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COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF GRANT SUBSIDIARY MECHANISMS AND SUCCESS OF UNIVERSITIES IN THE SLOVAK AND CZECH REPUBLIC

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Summary. The article deals with a comparative analysis of the systems of financing science and research at universities in the Slovak and Czech Republics since 1993. The aim of the work is to identify the causes of the divergence of both systems and to analyze the impact of different subsidy mechanisms on the scientific success and international competitiveness of universities.

Methods: The research uses the method of comparative analysis of national grant agencies (APVV, VEGA, KEGA in the Slovak Republic vs. GAČR, TAČR in the Czech Republic) and evaluation frameworks (VER 2022 in the Slovak Republic vs. Metodika 17+ in the Czech Republic). The data are drawn from annual reports of ministries, statistics of the Horizon Europe program, international rankings (QS) and economic indicators of institutional budgets.

Results: The analysis shows that the Czech model shows a higher level of stability and financial robustness, which is documented by the budget of Charles University in Prague, which is more than three times higher than that of Comenius University in Bratislava. While Slovak universities have a relatively high success rate of submitted projects in the Horizon Europe program, their financial volume and share in project coordination is low compared to Czech elite universities. The Slovak system suffers from resource fragmentation and administrative rigidity.

Discussion: The results indicate the need for systemic changes in Slovakia, especially in the area of concentration of resources into excellent clusters, reduction of administrative burden and implementation of independent management of grant calls (the "arm's length" principle). The article suggests strengthening schemes to support young researchers as a key tool against brain drain abroad.

Keywords: universities, grant subsidies, science financing, comparative analysis, Slovakia, Czech Republic, APVV, GAČR, Horizon Europe, excellence in research.

1. Historical genesis and divergence of science funding systems in the post-transformation period

The process of transformation of higher education and scientific research in the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic after 1993 represents a complex trajectory from a centrally managed model to a system based on institutional autonomy and competitive funding. The division of the common state did not mean only an administrative act, but initiated a deep divergence in approaches to structural support of excellence. While in the early years both systems shared an identical legislative base and institutional memory, subsequent development was determined by a different degree of political priority assigned to science and research (R&D) as an engine of economic growth (Harušíncová, 2026).

In the Slovak context, development was marked by an effort to preserve the dual system, where the Slovak Academy of Sciences (SAV) plays a dominant role alongside universities, which led to a certain degree of fragmentation of resources. Act No. 131/2002 Coll. on higher education laid the foundations for modern financing, but practical implementation has encountered state budget limits and a low level of private investment in research (University of Prešov, 2024). On the contrary, the Czech system has been much more oriented towards performance-oriented financing and more robust support for technology transfer, which has been reflected in the growth of the prestige of Czech universities in the international arena (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports [MŠMT], 2021).

The current analysis of grant success requires an understanding of the mechanisms that determine these results. Grant subsidies are now not just an additional source, but a key quality indicator that directly affects institutional budgets through methodologies for evaluating creative activity. The difference in success between the two countries reflects not only the amount of available funding, but also the efficiency of administrative processes, the stability of grant schemes and the degree of integration into the European Research Area (ERA, 2026).

2. Architecture of national grant systems in the Slovak Republic

The Slovak grant support system is characterized by a high degree of institutionalization, but it also faces criticism for administrative rigidity and fragmentation. The main pillars are the Research and Development Support Agency (APRDA), the Scientific Grant Agency (VEGA) and the Cultural and Educational Grant Agency (KEGA) (Sovák, 2022). These entities form the backbone of purpose-built funding, each of which targets a different segment of academic activity.

The Research and Development Support Agency (APRDA) as a guarantor of excellence APRDA represents the most important national institution for research support in Slovakia. Its mission is to support both basic and applied research through general calls. The success of universities within the APRDA is perceived as a primary indicator of their scientific standing. Long-term statistics show that large universities with a comprehensive research profile, such as Comenius University in Bratislava (UK), Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava (STU) and Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice (UPJŠ) maintain their dominant position (Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sports of the Slovak Republic [MŠVVaŠ SR], 2021a).

