

Foreword

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In 2025, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences celebrates the 200th anniversary of its founding. On this occasion, we have prepared this book, which recounts the Academy's two-century history with both precision and clarity. Its rich visual content helps bring the events and developments vividly to life.

An anniversary commemoration should not be limited to ceremonial formalities and rigid conventions. When we began our extensive preparation of hundreds of events commemorating the anniversary of the Academy, along with numerous related publications, we did so in the hope that we might arrive at a new, comprehensive understanding of the history of science in Hungary and the evolving institutional frameworks through which science has been organized over time. This hope has been fulfilled: for the first time, a fundamental historical synthesis has been compiled, covering the efforts and activities of all the Academy's past presidents and secretaries general. Similarly, a comprehensive overview was written about the institution's financial foundations over time, its patrons, and the individuals and social groups who made sacrifices for the advancement of science in Hungary. Several parts of this volume also present the results of original research, including the first systematic summary of specific events and data from the second half of the twentieth century to the present day.

The outcome of the preparations for the anniversary however far exceeded even these initial expectations. It has become clear that anyone who examines the past must also, in some way, understand and evaluate the present, and moreover, discern movements pointing toward the future – including both those that emerge organically from history and those unrealized possibilities the past has left open. What insights can we already begin to see?

Unlike many of the world's other scientific and artistic academies, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (originally the Hungarian Learned Society) was not founded by royal decree but by public donation at the end of the first third of the 19th century. The first pledges to establish and support such a society were made in 1825 by aristocratic and noble members of the Hungarian Diet, and soon spread more widely. The law establishing the Society was

passed in 1827, and actual operations began in 1830. This founding era deeply shaped the institution's early decades. The 1827 Act XI of Parliament, entitled "On the Learned Society or the Hungarian Academy to be established for the cultivation of the national language" stated that the institution was intended "not only to promote the spread of the national language, but also to cultivate all branches of the sciences and the arts." From the beginning, this aim has been closely connected with the cultivation of creative literature, which plays an important role both in refining the language and representing the national culture, as well as with the historical recording and methodical organization of the Hungarian literary heritage. Among the first members elected to the Academy in 1830, we find leading or emblematic figures of at least two generations of Hungarian literature, including national classics whose works continue to shape Hungarian cultural identity to this day. In the decades following its founding, the Academy primarily supported the Hungarian language movement, literature, the humanities, and legal studies, with the overarching aim of expanding Hungarian national culture, exploring the nation's past, and developing the legal framework for national public policy. It was only in the final decades of the 19th century that the natural sciences emerged as an equally important goal: cultivating them in a manner capable of engaging with the international scientific world and establishing their institutional foundations. The now self-evident expectation of pursuing science as a universal endeavour gained greater prominence only in a later period, as a result of efforts that reoriented the Academy to a considerable degree. From that point onward, the dual mission described in the opening sentence of the preamble to the Academy Act, still in force today, became more balanced: "The Hungarian Academy of Sciences was established by the nation to nurture the Hungarian language and to serve science."

The first half of the 19th century in Central Europe was an era of emerging modern nations and national identities, both politically and constitutionally. It is no coincidence that the year of the Academy's founding marks the beginning of a major era in Hungarian history, referred to

as the Reform Era and is regarded as a time of struggle for the modern institutions of the Hungarian state. Many of the scholars who helped shape Hungary's political, legal, and economic framework were members of the Academy. For decades, the Academy was the sole national institution capable of assuming the unique task of shaping Hungary's cultural identity, historical consciousness, and intellectual and artistic traditions. The modern Hungarian nation and the Hungarian Learned Society share a common birthdate and history. From this shared origin stems the Academy's enduring credibility and prestige: for decades, it has consistently ranked as the most respected public institution in Hungarian opinion polls.

In the 20th century, the Academy could not have survived without the annual funding it received from the state budget. Its endowment was depleted by wars and the subsequent inflationary periods. The communist regime later confiscated its lands and buildings without compensation. For a time, it seemed that the Academy would be entirely excluded from organising and directing scientific life, as the Hungarian Communist Party sought to marginalise it by creating a Soviet-style national scientific council. Nearly half its members were stripped of their titles, and its subsection dedicated to the arts was dissolved. In the end, however, the opposite occurred: the purged Academy was reshaped into an entity suitable for functioning as a kind of ministry of science during the decades of communism. This was the era when it established a remarkable research network spanning the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and engineering, with a strong emphasis on basic research.

In 1990, following the transition from communist rule, the Academy also underwent fundamental changes. It rehabilitated the members who had been expelled in 1949 – mostly posthumously – and restored their membership; to embrace the arts, it also established an affiliated institution, the Széchenyi Academy of Letters and Arts. A new law came into effect in 1994, reconstituting the Academy as a public body, thereby granting representation to all scholars engaged in research in Hungary. Since then, its bodies and committees have been formed through the broadest possible professional participation, ensuring the

autonomy of each scientific field. Additionally, the research network remained under the Academy's supervision, and several reform measures were implemented to invigorate its work and enhance its efficiency.

In 2019, the Academy lost control of its research institutes. Despite widespread domestic opposition and significant international protest, the Hungarian government separated the research network from the Academy and since then, it has been seeking ways to operate in a different form.

In the same year, the Academy renewed its mission statement; empowered by new legal provisions, it evaluates and certifies, through application processes, the excellence of research institutions in Hungary. It continues to participate in science governance and administers grant programmes from both its own and delegated funds to support scientific book and journal publishing, professional scientific societies, the organization of international conferences in Hungary, and participation in conferences abroad. Additionally, it promotes the careers of female researchers, supports Hungarian research institutions beyond the borders, awards Bolyai Scholarship to individual researchers through excellence grants, and offers the highly competitive Lendület (Momentum) grants to research groups preparing for the European Research Council's international applications. Thus, life is vibrant not only within the walls of the Academy's headquarters, as the Academy plays a vital role in revitalizing the entire Hungarian research community, providing access to resources, enhancing quality, and shaping career pathways.

The confident, steady force of tireless activity. A conscious commitment to the benefit of the national community. A balanced partnership with international trends in science, scientific organisations, and science policy. These are the defining characteristics of the Academy today. The lessons of its two-hundred-year history all point in the same direction: there is no alternative to consistent, tireless action guided by the professional and ethical standards of science and carried out for the benefit of both the national and the broader human community, and hardly any offer could be more compelling in its value to society.

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