

The International Visegrad Fund

Tamás ORBÁN

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A decade after the establishment of the Visegrad Group, its leaders felt it was time for creating a hub for Central European cooperation among the civil societies of their nations, extending the initially just political purpose of their constellation to cover nearly every area of public life. Thus, the International Visegrad Fund was created to promote cultural cooperation across the borders, and bring the fundamentally similar communities of Central Europe closer to each other. The IVF, demonstrating its effectiveness early on, has been growing ever since and has become the most prominent CE-based monetary fund, building regional cohesion in East Central Europe and beyond.

History

Foundation

The International Visegrad Fund (IVF) – the only institution within the Visegrad Group – was established in June 2000, at the V4 summit between the prime ministers of Poland, Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary in Prague.¹ The purpose of the Fund – described by the official establishment agreement – was the promotion and development of cultural, scientific and educational cross-border cooperation throughout the V4 countries.²

Initially, the Visegrad Fund had a modest sum of €0.8M in its disposal to be distributed among a few selected projects which involved at least three V4 member states (with organizers from at least two). Even though the fund was designed to be quite cost-effective (spending only 7-8.5% of its budget on administration annually), it quickly

became clear that the budget will need to be dramatically increased in order to keep pace with the rising number of applicants each year.³

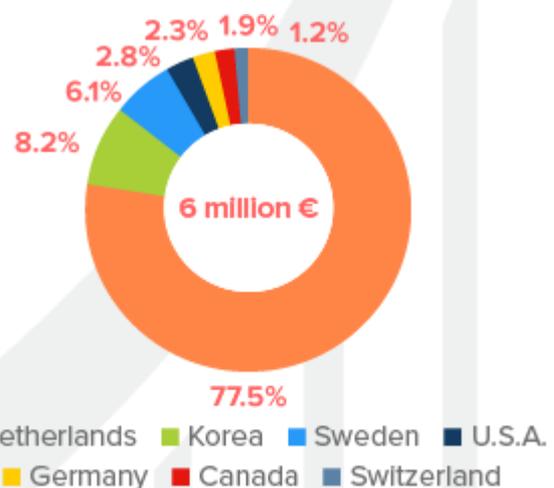
Development

In 2002, the IVF budget was extended to €2.4M and in addition to the *Standard Grants* a different type of grant was established in order to fund smaller, localized projects as well (*Small Grants Program*). Later the Fund established different scholarship programs for post-graduate and doctoral students (extended to six neighbouring countries in late 2004, including Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Croatia, Romania and Serbia), and in 2005 the organization started the *Strategic Program*, giving out grants for projects lasting for up to three years.⁴

The EU accession of the V4 countries in 2004 also gave way for a perspective change in the operation of the IVF. Since then, applicants from all EU member states and the neighbouring countries are able to participate in all programs, if their projects meet the standard criteria (having partner organizations from at least two V4 countries and a subject matter related to the region). Subsequently, the annual budget of the IVF was increased to €3M in 2005.⁵