However, from a governance perspective, the agency faces challenges related to rigid legal regulation. Analyses suggest that governance processes in the APVV require stricter mechanisms to prevent conflicts of interest and reduce administrative burden (Research and Innovation Authority [VAIA], 2023).

The VEGA and KEGA System: Continuity versus Fragmentation VEGA and KEGA are internal grant schemes of the Ministry of Education aimed at smaller research teams. VEGA is a joint system of the ministry and the Slovak Academy of Sciences, which in practice often comes up against different priorities of both founders (MŠVVaŠ SR, 2024). VEGA projects are crucial for the scientific education of doctoral students and maintaining research continuity at faculties, but their average budget allocations are low compared to international standards.

Criticism of these systems focuses on the violation of the "arm's length" principle, where instead of an independent agency, calls are managed directly by the departments of the ministries (VAIA, 2023). Moreover, the e-VEGA administrative system is perceived as isolated from other registers, which makes analytical assessment of success difficult (MŠVVaŠ SR, 2024).

The data indicate that although the VEGA and KEGA systems generate the largest number of projects, their financial weight is dispersed. Slovak universities have to manage a large number of administratively demanding small projects to ensure at least a minimum level of funding (Sovák, 2022).

Table 1

Distribution of R&D projects in Slovakia by funding source (2021) (Financovanie vedy a výskumu v SR a na slovenských VŠ, 2026).

Source of funding	Number of R&D organizations	Number of projects solved	Dominant sector
VEGA	385 (total)	1 696	Universities and Slovak Academy of Science
KEGA	–	505	Universities
APVV	–	781	Multi-sector
Horizon 2020 / Europe	–	755	International cooperation
Structural Funds (ESIF)	–	168	Infrastructure and innovation
SPOLU	385	4 376	–

The data in Table 1 clearly demonstrate that although the VEGA and KEGA systems generate the largest number of projects, their financial weight is dispersed. This situation is paradoxical for Slovak universities; they have to manage a huge number of administratively demanding small projects to ensure at least

a minimum level of funding for their departments (Financing of Science and Research in the Slovak Republic and Slovak Universities, 2026).

3. The Czech Grant Funding Model: Stability and Performance

The Czech Republic has embarked on a reform of science funding with greater emphasis on institutional strengthening of grant agencies. The Grant Agency of the Czech Republic (GAČR) and the Technology Agency of the Czech Republic (TAČR) are established as independent entities with a clearly defined division of competences (Grant Agency of the Czech Republic [GA ČR], 2023).

The Grant Agency of the Czech Republic (GAČR) and three decades of support

In 2023, the GAČR supported projects with a total volume of 71 billion CZK, and its system is perceived as highly stable (GA ČR, 2023). In 2023, the agency selected 432 new projects from 2,748 proposals, which indicates a strong competitive environment. In the Czech Republic, the share of formally rejected projects is low (around 3%), which confirms the high administrative competence of Czech universities (GA ČR, 2023).

Success in GAČR competitions is the result of a strict peer-review process. In 2023, the agency received 2,748 project proposals for the start of the solution in 2024, from which 432 new projects were selected after a demanding evaluation.12 The overall success rate is thus at the level of . This parameter is crucial because a low success rate with a high number of high-quality proposals indicates a strong competitive environment that forces researchers to improve the quality of their methodological approaches.

The formula for calculating the success rate in a given year is defined as:

$$U = \frac{N_f}{N_s - N_r} \times 100$$

where the number of funded projects, the number of submitted proposals and the number of proposals rejected due to formal shortcomings are. In the Czech Republic, the share of formally rejected projects is low (around 3 %), which indicates the high administrative competence of Czech universities (Grant Agency of the Czech Republic, 2026).

The Technology Agency of the Czech Republic (TAČR) and Innovations TAČR supports projects with a direct impact on economic practice. Universities in the Czech Republic show a high success rate in this agency thanks to their ability to form consortia with industrial partners, which is often hampered by legislative restrictions on state aid in the Slovak system (VAIA, 2023).

