

**Your Excellencies,
Mr and Madam Presidents,
Dear Friends,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Let me thank you once again for taking the time to travel to Budapest to celebrate with us on this important occasion. It is a true honour for the entire Hungarian scientific community and especially for the members of our Academy to be able to share this moment with you.

As already presented to you by our distinguished speakers, the 200-year history of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences was not without its twists and turns. Once initiated and built by the most forward-looking minds of our country, the Academy has been spared neither from the hardships of our history, nor from the devastating or corrupting power of regimes seeking to impose the precedence of political ideology over the truth of science. But even during these most difficult times, generations of eminent scientists did their best to at least preserve the ideal of an independent scientific institution for the benefit of the Hungarian nation and universal science.

The Hungarian Academy of Sciences has not only survived these 200 years, but it has grown and expanded its activities successfully. It has provided a haven to and stood up for its scientists far more often than it failed to do so. For 200 years, it has adapted with remarkable success to the changing times, and apart from some brief periods of history it has remained faithful to the intention of its founders, even though this had sometimes required a change in its course of development.

Throughout its history, the Academy has been accused of being backward-looking, elitist, a hindrance to development – or on the contrary, opportunistic, time-serving or underperforming. Such accusations may also sound familiar to some of you sitting in the audience from your own experience. Well, individual scientists may have

their flaws just like ordinary people, but if you ask me, as a community organised into an institution, academies can manifest a high degree of integrity and remarkable resilience: they have the capacity to incorporate new ideas and sometimes even to lead the change. I believe that these are exactly the characteristics that have also helped the Hungarian Academy of Sciences to overcome some major challenges and bounce back on its feet by reinvigorating its activities.

“Sunshine after rain” says the motto of the Academy, which was endorsed already at its very first general assembly meeting. Looking back to our two centuries of existence, it is striking to see its prophetic power, grasping the essence of our innate desire to even out the inevitable ups and downs of our struggles.

Now, we are – once again – partly looking back on and partly amidst a period of significant transformations. Whether these are just some solitary rays of the rising sun or the signs of a sky clearing up for good, that is yet to be seen, but please bear with me in the next 20 minutes and let me talk to you about our strategy of renewal and coping. While the latter may be unique to Hungary, I am sure that elements of both our motivations and solutions are not foreign to other Academies worldwide.

Situation in 2020

In 2020, when the current leadership of the Academy, including me, was elected, the Academy was in a state of post-trauma. Our research network comprising 15 institutes and 3,000 researchers was separated from the Academy by the force of law despite intense objection and protests by the scientific community and a long and exhausting series of negotiations with the government. The separation was incomplete though. In addition to the many intrinsic ties still connecting us, we were, and are still today, forced by law to lease our properties without financial compensation to the research network so that it could operate, leaving us all with a situation impossible to settle by our own means. To make matters worse, our research funding activities were also put in jeopardy

by the transfer of funds from our budget, and not surprisingly, at that point, our relations with the government looked beyond repair.

However, despite these painful losses in 2019, the Academy had managed to preserve its integrity. Its firm, but reasonable stand to resist the fragmentation of the research network had clearly reinforced the unity of our membership and fortified our reputation in the eyes of most scientists and intellectuals in the country.

New mission

Just a few months after the separation in December 2019, the General Assembly of the Academy adopted a new mission statement with overwhelming majority. This new-found consensus clearly indicated that the Academy – even without the research network – was committed to pursuing its mission as the principal national institution of science. Our goal as incoming academic leaders was to find the right instruments and make sure that this expectation is fulfilled, and, of course, try and secure the funding necessary to execute our programme.

While in the case of our Academy, the triggering cause to launch new initiatives on a larger scale was partly the shock caused by the loss of the research network, I must emphasize that the underlying motives were just as much rooted in the changing global environment for science. We are all aware of the decline of public trust, the rise of post-truth communication and populism, increasing global competition in science and technology, the extreme focus on the direct economic impacts of science, the advance of AI, and so on. We could all go on with the list of the more recent developments of our 21st-century world that have been putting science and scientists under a new-found pressure.

Some special features of MTA

In order to better elucidate our strategy, I need to share with you a few features of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences that may not be common to other academies.

First of all, our legal status: we are a public association, which means that for our public duties defined in the Academy Act, we are entitled to receive public funding from the state budget. At the same time, owing to the fact that we are an association, our properties are in private ownership, and if we can collect additional revenues, we can use them at our will just like any other not-for-profit organisation.