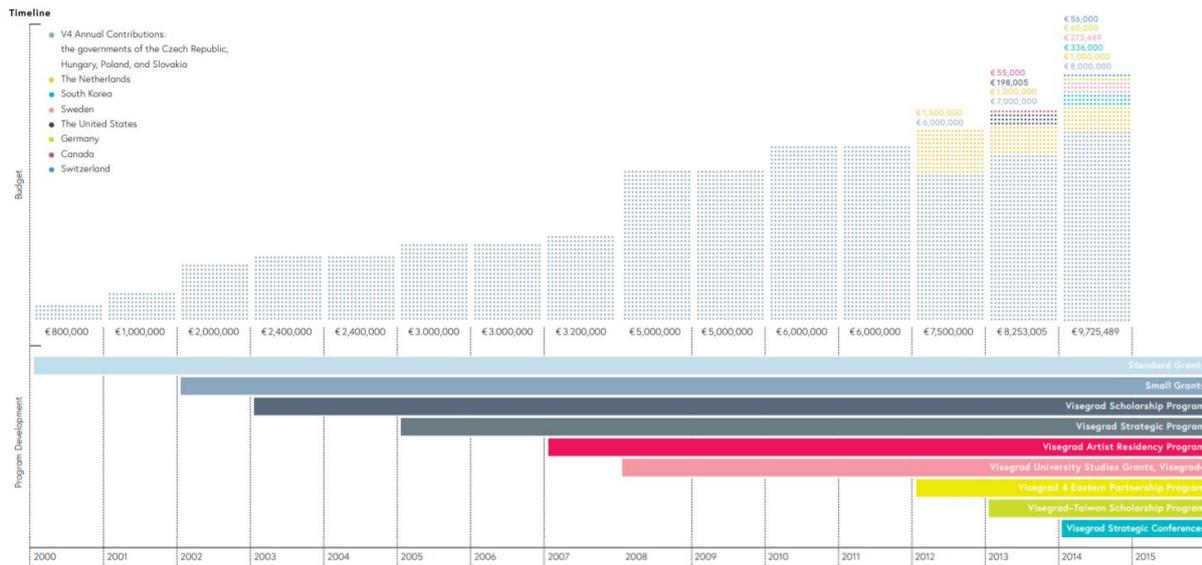
From then on, the IVF constantly grew in budget and started a number of new grant schemes as well, including the *Artist Residency Program*, the *University Studies Grant* and the *Strategic Conferences* program. The range of countries eligible for application was also extended to include all Western Balkan and Eastern Partnership countries in 2012, with special programs and a budget on their own, with the aim of creating a wider regional cohesion.⁶

Today's budget of nearly €10M was fixed in 2014, with €8M coming from the V4 member states in equal contribution, and another €1.5M-2M coming from various non-V4 countries, most prominently the Netherlands, South Korea and Sweden.⁷



Non-V4 IVF contributors, 2012-2020.

(Source: 20visegradfund.com)



Timeline of budget growth and expansion of programs, 2000-2015.
(Source: Nováková, 2015)

Mechanism

Administration

The administration of the International Visegrad Fund consists of three organizational units and has its headquarters in Bratislava. The IVF presidency is rotating yearly among the V4 countries. The supreme decision-making body of the Fund is the Conference of Ministers of Foreign Affairs (CM), which meets at least annually in the country currently holding the presidency. The Conference of Ministers determine the annual contribution, approves the rules of procedure and the final budget.

The Council of Ambassadors (CA) is the body which approves the final list of projects for funding recommended by the Fund. The CA consists of ambassadors of the V4 member states accredited to the country which holds the presidency, and meets at least twice a year. It ensures monitoring, control and evaluation of the Fund's operations, and drafts up programs and documents for the sessions of the CM.

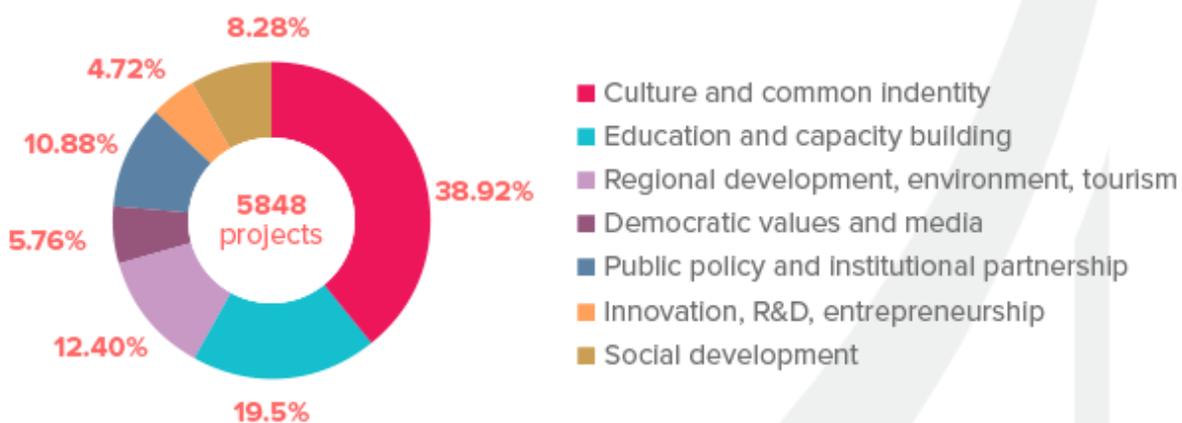
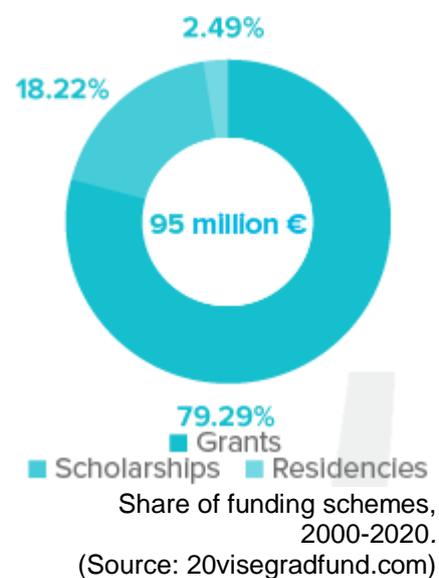
Finally, the only permanent organizational unit – with a current staff of 13 – is the Secretariat, located in Bratislava, headed by a rotating diplomatic mission with officials elected by the CM for a mandate of three years. The order of rotation varies for the Executive Director and the Deputy Executive Director, the former is accredited in