4. Comparative analysis of success in the Horizon Europe program

International success is a top indicator of quality. The Horizon Europe (HE) program reveals structural differences between the two countries (European Parliament, 2023).

Czech Research University Sector (AVUni)

Czech participation in HE is driven by the Association of Research Universities (AVUni), which consists of seven elite institutions: Charles University, Masaryk University, Palacký University in Olomouc, Czech Technical University in Prague, University of Technology in Prague, Brno University of Technology and the University of South Bohemia (eraportal, 2026). These institutions account for up to 77 % of the financial support allocated to the Czech higher education sector (ERA portal, 2024; Věda a výzkum, 2024). Masaryk University (MUNI) has emerged as a national leader, having received EUR 54 million by April 2024, representing almost 30 % of the support for the entire Czech higher education sector.15 MUNI's uniqueness lies in its efficiency per employee (FTE); receives approximately EUR 22.5 thousand per FTE researcher, which is significantly above the national average.16 This success is a direct consequence of strategic management of internationalization and massive support in the preparation of prestigious ERC grants (ERA portal, 2024).

The data in Table 2 reveal an alarming disparity. While the Czech higher education sector received over EUR 181 million, the entire Slovak contribution from HE (including businesses and the Slovak Academy of Sciences) was at EUR 84 million as of January 2024, with the share of Slovak universities estimated at less than half of this amount (Horizon Europe Programme in a World and European Context IV., 2026).

Table 2

Financial support from the Horizon Europe program (2021 – 04/2024) (ERA portal, 2024)

Institution / Sector	Financial support (in thousand EUR)	Share in sector (%)	Leaders in coordination
Masaryk University (MUNI)	54 000	29.8 %	MUNI (35 mil. €)
Charles University (UK)	~38 000	~21.0 %	UK (11 mil. €)
CTU in Prague	~35 000	~19.3 %	ČVUT
UPOL in Olomouc	~22 000	~12.2 %	UPOL (11,9 mil. €)
Other universities in the Czech Republic (OUni)	41 800	23,0 %	ČZU, VUT
TOTAL CZECH UNIVERSITIES	181 500	100 %	–
TOTAL SLOVAK UNIVERSITIES	~35 000	–	UK, STU, UPJŠ

The Slovak success paradox Slovakia shows a high success rate of submitted projects in HE (over 20 %), but the total financial contribution is only 0.2 % of the HE budget (Science|Business, 2023). This situation suggests that Slovak schools are involved in less risky projects with lower financial benefits, often only as partners (Science|Business, 2023). The only exceptions are the largest institutions such as UK, STU and UPJŠ, which are perceived as top national institutions in rankings such as QS, although they lag behind the Czech top on a global scale (Slovak Academic Information Agency [SAIA], 2021).

5. Institutional evaluation and its impact on grant motivation+

In both countries, periodic evaluations of science are underway, which have a direct impact on institutional subsidies, thus indirectly affecting the motivation to obtain grants.

VER 2022 in Slovakia: Reflection on quality

The periodic evaluation VER 2022 (Verification of Excellence in Research) was the first attempt in Slovakia at an independent peer-review evaluation by international experts. The periodic evaluation VER 2022 showed that the quality of Slovak science is uneven (MŠVVaŠ SR, 2022). The assessment focused on the period 2014–2019 and showed that the quality of Slovak science is highly uneven. In total, 20 public universities and 44 SAS institutions were assessed, with over 7,700 outputs assessed (VER 2022 (Verification of Excellence in Research, 2026). The highest score was achieved by UPJŠ in Košice (300.22), surpassing the larger Comenius University in Bratislava (249.74) (MŠVVaŠ SR, 2022; Slovak Academy of Sciences [SAV], 2022). Schools with high scores in VER also tend to be more successful in grant schemes, as their outputs have higher international relevance (MŠVVaŠ SR, 2022).

