

Transformation of the Academy of Sciences (1990s) and accomplishments in Latvian science by Prof. Jānis Stradiņš, Chair of the Senate, Latvian Academy of Sciences

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In 2015, the Latvian Academy of Sciences celebrated the 200th anniversary of the establishment of *Academia-200* Kurzeme Society for Literature and Art; during the first decades of its existence, this association had functioned as the first Academy of Sciences in the Baltic provinces of the Russian Empire until it was dissolved in 1939, with repatriation of the Baltic Germans. The Latvian SSR Academy of Sciences was founded in 1945/1946. It was composed of individual members and had a vast network of research institutes, design offices, workshops, libraries, and other institutions, which for almost 50 years served as the leading and most significant research system in Latvia. It introduced and developed branches of modern science previously absent in Latvia. The LSSR Academy of Sciences was formed according to the structure of the USSR Academy of Sciences, and coordinated its activities with its USSR counterpart, functioning however, relatively independently and efficiently, and earning a certain recognition in the Soviet Union and in some areas of research — even globally. It should be noted that the Latvian SSR Academy of Sciences had largely been formed on the basis of the Latvian State University and the Latvian Academy of Agriculture, hence its first academics were simultaneously the professors of these universities.

When the Republic of Latvia regained its independence in 1990/1991, a certain contribution in this process was also given by the progressive AS staff, and a logical problem arose: what shape should the Latvian Academy of Sciences take in these new conditions. This question arose not only in Latvia and its two neighbouring countries Estonia and Lithuania, but also in other post-communist countries of Eastern Europe, where the Academies of Sciences had functioned similarly to that of the USSR. In two countries, where the former Academies of Sciences had been too closely bound to the old regime (the German Democratic Republic and Czechoslovakia), they were dissolved, while in other countries — transformed, giving autonomy to their institutes or incorporating them into universities. The three Baltic republics independently of each other chose the Nordic model — the academy of individual members, without institutes, the so-called personal academies, associations of leading 8 scholars and scientists, even though Western Europe has a number of countries, where the Academies of Sciences do have institutes (e.g., Austria, the Netherlands). The overwhelming majority of the scientific community in Latvia was against the Academy acting as a “ministry of science”, supervising its subordinate institutes and allocating funds to them.

In Latvia, the dispute about the academy of sciences started in 1989 and went on until 1992, to some extent, even to the late 1990s. The name of the Academy was changed to the Latvian Academy of Sciences (the LAS) in March 1990, the academic staff had to be upgraded to enable the transformation of the existing Academy. Part of the members united by the newly established public organisation — the Latvian Union of Scientists (founded in 1988) insisted on liquidation of the “old” Soviet Academy and foundation of a new national Academy of Sciences (without institutes). Such a solution would annihilate the previous 45 years of existence of the Academy of Sciences in Latvia. The new Academy would have lost claim to such outstanding Latvian scholars as academicians Jānis Endzelīns, Paulis Lejiņš, Pēteris Stradiņš, Augusts Kirhenšteins, Gustavs Vanags, Alfrēds Ieviņš, Solomons Hillers, Arvīds Kalniņš, Lidiya Liepiņa, Artūrs Krūmiņš, etc., the continuity would be interrupted, and the members of such a “National Academy of Sciences” could, most likely, be appointed or elected according to somewhat subjective criteria.

Another important issue was the prospects of existence of the newly established, strong institutes within the Academy of Sciences structure (the type of “a hybrid academy”) or outside the Academy, mostly attached to universities, because, in essence, several Academy institutes had grown from the universities historically, and within the structure of the university it would be easier to include research into study programmes and attracting the young generation to science. Furthermore, in 1990, the Latvian Council of Science (LCS) had already been founded by the resolution of the Republic of Latvia Soviet of Ministers, and it distributed funding for state research

projects. Therefore, the Academy of Sciences objectively could no longer supervise the institutes. And finally, the decision whether the Academy should be transformed by the government's (or the Supreme Council's) resolution "from the top", or should this change be effected on the Academy's own initiative (the Academy of Sciences Constitutional Assembly at that time in addition to the LAS members also included the elected representatives of the institutes)? The disputes on these matters raged for almost two years.