rotation by SK, PL, HU, CZ, while the latter by HU, CZ, SK, PL in the same time.⁸ The current Executive Director is Edit Bátorfi (HU), while her deputy director is Marianna Neupauerová (SK).⁹

Funding schemes

The Visegrad Fund has two primary categories of funding: grants and mobility programs (including scholarships and residency programs). During the past two decades, the grant schemes took up almost 80% of all funds given out.¹⁰

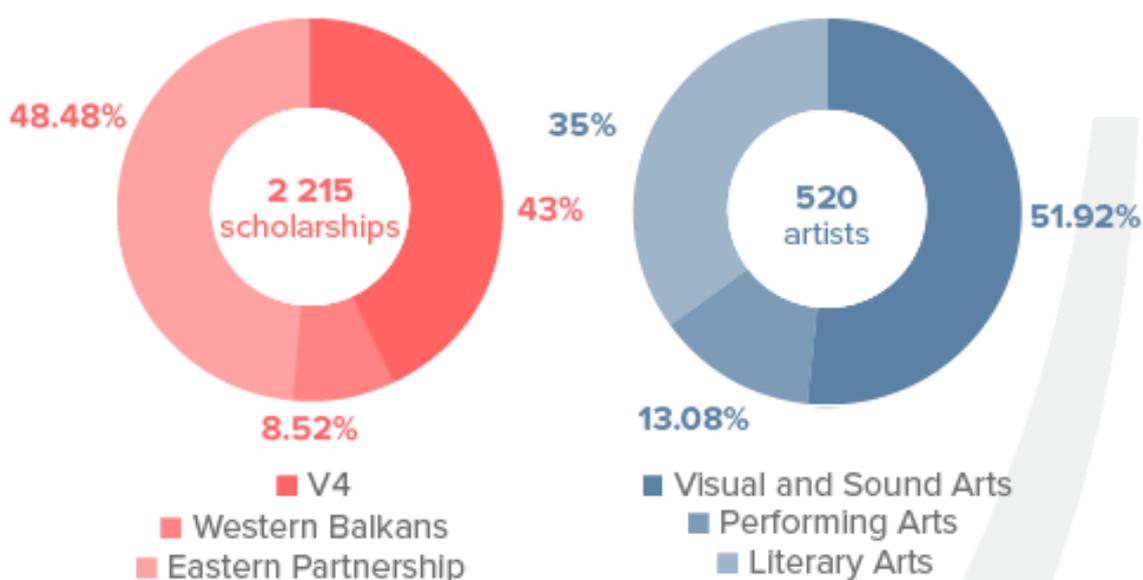
Grants are designed to support innovative ideas, cooperation and projects involving partner organizations two or more V4 countries. In order to receive funding, the projects must address at least one of the seven focus areas specified by the IVF (culture and identity, education, innovation, democratic values, public policy, innovation and social development).¹¹



