

**Speech by the President of the Republic of Estonia, Alar Karis,  
at the Inauguration of the President of the Estonian Academy of Sciences**

**8 January 2025**

Dear President of the Academy of Sciences, esteemed Academy Members, dear guests!

Nearly nine years ago, I stood in this very hall on a different occasion and asked, somewhat provocatively, „Why do we need the Academy of Sciences?“ At that time, I was reflecting on the visibility of scientists and their contributions to society. I pointed out that the question of the Academy's necessity might arise among those who do not recognize its significant role in society.

Over the past nine years, the Academy of Sciences has undergone significant transformation. The Estonian Young Academy of Sciences has been established, its membership has become more diverse, and Academy Members are now more visible and vocal in the media. Moreover, the Academy's role in policy advising has been more clearly defined, in line with the expectations set out in the Academy of Sciences Act.

The course of these changes clearly reflects that the question of the societal significance of the Academy of Sciences has undoubtedly been on the minds of many of you. I express my sincere admiration for Tarmo Soomere, whose efforts have been instrumental in strengthening the Academy's resilience in facing the turbulent waters of societal expectations.

As the English historian and politician Edward Gibbon once noted, the winds and waves always favor the experienced sailors. I believe that many in our country now have a clearer understanding of the role of the Academy of Sciences and a deep confidence in your influence.

As I was during my previous speech, I remain today firmly convinced that a nation which values itself and cherishes knowledge cannot exist without the Academy of Sciences. However, there is always more than one answer to the questions of „why,“ „for whom,“ and „how“ the Academy should be shaped. The direction taken depends on society's expectations and needs, as well as the Academy's capabilities and ambitions.

Decisions must be made with wisdom. A societal contribution is never something that can be considered „finished.“ There will always be complex issues to clarify and decisions that require solid evidence. The future must be watched, and the legacy reassessed in the light of new knowledge.

As society undergoes broader changes, the academy's process of self-reflection must be continuous. But you are here because you are capable of making wise choices.

The transformation of society is also evident in the fact that at different times, various societal groups require the academy's attention and support. Sometimes it is necessary to advocate vocally for scientists, to help politicians make informed decisions, or to provide momentum for entrepreneurs. The only constant is the need to always engage with the people.

An interesting insight can be found in the 2021 Eurobarometer survey, which shows that Estonians are the most science-oriented and the highest in their regard for scientists within the European Union.

Estonians are among the top three in the European Union in believing that science has a positive impact on society, making our lives easier, more comfortable, and healthier. They also believe that science should have no boundaries when it comes to the areas of study.

No other country in the European Union has as many people who regularly visit museums and science centers or engage with science media. More than anyone else, Estonians report spending their free time exploring topics in science and technology.

They believe that scientists are selfless. In every other EU country, the majority of respondents agree with the statement that „scientists focus only on very specific topics and fail to consider broader issues.“ In Estonia, however, only 30 percent share this view.

85 percent of Estonians – the highest proportion in the European Union – believe that scientists should engage in political discussions to ensure that scientific evidence is considered in decision-making.

These results can be seen as a recognition of the hard work scientists have done so far. At the same time, they represent a vote of confidence and a mandate to act more decisively and intervene when necessary.

One example is artificial intelligence. While we know that no field can progress without it, we're still figuring out the best ways to apply it effectively. For Estonia, this is an opportunity to build on its existing strengths and give them a new momentum. Education, genomics, and e-governance are areas where Estonia already has a strong reputation and a solid foundation for further development.

But how do we move forward with artificial intelligence? Who are those who recognize the opportunity and the responsibility to take the field to the next level?

It is clear that a sensible and effective approach involves collaboration between scientists, the public, and the private sectors. However, if momentum falters or the project risks going off track, I would first look to scientists, expecting them to take the lead and provide inspiration. Without a doubt, the scientific community is always a trusted voice when it comes to the opportunities and risks associated with new technologies.

Estonians' strong trust in scientists could make such significant transitions easier. However, as we all know from experience, when issues are divisive, evidence and facts are often not the primary consideration. For this reason, we don't need the Academy of Sciences as the ultimate authority on truth (because we all know that this is neither possible nor scientific), but rather as an active participant in societal discussions.

And when I speak of the Academy, I am, in fact, referring to each and every one of its members.

Dear Academy Members! As leading scientists, you have already made Estonia greater. Your influential research, international collaboration networks, and the opportunities you create for young scientists to connect with the world are truly invaluable.

The other crucial aspect of this work, which is just as important and valuable, is to strengthen the presence of science within Estonia. Political support, applied research, and the widespread adoption of scientific thinking create the foundation upon which both science and society can advance.

If I may, here are two more findings from the previously referenced Eurobarometer survey.

Two-thirds of Estonians believe that scientists cannot be considered poor communicators. Once again, this is a higher proportion than in any other European Union country. However, when respondents were asked whether scientists spend enough time explaining their work to people like them, only one country—Germany—had a lower level of agreement than Estonia. Another paradox for Estonia.

Dear listeners!

Many of the topics and challenges I've discussed today have also been featured in Mart Saarma's interviews, both recently and in the past. Our backgrounds are quite similar as well. As geneticists, we both received our training in the same lab, with the support of Richard Villems.

There are also similarities in our current roles. One of our shared responsibilities is to uphold and promote the values that sustain and move society forward. This role offers an opportunity to advance wisdom within the nation, further enhancing the qualities that are characteristic of scientists—curiosity, responsibility, ethics, reasoned argument, and a commitment to facts.

I will continue to ask, „What is the purpose of the Academy of Sciences?“ But I believe I can ask this question in a way that is thought-provoking and inspiring, rather than doubtful.

I wish President Mart Saarma success and strength, and all the best to the Academy of Sciences.

Vivat academia!