Table 3

Comparison of VER 2022 results by institution

Institution	Final Score	Strengths
UPJŠ Košice	300,22	Natural Sciences, Physics, Medical Sciences
TU in Zvolen	284,80	Forestry, Ecology
University of Trnava	260,36	Humanities, Law
TU in Košice	256,80	Technical Sciences, Metallurgy
UK Bratislava	249,74	Complex Profile, Social Sciences
STU Bratislava	237,64	Chemistry, Construction
University of Žilina	154,93	Transport (high fragmentation)

The VER 2022 results confirm that success in obtaining grants correlates with the quality profile of the institution. Schools with high scores in the VER tend to be more successful in APVV and international schemes as well, as their outputs have higher international relevance (Results of the VER 2022 Periodic Evaluation | Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth of the Slovak Republic, 2026).

Methodology 17+ in the Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic, the evaluation system (Methodology 17+) is even more sophisticated and directly linked to the allocation of institutional support for the long-term conceptual development of a research organization (DKRVO). This system uses five modules, ranging from the quality of selected results to societal benefit. For Czech universities, this assessment is a key factor in their strategic decision-making,

whether to focus on quantity (as was the case in the past with the so-called "coffee pot") or on excellence in terms of international standards (Masaryk University [MUNI], n.d.).

Economic and personnel factors of success

Analysis of grant success cannot ignore the vast difference in the overall financing of the higher education sector. This factor is the primary driver that either stimulates or inhibits scientific ambition.

6. Budget gap: UK Bratislava versus UK Prague

A comparison of the two most important universities of the former common state illustrates the unequal playing field. In 2023, the budget of Comenius University in Bratislava amounted to approximately EUR 140 million, while the budget of Charles University in Prague exceeded EUR 500 million (teraz.sk, 2026). In comparison with the entire sector, all 20 Slovak public universities have an annual budget of around EUR 600 million, which is an amount consumed by less than the two largest universities in the Czech Republic.

Slovakia spends approximately 0.6 % of GDP on higher education, which is well below the EU and OECD averages (Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sports of the Slovak Republic, 2026). This situation leads to chronic underfunding of infrastructure and an inability to compete in the salaries of top scientists. As a result, universities in Slovakia are struggling with a brain drain, when the best students and researchers leave for the Czech Republic.

Students as future research capacity

In the academic year 2017/18, Slovak students made up 9 % of all applicants for studies at Czech universities. In the most attractive fields, such as medical sciences, IT and economics, the share of Slovaks is even more significant. This trend has a direct impact on the grant success of Slovak schools in the long term, because they lose future doctoral students and young scientists, who are the main bearers of grant activity at universities (Analysis of findings on the state of education in Slovakia, 2026).

The chances of successfully completing their studies in the Czech Republic are very high for Slovak students, which confirms their quality. At Charles University, the overall success rate of studies is 58.8 %, at Masaryk University 56.2 %. On the contrary, Slovak universities are facing a decrease in the number of enrolled students (by 42 % over the last 10 years), which is not only caused by demographic development, but also by migration in search of quality and better conditions abroad.

System efficiency and criticism of grant mechanisms

A review of research, development and innovation expenditure carried out by the Value for Money Unit (VMU) and the Research and Innovation Authority (VAIA) in Slovakia identified fundamental inefficiencies that hinder higher grant success.

Fragmentation and the missing "One-Stop Shop"

Unlike the Czech system, where competences are clearly divided, the Slovak system is characterised by a high number of actors with overlapping agendas. There is no single point of contact for grants, which increases the administrative burden for universities. Furthermore, grant systems are prone to unpredictability of calls and a high level of bureaucracy in cost accounting (Review of expenditure, competences and personnel capacities in research, 2026).

R&D information systems (such as SK CRIS) are perceived as poorly connected and outdated, which makes it difficult to transparently track the success and efficiency of the funds spent.11 In the Czech Republic, systems such as Starfos or INKaviz provide a much more detailed and user-friendly view of the map of the country's innovation potential.

Support for young researchers

A critical area in both countries is the support of doctoral and postdoctoral students. In Slovakia, universities (such as Charles University) create internal schemes, such as "Charles University Grants" with an amount of approximately EUR 1,000 per project, which is, however, perceived as insufficient for the implementation of real research. On the contrary, in the Czech Republic, the GAČR has introduced prestigious schemes such as JUNIOR STAR or POSTDOC INDIVIDUAL FELLOWSHIP, which provide young scientists with financial autonomy and resources comparable to those abroad.