IVF funded projects by focus areas, 2000-2020.
(Source: 20visegradfund.com)

Three types of grants are currently available: standard *Visegrad Grants* (involving at least three V4 countries or two neighbouring V4 countries), *Visegrad+ Grants* (involving at least three V4 and one Western Balkans or EaP country) for a maximum duration of 18 month, and *Strategic Grants* (with organizers from all four countries) for a duration of 12-36 months.¹²

The mobility programs offer a more diverse portfolio for applicants to choose. The opportunities offered by the standard scholarship programs offer different opportunities for each grade of higher education. While Bachelor students from V4 countries can only apply for V4 universities, Master students are eligible to choose institutions in the Western Balkans and EaP countries as well and vice-versa. Apart from these, the IVF offers research grants to various European archives (EU Archives in Florence or the Open Society Archives in Budapest), as well as residency programs for visual and sound artists, performing artists and literary artists in not only the V4 and neighbouring states, but in various non-EU countries (such as the US, Taiwan or Japan) too.¹³



Scholarships (by recipients) and residency programs (by category), 2000-2020.
(Source: 20visegradfund.com)

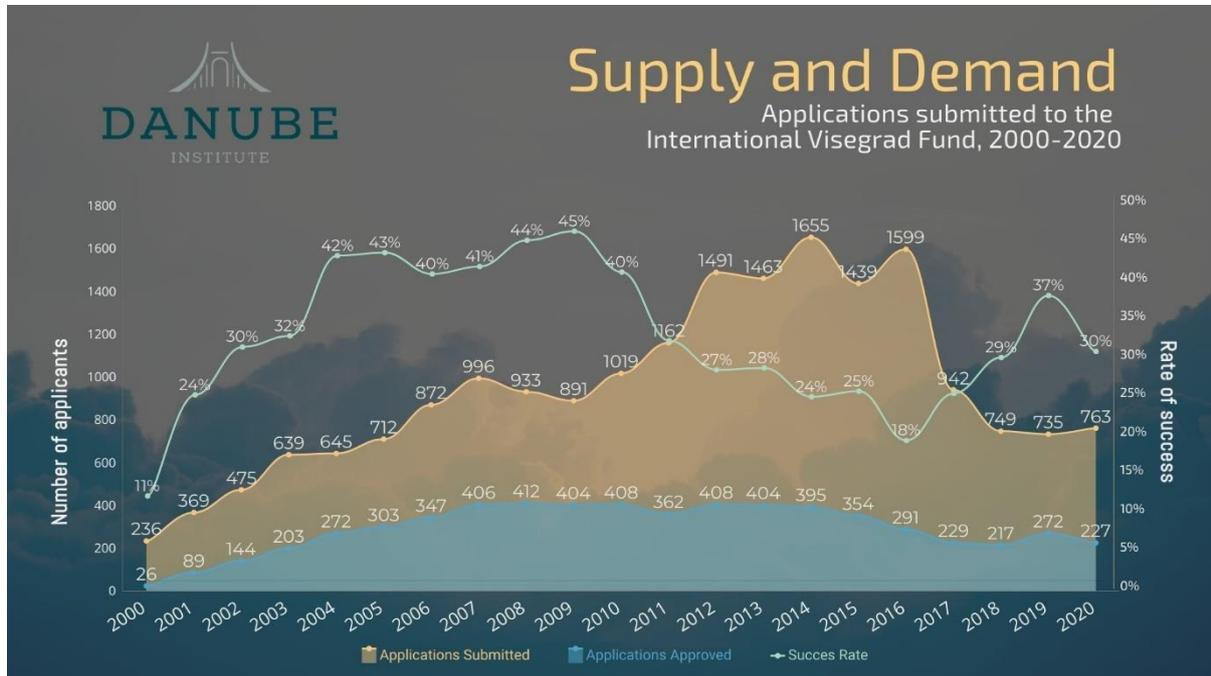
Distribution in numbers

Demand and supply

As the IVF grew in both the budget and the types of grant schemes, it has gradually evolved into one of the largest and most well-known monetary funds in Central Europe, and the number of applications submitted each year has not stopped growing since its establishment.

