Speech by Academy Member Tarmo Soomere,
President of the Academy during 2014 - 2024,
at the Inauguration of the President of the Estonian Academy of Sciences

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Dear President of the Republic o Estonia, distinguished guests, President Saarma, dear colleagues!

Although Estonia is small, this does not prevent us from being not only visible but also influential—both among our neighbouring countries, on our small continent, and globally. However, our size does impose limits on the ways in which we can be great.

Estonia appears to be one of the smallest places in the world where the cutting-edge of global science is available in our native language. This is, in every sense, an invaluable treasure: the ability to access the world's knowledge without the need for translation. As Bertrand Russell once put it: When someone retells the words of the wise, it is never truly accurate, because subconsciously the storyteller (or translator) reshapes everything they hear into what they are capable of understanding.

For a country, being wise is not a goal in itself, but rather a tool to achieve other objectives. The competitiveness, success, and even survival of nations increasingly depend on how wisely they make decisions. In other words, it depends on how effectively they can apply the knowledge that scientists have created and gathered for the benefit of society. Alone, we are weak; together, we are strong. This is one of the central roles of scientific academies in our society: to consolidate, preserve, develop, and represent such knowledge. This also includes the responsibility to translate it into an accessible language and encourage its use. Without this, the academy would be like a collection of books written in a foreign language—beautiful, but ultimately useless.

The Academy is one of the few institutions, if not the only one, where the core principle is to rely exclusively on facts and logic, and to clearly distinguish knowledge from opinion.

In a world where strange and inhumane ideologies, like communism and nazism, can remain in power for extended periods; in a world that has effortlessly entered the post-truth or post-factual era and now marches confidently into a phase of climate panic, as described by the Oxford English Dictionary’s dialect of the English language. In a world that now flirts with the notion of intellectual decay, there should exist – in the words of Martin Luther – a solid city and refuge where knowledge and rationality can flourish, gather strength, and ensure that the best available knowledge, properly organized and contextualized, occupies an ever-growing portion of the information space. By its very existence, it would relentlessly steer the world toward rational progress; toward a society where not only wise decisions are made, but where these decisions are also made comprehensible to the public, systematically implemented, and, in the light of ever-expanding wisdom, continually refined.

Historically, the establishment of scientific academies has generally been the privilege of great powers, as evidenced by Italy (1603), France (1666), and Germany (1652) around 400 years ago. The process became widespread roughly a century ago. Maintaining an academy is a costly undertaking. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that a well-functioning scientific academy offers a competitive edge to a country, or at the very least, helps preserve its competitiveness.

Taking this thought a step further, Estonia is one of the smallest nations in the world to have a well-functioning scientific academy that actively supports the state. The process of establishing academies continues globally, with emerging young nations considering whether to create their own. In this context, the Estonian Academy of Sciences acts as a benchmark—its success or failure may serve as a crucial example for others in shaping the future of their own countries. If a small nation's academy proves beneficial, it could encourage others to establish their own, justifying the decision. However, if our academy fails to deliver or becomes a burden, countries similar to ours may reconsider the value of such an institution—one that consolidates, develops, and represents cutting-edge scientific knowledge. Just as the mouse's help ultimately saved the lion, our academy could be the decisive factor that tips the scale one way or the other.

The purpose of an academy lies in diversity—a paraphrase of the idea that the whole must exceed the sum of its parts. Except for a few fields, such as mathematics, science and scientists will never speak with one clear and unified voice. Attempting to do so would spell the end of science. Science advances through constructive debate, the comparison of facts, the identification of contradictions, and the testing of unifying ideas.

As such, academic discourse is a cornerstone of the ideal intellectual environment—the most effective way to structure the best knowledge for advising the state and benefiting society. Eight years ago, Gunnar Okk envisioned an academy as an ideal hub for vigorous debate—a space where all arguments are laid on the table and treated without prejudice or condescension. A venue where even the most sensitive or contentious issues can be thoroughly explored.

This would be a forum for gathering all relevant stakeholders to construct the most comprehensive understanding of both the problems and potential solutions. However, with one critical caveat: the resulting picture must be based on facts and logic, clearly separating opinions from knowledge—though both can coexist respectfully within the same space. Such a forum would produce fact-based insights into our current knowledge and participants' arguments while strictly excluding demagoguery and personal attacks.

It would also address gaps in knowledge collaboratively. Similar to the Ice Cellar Initiative, but with one key distinction: the guaranteed presence of top-tier expertise and the commitment to expanding that knowledge.

Several such discussions have already taken place. The two-part seminar on Estonia's wood chemistry prospects in 2017 cut through the fog of misconceptions and brought clarity to the issue. Likewise, the discussion between the leaders of Eesti Energia and Elering (energy providers) a few years later produced materials that, to this day, serve as the definitive guide to understanding Estonia's energy landscape and its future potential.

While an ideal landscape may not be fully achievable, it is invaluable for the academy's president—and, through them, the nation's leaders and head of state—to have a clear grasp of the complexities of wicked problems, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of potential solutions. In the real world, unyielding principles operate, much like Newton's laws in physics. Politicians are well-acquainted with a corollary of Murphy's Law, often called Hiram’s Law: if you consult enough experts, you’ll find support for any opinion. However, what Murphy's Law doesn’t mention is that cutting-edge science quickly reveals the significant disparities in the weight and validity of those arguments.

But given the multitude of opinions, the second version of Murphy's Law—known as the worker's dilemma—aptly applies to both the Academy and its president: no matter how much you accomplish, it's never enough; and whatever remains undone is always considered more important than your achievements.