Internationalization and position in international rankings

Grant success is a key factor influencing the perception of universities in global rankings such as QS, ARWU or THE. These rankings are important not only for prestige, but also for attracting foreign students and partners to international consortia.

Czech universities in the world's top league

In 2024, Charles University in Prague ranked among the top 250 universities in the world according to QS, making it among the top 1.5 % of global educational institutions. Masaryk University recorded a record year-on-year increase of 150 places and reached the top 400. These successes are directly linked to the growing citation rate of their scientific works, which is the result of successful international grants.

Position of Slovak universities

Slovak universities maintain a stable, but less dominant position in the rankings. Comenius University has been in the range of 651–700 for a long time (QS 2022), UPJŠ in Košice in the range of 601–650. The University of Žilina, STU and TUKE are consistently ranked in the range above 800 (Slovak universities in the most famous rankings – SAIA.sk, 2026). Slovakia's problem is the low level of internationalization of the research environment; while the Czech Republic aims for 20 % of foreign students and massively supports the arrival of foreign experts through EURAXESS, in Slovakia these processes are still hampered by bureaucracy in recognizing documents and granting visas.

7. Reform trends and future developments

Both Slovakia and the Czech Republic face challenges that require systemic changes in grant policy to compete with Western Europe and Asia.

Doctoral study reform

The Czech Republic is undergoing a doctoral study reform in 2024, aiming to introduce quality elements without the need for radical legislative changes, but with an emphasis on increasing scholarships and linking them to research projects.33 In Slovakia, the key document is the National R&D Strategy 2030, which envisages the merger of some agencies and an increase in the share of competitive funding at the expense of institutional funding.

Transition to the 10th EU Framework Programme

Universities in both countries are already preparing for the transition from Horizon Europe to the next Framework Programme (FP10). Experience to date shows that success will depend on the ability to build strategic partnerships within the "Widening" countries and on the effective use of the Recovery and Resilience Plan for the modernization of equipment (Upcoming interim evaluation of Horizon Europe, 2026).

8. Conclusions and recommendations for academia

A comparative analysis of grant subsidy schemes in the Slovak and Czech Republics reveals a deep asymmetry, which is determined not only by the volume of funds, but above all by strategic management and systemic integrity.

1. The need for concentration of resources: The Czech AVUni model shows that the concentration of funds in a limited number of research universities brings a national dividend in the form of high financial profit from international schemes. Slovakia should consider supporting strong scientific clusters that would have a chance to coordinate international projects.

2. Removing administrative barriers: Rigid legislation and the unpredictability of challenges in Slovakia are the main brakes on grant activity. It is essential to implement the "arm's length" principle and unify the systems for submitting and monitoring projects under a single independent authority.

3. Investment in human capital: Grant success depends on quality people. Without a radical increase in budgets to at least 1 % of GDP and without effective support for young scientists through "Postdoc" schemes, Slovakia will continue to face a brain drain, which in turn reduces its innovation potential.

4. Focus on coordination: The Slovak paradox of high success with low funding in HE is a challenge to change the mentality. The goal should not be to "be a partner" in ten projects, but to "be a coordinator" in two, where the financial and scientific benefit is many times higher.

5. Data-driven management: The use of analytical tools for monitoring success (such as Starfos in the Czech Republic) should be standard in Slovakia as well. Transparent publication of success rates by faculty and department would stimulate healthy competition within institutions (Report on the State of Research and Development in the Slovak Republic and its Comparison with Foreign Countries for 2021, 2026).

The future of higher education in both countries is inextricably linked to their ability to generate new knowledge in a competitive environment. While the Czech Republic is successfully catching up with the European average, Slovakia must urgently implement the reforms of the Recovery Plan so as not to lose touch with global scientific development. Grant success rates are not just statistical data, they are a business card of the viability of national intellectual potential in the 21st century.

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