For the first eight years, the number of applicants and the budget of the fund grew proportionally, and the Fund's acceptance rate (share of applications being approved)

has risen from 11% in 2000 to 45.3% in 2009. However, as the table below presents, from 2008 onward, the number of approved applications flatlined, while the submissions continued to grow, resulting in decreasing acceptance rate, which fell to 18.2% in 2016. From 2017 onward, the acceptance rate started to grow again, but only because of a steep decline in the number of submitted applications.



Submitted and approved IVF applications, 2000-2020.
(Source: Tamás Orbán, data provided by the IVF)

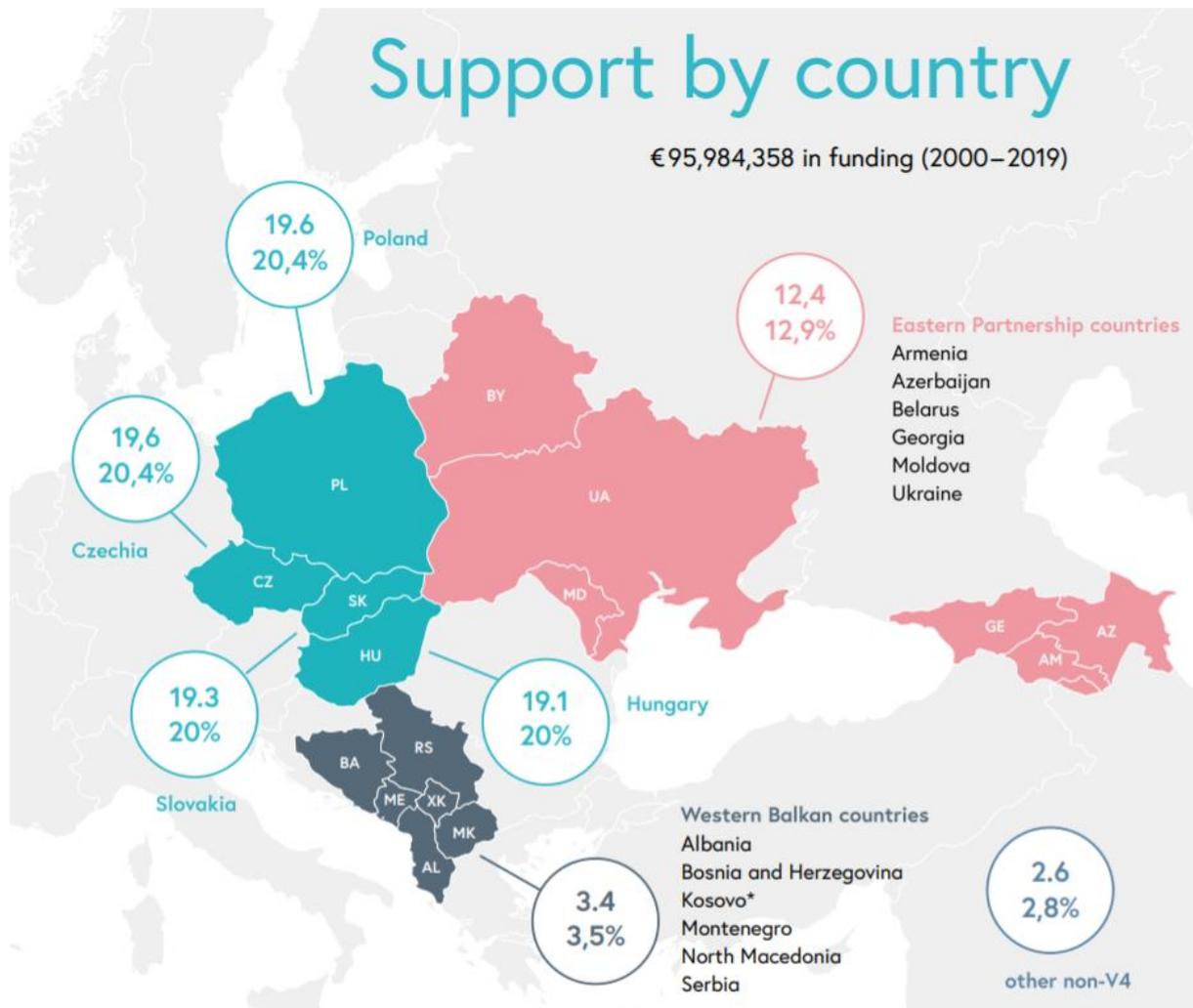
Throughout the two decades of the Visegrad Fund's existence, the average approval rate was 31.2%, meaning that roughly every third person or organization which submitted a project or a scholarship has received the funding for it from the IVF.