The option of "a hybrid academy" (individual members and large research institutes) was rejected by the majority of the institutes and by the large universities (UL), the Latvian Union of Scientists and the researchers' representatives in the political circles (the head of the Science Council at the time, academician Andrejs Siliņš, who urged scientists to actively engage in politics and later became a Chairman of the Parliament Standing Committee for Culture and Science, supported the conversion of the existing LAS into a classical type academy of sciences and opposed its dissolution). Nevertheless, the contested Academy of Sciences concept originally was not included even in the new Republic of Latvia draft law on scientific activity, the preparation of which commenced in 1991/1992.

It should be noted though that the status of academies of science at that time was uncertain in Western Europe too, because science and its funding at the national level was governed by the respective national science councils, rich universities or there were state and private investor-funded research institutions (as the societies of Max Planck or Fraunhofer Institutes in Germany). Consequently, on 17–18 March 1992, in Stockholm the AllEuropean-Academy Meeting "The Role of Academies as Learned Societies in the New Europe" was held. The representatives of the Latvian Academy of Sciences Jānis Lielpēters and Jānis Stradiņš were invited to attend the meeting, which laid the foundations for a new, not yet formalised organisation ALLEA (European Federation of Academies of Sciences and Humanities). This event partially legalised the admission of the LAS (at that time not yet recognised by the state of Latvia itself), into the international academic community. Since the summer of 1990, the direct relations of the LAS with the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences motivated the LAS to shape the new version of its Charter after the Swedish model as "a personal academy" rather than "a hybrid academy" (with institutes). Thus, the Latvian Academy of Sciences gave up its former administrative power over funding and problem-solving of the institutes which were addressed independently of the LAS, whose authority was upheld by the more active individual Academy members, especially those elected by the LCS.

The General Meeting of the LAS, where the new LAS Charter and the Statutes were approved, was held on 14 February 1992 (to emphasise the historical link with the existing Academy of Sciences, whose first founding general meeting had taken place on 14 February 1946). It proceeded quite dramatically, since the first round of voting failed to achieve the majority of 2/3 of the votes cast, however, in the second round the Charter was accepted (68 votes – for, 1 – against, 1 – abstained). The general meeting was attended by the President of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences T. Laurent and Secretary General C. O. Jacobson. The adopted Charter established that "The Latvian Academy of Sciences is an autonomous legal entity made up of elected members of the Academy of Sciences and subsidised by the state. LAS Charter is approved by Saeima and therein are specified the operational objectives, main directions, the legal and economic basis, the system of governance, rights and obligations of the LAS. Saeima or the Cabinet of Ministers may set the LAS specific tasks and mandate in the sphere of science." Although both the Charter and the Statutes provided that the institutions had the right to form an association with "the personal academy", in actual fact, with rare exceptions, such an association did not materialise, and in 1996–1998, as a result of the so called "Cimdiņš' reform", the majority of the institutes were incorporated into the University of Latvia (and later, some also into the structures of the RTU and the RSU).

The obstacles had to be overcome in order for Saeima — the Parliament of Latvia — to unanimously approve (in a modified form) the LAS Charter on 23 January 1997, granting this decision the power of law. Thus, the Latvian Academy of Sciences was permanently legally established as an important institution of the renewed Republic of Latvia, and no longer perceived as a relic of the Soviet regime, in opposition to the attitudes maintained earlier in some circles. This

unanimous vote confirmed the authority attained by the LAS in the Latvian society. The LAS has become a nationally and internationally recognised centre of multidisciplinary scientific excellence, expertise and publicity, an advocate of Latvian scientific achievements on the international scene, where such academies are seen as significant intellectual and cultural attributes.

According to its Charter, the tasks of the LAS include promoting research in basic and applied sciences, especially in interdisciplinary studies; research and cultivation of Latvian history, culture, and the Latvian language; active participation in policy making regarding the science in Latvia, and advising public institutions about scientific issues; elaboration of scientific terminology; organisation of congresses, conferences, discussions, and competitions; popularisation of scientific achievements and the Baltic history of science; maintenance of bilateral international contacts of Latvian scientists; safeguarding, preservation and further development of research ethics, principles, and traditions of discussion. In the scientific organisation aspect, the LAS participates in the evaluation of the choice of research directions in Latvia, including the debating and improvement of draft legislation related to research and innovation, working in close cooperation with the Latvian Council of Science.

What has been achieved by the LAS during the years of regained independence? It has significantly updated its membership, electing as members or honorary doctors the most notable Latvian scientists, who, before the restoration of independence, due to political or subjective motives, were not elected to the LAS. Currently, according to membership figures, the LAS is the largest Academy of Sciences in the Baltics (as of 1 January 2017, there were 127 full members, 127 corresponding members, 57 honorary members, and 97 foreign members). As time passes, there arises the disproportion in terms of age and sectoral representation and the LAS personnel grows older, which is also characteristic of the academies of sciences in other countries.