Second, as a public association, the membership of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences incorporates far more learned individuals than just its fellows, that is, the “members of the Academy”. Actually, in Hungary, any scientist with a PhD degree is allowed to apply and become a member of the public association of the Academy. This means that we have over 19,000 members at present. 19,000 scientists, who can – at least in theory – support our activities, be engaged in our programmes, and participate in the work of our scientific committees. 200 of them, elected for a three-year mandate, even have equal voting rights in our General Assembly. This large membership indeed ensures a very good representation of the entire Hungarian scientific community. And among there is special group of about 2600 Doctors of Academy, we can rely-on even more, wearing a title which is a precondition to become fellows of the Academy. and which already requires passing an extremely thorough peer-review process.

Third, the Academy plays a dual role. True enough, it used to play a triple one, but it has still retained two key functions. It is a learned society mainly engaged in the representation, communication and organisation of science, offering a large variety of services to the scientific community. But it is also a science funding organisation, the only one in Hungary besides the national funding agency. What is more it is the one distributing maybe the most prestigious individual fellowships, as well as a variety of smaller grants often in areas that remain uncovered by the national agency, including funding for publications, bilateral mobility and so on.

Strategy

My strategy as incoming president was to activate this larger membership, and to try and offer additional services that the scientific community would make use of. At the same time, I also wanted to reinvigorate the ties that connect the Academy with society, and form alliances between science and other sectors of public life, including public education, arts, industry, and of course, policy-makers and politicians. As you will see, some of these alliances have worked better than others, but our goal to open up to society, involve the general public in our activities, and increase our visibility, I think, has been mostly successful.

Let us now run through the most important elements of this programme, which I have categorised into four areas, or work packages if you like. The idea that connects them is that they all rely on a more involvement by our public association.

1. Broadening the scope of services provided by the Academy to the scientific community

Our first area where we took action was the strengthening of our ties with the scientific community, mostly by broadening the array of the services we are ready to offer to them, and just as importantly, engaging them in our activities.

The way I see it, our science funding activities should be mentioned in the first place in this category. The individual bottom-up fellowships of the Academy, including our ERC-like Momentum grant or our Bolyai Fellowship with its 25-year history, have always had an excellent reputation. “All” we had to do was to secure their funding. But we also wanted to offer something that would appeal more to government decision-makers on account of its direct impact and applicability. Therefore, we expanded the strategic research programmes of the Academy, complementing our programme on the methodology of public education with four more themes, which were the following: Hungarian language, brain research, sustainable technologies, and ageing. By now, these programmes are beginning to deliver the first results, confirming

that there was a clear rationale behind launching them. But funding science obviously costs a lot of money, so we could only launch these thanks to a 50% increase in our budget, negotiated with the government based on our new strategy.

There are, however, other means to offer meaningful services to our scientific communities, which barely cost money, and which, in our case, have been equally well-received.

MTA Centres of excellence

When it comes to individual scientific performance, all academies use a system of evaluation to mark off scientific excellence at least on the highest level: this is what our distinctive membership labels certify. Numerous academies also issue other scientific titles, including PhDs or ones that are similar to our “Doctor of Academy” degree that testify a superior level of excellence.

But there are far fewer examples of academies that are committed to taking the lead in the quality assurance of research institutions. This is exactly what we have introduced with the MTA Centre of Excellence Certification, setting up and elaborating a complex evaluation system, at first for public research institutions and research groups, which has been eventually extended to cover research units of the business sector as well.

Originally, the motivation behind the creation of this label was our intention to give at least some of the prestige that belonging to the Academy used to carry for the research institutes that were cut off. But to our greatest pleasure, the call turned out to be so popular that by now we have as many as 116 MTA certified Centres of Excellence in Hungary, all of which have successfully passed the thorough evaluation procedure in the framework of several calls since 2022.

Young Academy

Considering our ageing membership our engagement with the scientific community could not be complete without the network of early-career

researchers. For this reason, we were more than happy to embrace and financially support the Hungarian Young Academy, which became officially associated with MTA in 2021. Their involvement in the activities of our senior academy have also gave additional momentum with often fascinating ideas and relevant recommendations, and a fresh eye to help us update our internal ways of functioning.