Where and whom

The Visegrad Fund's primary beneficiaries are the residents of the contributing V4 countries, although the IVF also focuses on helping the neighbouring states to strengthen regional cohesion in East Central Europe, specifically the countries belonging to the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership formats and are in line for future Euro-Atlantic integration.

Despite the fact that the Visegrad Group contributes around 85-90% of the Fund's total budget, the historic share of funds allocated to applicants in V4 countries is around 80%, while the applicants of the EaP and Western Balkans were given 16.4% with the

rest going to other non-V4 countries, mostly in Europe. As of 2020, the total number of countries involved in the various IVF schemes has reached 38.¹⁴



Share of funds allocated to applicants per region. (Source: IVF brochure 2020)

The countries of the Eastern Partnership are significantly overrepresented in certain IVF schemes compared to those of the Western Balkans, which is clearly shown on the map above. However, since the map only shows the historical percentages – with the EaP getting involved earlier in the programs – today’s numbers are a bit different. In 2018, according to the last annual report, the EaP countries were allocated more than €1.18M in grants, while the WB countries were given about half of that amount, €0.56M.¹⁵

Furthermore, in terms of scholarships, the relationship between the EaP and WB countries is quite the opposite. The total number of scholarship applications in 2018 from the West Balkans reached 401 (with 75 or 18.7% approved for almost €400K),

while the Eastern Partnership countries have submitted only 108 applications (with 24 or 22.2% approved for €135K). The non-V4 countries where the most applications were submitted for scholarships were Bosnia and Herzegovina (233 submissions), Albania (127), and Moldova (32), although only 13, 52 and 5 of those were approved respectively.¹⁶

Conclusions

The International Visegrad Fund – being the only institution within the Visegrad Group – was established to promote cultural and scientific cooperation among individuals and organisations in the Visegrad countries by giving out grants for a number of selected projects. During the two decades of its existence, the IVF has grown rapidly in both its scopes and means to accomplish them. Its budget has grown from €0.8M in 2000 to €9.75M in 2014, and while it has started with only one type of grant program, it now has more than ten different schemes for applicants to submit their projects.

The IVF headquarters – and Secretariat – is located in Bratislava, although the most important decisions regarding its mechanism is decided by the councils of foreign ministers and ambassadors of the V4 countries, at meetings held by the country with the rotating presidency. The primary funding schemes of the IVF are the grants and mobility programs, tied to a strict set of criteria applicants must meet, including the involvement of two to four V4 member states and projects related to at least one of the specified focus areas of Central European cohesion policy.

To this date, the IVF has given out nearly €100M for six thousand projects, two thousand scholarships and five hundred artist residency programs, primarily for applicants from the V4 countries, but for Eastern Partnership, Western Balkans and other non-V4 residents as well, involving a nearly 40 countries in the process. This also led to a continuously increasing number of applicants each year, which the IVF is unable to keep up with, resulting in an approval rate of less than thirty percent in recent years.

The Visegrad Fund, with everything taken into account, can be considered an extremely successful initiative and one of the most well-known flagship projects of the Visegrad Group. It shows that the Visegrad cooperation is not only a political and

strategic forum, but a living and breathing hub for all people of Central Europe, tied together not only by the circumstances, but by common culture, identity and values and platform ready to help us all connect.



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Endnotes

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³ Jagodziński, 2006, p. 212-213.

⁴ Ibid., p. 213.

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¹² Ibid.

¹³ Mobility. In: Visegrad Fund, <https://www.visegradfund.org/apply/mobilities/> (2021.03.31.)

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¹⁵ IVF Annual Report 2019.

¹⁶ Ibid.