistent underrepresentation of the V4 in competitive EU funding. One possible avenue is to advocate for the introduction of national and/or regional envelopes or proportionality mechanisms within key programmes to ensure that structural disparities do not translate into persistent funding imbalances. In the absence of such adjustments, funding mechanisms based purely on open competition risk systematically disadvantaging less developed Member States and regions, which inherently possess fewer institutional, financial and knowledge-based resources to succeed in these programmes. This dynamic not only entrenches existing disparities but also undermines the functioning of the internal market by creating uneven levels of innovation, productivity and economic opportunity across the Union. As Kengyel (2019) highlights, the European Union's foremost economic task is to enhance both competitiveness and convergence.²⁰ To safeguard the EU's long-term unity and competitiveness, a more balanced approach must be institutionalised, wherein cohesion is recognised as a cross-cutting objective across all funding modalities.

²⁰ KENGYEL 2019.



Conclusion

The implications are clear: the existing mechanisms for direct EU funding fail to uphold the principles of subsidiarity and cohesion. Instead of empowering Member States and addressing regional disparities, these funds disproportionately benefit more developed regions, widening the economic and social gaps within the Union. This failure to adhere to the principles set out in the Treaties threatens the EU's goal of fostering balanced and harmonious development.

It is clear that if for two decades the public and private sector institutions, companies, SMEs and universities of the V4 countries receive only one third or less of the EU average from the direct EU funds, it does not serve the cohesion objectives of the Treaties and will even have an opposite effect, which leads to widening disparity. The widening disparity undermines the EU's foundational objective of fostering cohesion across economic, social and territorial dimensions.

While the V4 countries have seen some progress in per capita funding levels compared to previous financial cycles, the increase remains insufficient to bridge the substantial gaps. Programmes like Horizon, the EU's flagship research and innovation initiative, further underscore these disparities, with the V4 receiving only one-sixth of the EU average per capita. This pattern is especially concerning given the growing emphasis on directly managed funds in the EU's financial architecture and the declining share of cohesion-focused funds such as the Cohesion Fund.

To ensure that EU policies genuinely support cohesion, it is essential to mainstream the principles of cohesion and subsidiarity in the programming and allocation of direct EU funds. Policymakers must address the structural and systemic barriers that hinder equitable access to funds for the V4 countries. Targeted measures to enhance participation, capacity building and institutional readiness in these countries are crucial for aligning funding allocations with EU cohesion goals.

The experience of the V4 with direct EU funding underscores the need for a recalibrated approach that prioritises equity and cohesion. As the EU moves forward in its financial cycles, ensuring a fair and balanced distribution of resources will be pivotal in achieving its overarching mission of reducing disparities and fostering a truly unified European Union.

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