Researchers' survey

Of our many fruitful co-operations, one particularly worth mentioning. The Hungarian Young Academy issued a report on the situation of early-career researchers in 2022, which also gave us, academic leaders, a lot to think about. In 2025, this report has led to the launch of the most comprehensive survey ever conducted in Hungary on the standing of Hungarian science with the participation of almost 5,000 researchers. Prepared in close partnership with the Young Academy, this report – once released – will shed light on the views of Hungarian researchers regarding almost all sectors of the research system, their social and economic status, workload and attitudes, their expectations and most pressing problems, and other relevant issues. The findings of the survey will be published in two weeks. Please cross your fingers that the pleas of our researchers expressed in these results do not fall on deaf ears.

2. Revisiting government relations

With that, let me move on to the second area, which in our case required immediate action: our relations with the government. This challenge proved to be a tough one, despite the fact that at the beginning of our term, after the state of complete estrangement following the separation of the research network, we finally seemed to be on the right track to recovery and to setting up an operating model with mutual benefits. As I mentioned earlier, our negotiations to receive an unprecedented, 50% increase in state funding were successful. Was it a sign of recognition for our new strategy and new programmes, a compensation for the research network lost or the upcoming 2022 general elections? I am still not sure.

Maybe a little bit of everything – nevertheless, it worked. Unfortunately, the magic worked only once, never again could we repeat this success.

For quite some time now, the Academy has been criticised by the government for its reports and position statements, which in their opinion are sometimes not supportive of existing or planned government policies. Critical articles and statements by our fellows or simple members of our public association have also been held against us. We could not and would not address these latter ones, since members of our Academy are free to publish and say whatever they like as individuals, but we have built new, direct channels with individual ministries to allow for an exchange of evidence-based information before going public with statements and reports. Although far from being perfect, these professional partnerships seem to work way more effectively than public statements in Hungary.

After several years of closing and reopening negotiations about our properties used by the research institutes, we had every reason to hope that at the end of last year we finally found a solution that would be acceptable for each of the three parties concerned, allowing us to close this matter. With a previously negotiated purchase offer from the government on the table, our General Assembly approved the plan to sell these properties at a fair price on two conditions: one that the integrity of the network would be preserved, and two that the Academy could use this considerable amount at its to fund its activities.

Unfortunately, one of our members challenged the decision of the General Assembly at court and before we could sign the agreement, the four Social Sciences and Humanities research institutes were detached from the network, and reassigned under the authority of Eötvös Loránd University. As a result of this move, the agreement had to be cancelled. And as things stand now, I don't see any agreement coming around the corner. This will certainly be a task to be solved by our successors in the future.

3. Opening up towards society

When it comes to strengthening the ties that connect the scientific community with society, I have always given priority to the creation of a science-friendly society above all else. A society that is familiar with the basic principles of science, a society that understands and values scientific achievements and is capable of critical thinking is more resilient to pseudo-science, popular fallacies and anti-science movements, and is, of course, more appreciative of the mission of the Academy as well.

Hungarian Science Festival

We had some excellent foundations to build upon, among them, the Hungarian Science Festival, a series of scientific lectures and popularization events held in each November. In the last 5 years, the festival has become a one-month-long string of almost 400 events. Coordinated by the Deputy Secretary-General of the Academy, Prof. Anna Erdei and our communications department, it has moved from an in-person-only event with a maximum of 4,000 visitors to around 200,000 views on YouTube and over 100,000 watch hours in a month. Beyond the excellent content coming from our scientists this increase is in large part due to the much robust video content and stronger focus on popular science.

Alumni Programme

I have always been convinced that involving secondary school students in our activities is of crucial importance. Teenagers are in their most receptive years when it comes to meeting scientific content, and to win their hearts and minds for science. It was with this idea in mind that I announced the MTA High School Alumni Programme, which offers an opportunity for schools to open their doors and invite scientists to talk about their research in ways that can complement school curricula and encourage students to trust in science and even to choose a career in science, although that is not our main objective. A database is available to school directors, in which they can search for MTA members who graduated in their highschool, and are willing to return to their old school to give lectures. Since its launch in 2021, 300 schools have joined the

programme, and as many as 1,700 members of our public association have volunteered to give lectures there.

Within the framework of the Alumni programme, we also organise scientific competitions for teams of three. The topic of the first edition was climate change, with 700 registered teams. We are now moving into the second round with a very different topic: the 19th-century modernization in Hungary, the so-called “Reform Age”, which was actually kicked off in 1825 by the famous National Assembly and Count Széchenyi’s generous offer that by now you must know by heart.