The renewed LAS has attracted the researchers of the Latvian diaspora, and to some extent, reintegrated the so-called “expatriate scientists” into the Latvian scientific community. Creation of the LAS honorary membership has helped bring into the LAS outstanding personalities of Latvian culture and art.

In 1998, the nomination system for LAS awards and awarding of young scientists was put in order, allowing to stimulate the most renowned and promising scientists. Since 1998, joint prize allocation has been launched in cooperation with Latvian manufacturing companies (Grindeks, Latvenergo, Dati, Latvijas Gāze, Itera Latvija, etc.) and individual patrons.

The LAS has given a momentum and materially contributed to establishment of major research centres important to Latvian science, e.g., Ventspils International Radio Astronomy Centre (VIRAC), the Baltic Centre for Strategic Studies, signed agreements with a number of scientific and administrative institutions for implementing joint research.

Since 2004, the LAS has participated in the national research programming conducted by the Republic of Latvia Ministry of Education and Science. Of these programmes, Letonika (Letonics or Latvian Studies) and EKOSOC are directly managed by the LAS, while most of the other programmes of national importance are headed by the LAS members.

The LAS has become a good mediator in forming scientific ties between Latvian universities, academies and other higher education institutions and state research centres. The LAS has concluded contracts or cooperation agreements with academic educational institutions, and elected their lead researchers as the members of the LAS.

Since 1999, the Latvian Academy of Sciences has helped to maintain a high quality of the doctoral theses elaborated in Latvia, having evaluated them by the State Scientific Qualification Committee.

In the general meetings, gatherings, and councils of the LAS and its chapters a dispute culture is encouraged, comprehensive discussions of topical scientific and practical matters take place, the LAS is also in charge of the ethics of science (LAS and LCS Ethics Committee).

The LAS operates in close contact with the Ministry of Education and Science, the Latvian Council of Science, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Defence, and the Ministry of Culture.

The LAS has facilitated active regional studies, together with the Latvian Association of Local Governments has held visiting sessions (for example, in Liv Coast, Selonia, Latgale, etc.).

Since 2002, the LAS has traditionally held a competition to define and promote the 10–12 most outstanding achievements of science in Latvia.

The LAS coordinates the work of the Terminology Commission; it renders support to national emeritus scientists and their club “Emeritus”; it promotes the activities of young scientists in collaboration with the Association of Latvian Young Scientists, individual student organisations (“Austrums”), etc.

The LAS establishes and maintains its own traditions (LAS insignia, promotion of scientific and technical history studies, research of the history of the building housing the LAS).

It has to be admitted that in recent years, in addition to the large natural science institutes the LAS has also lost the humanities institutes, which until 2014 were located in the LAS building. The Latvian Academic Library, Archives of Latvian Folklore with the famous historical folksong cabinet Dainu skapis and other institutions have moved, too. With the strengthening of research in the universities, the role of the LAS in the science in Latvia has diminished. However, the LAS still encourages, evaluates, and provides professional expertise on research and innovation trends and results in the country. It would be beneficial to facilitate in-depth cooperation with universities and institutes. Unfortunately, insufficient state funding for the LAS activities and the fact that the LAS does not hold property rights to the Academy’s high-rise building, impedes the expansion of the LAS work. Transfer of the high-rise building into the LAS ownership might significantly contribute to further development of the LAS, creating a more stable economic base and establishing the scientific and cultural centre of Latvia and, possibly, of the entire Baltic region in one edifice.

Presently, the Latvian Academy of Sciences is one of the essential vehicles for manifestation and implementation of the democracy in science in this country, where the researchers’ weighted collective opinion is crucial.

The priority task of the LAS for the nearest future would also be the regaining of the partially lost influence within governmental structures as a qualified intellectual advisory body on national development strategy issues, which was of importance in the 1990s and in early 21st century. LAS together with the Latvian Council of Science must become a significant support for the Latvian Innovation and Research Strategy Council permanently running at the Cabinet of Ministers. LAS should be actively involved in promoting scientific and innovative technologies, become a scientific lobby in our country, and encourage interaction between science and technologies in all their manifestations.

Such is the position of the current LAS management which has gained approval with the researchers and the academic community of Latvia. This position is winning a growing support, although often a purely declaratory one, also in the political environment.