Science and Art

Capitalizing on our heritage to cultivate not only science but also arts and culture, and driven by my personal conviction in the power of music, I decided to launch a series of social events in cooperation with the Club of our Academy to help restore our social relations after the pandemic. Now a tradition, the programme of these events features a music concert in our Ceremony Hall, an exhibition of contemporary art, and a wine-tasting and reception in our restaurant. Invited guests are the members and supporters of our Academy along with prominent figures and intellectuals in Hungary. The Science and Art events have quickly gained popularity, and with life returning to our embellished Palace after the renovation, by now we can hardly cope with the high number of requests to accommodate additional events.

The renovation of the Palace also allowed us to reorganise our extensive art collections and finally reopen the exhibitions halls on the 3rd floor, which we will be glad to present to you later on today. With a brand new exhibition opening tomorrow, these rooms will serve as a public museum in the future, attracting visitors from all over the country for guided visits. Even though we have just started to advertise this opportunity, it has raised such interest that we have already run out of time slots for 2025.

Science-friendly cities

Finally, let me bring one more initiative to your attention that we have just launched, equally with a view to strengthening our connections with the fabric of Hungarian society: our Movement of Science-friendly Cities. We have decided to invite all settlements in Hungary to join the Academy in our quest to cultivate the scientific and cultural heritage of even the tiniest villages in Hungary. We will support them in organising science lectures, recommend experts to underpin their local policies requiring a more robust scientific background, or invite them to participate in the bicentennial celebrations. Besides our central administration in Budapest, for this initiative, we can also significantly draw on the contribution of our five regional committees located outside the capital. The programme has just been launched, so I cannot report about any specific results yet, but the response from mayors has been most favourable.

4. Celebration of the bicentenary

And last but not least, let me say a few words about the bicentenary celebrations which have provided the framework for any new initiative in the past years and which have prompted so much energy and willingness on the side of our scientific community. Its convening power has helped us realise even some of our most daring endeavours while making sure that we do not anchor our celebrations to the glorious past of this institution, but can also adjust our focus on its future.

Renovation

Let me begin by highlighting the 2-year-long renovation of this magnificent palace that we are so proud of for more than one reason. Well, first of all because after a thorough preparation, we have been able to complete the restoration and meet the highest standards of the protection of cultural heritage, saving all original bits and pieces that were possible to salvage. This is a time consuming procedure, and as you will see, it is not over yet. We are getting ready to pursue the reconstruction as soon as the celebrations will allow us.

Another reason for our pride is that all of that was accomplished while

the building was in use, and also that we used our own funds to pay for it. Closing the building down completely could have likely prevented the launch of our new initiatives that I have just described.

You will hear more about the Palace and the renovation from experts during your stay here, so I will stop here, but let me say a few more words about the scope and the variety of the celebratory events.

Celebration events

Our festive year started this May with our 199th General Assembly meeting in the reopened lecture halls of this building and an exhibition in the National Museum of Hungary on the history of Hungarian science and the Academy. Moreover, 2025 was declared the Year of Hungarian Science by the Parliament in honour of the foundation of the Academy in 1825 and its Library in 1826.

By that time, however, over a dozen of books and publications were already in preparation on the last 200 years of Hungarian science. Beginning with May, our Palace has been specifically reserved for a month for one of our 11 scientific sections, our regional committees, external members, the Hungarian Young Academy, our Library and so on, until December 2026. These month-long series of events are like a continuous science festival with a thematic focus for each month and we make sure to attract lay audiences as well. You have already had a taste of the programme of this November featuring the concert organised in partnership with National Philharmonic Orchestra, but tomorrow we are also opening our next exhibition and start the jubilee edition of our yearly science festival. On this occasion, there will be coins released by the National Bank and stamps by the National Post, and our communication campaign is already in full swing all over the country to advertise these activities for the rest of the year.

International relations

And very importantly, our meeting today allows us to celebrate together with colleagues from all over the world, and share and discuss our

concerns regarding the future of Academies. I did not mention it earlier in my talk, since I believe I don't need to emphasize our commitment to the promotion of international relations in science. I think our partnerships have been among our most important assets recently, with a fascinating array of bilateral relations, our membership and participation in European organisations, as well as the World Science Forum, which we are so proud to support in partnership with the most distinguished international organisations next year in Jakarta.

Conclusion

To conclude, let me once again underline how highly I value these international connections, and how much I cherish your presence in this room today. Thank you for being here, thank you for your partnership and thank you for listening to my talk today. It is my modest hope that some elements of our approach may also inspire new thoughts in you when planning your next steps in advancing science in your country.