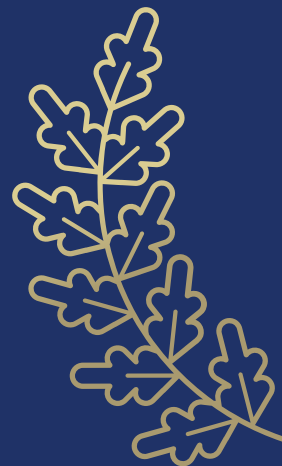




SEMMELWEIS
UNIVERSITY 1769



Ladies and Gentlemen!

Honourable Members of Parliament! Dear Participants!

On this historic day for our university community, I stand before you today as the Rector of Semmelweis University in Budapest, representing our students and staff. **This is an important moment in the 254-year history of our institution, which, in addition to the reputation of our university and equal opportunities, also has at stake the future of Hungarian and European medical education in the EU.**

We know that our namesake, the obstetrician-gynaecologist Ignác Semmelweis, one of the world's most famous doctors, studied and worked at our university, and was the first to point out the importance of asepsis, so it is no coincidence that he is universally called "the saviour of mothers". Statues of Ignác Semmelweis have been erected in many places around the world. At the International Museum of Surgical Science in Chicago, USA, one of the twelve monuments dedicated to illustrious persons from the history of medicine is that of Semmelweis. His teachings on the importance of disinfectant handwashing were brought to the fore again during the coronavirus pandemic - no wonder that in March 2020, the Google search engine homepage featured a video tribute to him and his legacy, which has been viewed by more than 40 million people. Albert Szent-Györgyi, the discoverer of vitamin C and later Nobel Prize-winning professor, was a former student of our university as well, and the first female Hungarian doctor, Vilma Hugonnai, defended her degree, which she obtained in Zürich, here in 1879. Our university's professor, Ágost Schoepf-Merei, performed the first anaesthetic surgery in Hungary, just a few months after the first demonstration operation at Harvard.

For 254 years, our university has been built and has become the institution we know today: Semmelweis University is the leading medical university in Central and Eastern Europe. Its three main activities - education, research and innovation, and medicine - make it an internationally recognized centre of excellence.



Semmelweis University was the first Hungarian institution to be ranked in the top 250 of the Times Higher Education World University Rankings last year, making it not only the highest ranked Hungarian university, but also **the 64th among universities in the European Union**. As a specialized university, Semmelweis University ranks the 43rd best higher education institution in the world in the US News Best Global Universities 2022 ranking in the field of “Cardiology and Cardiovascular System” - my field of specialization.

Semmelweis University is not only an internationally renowned institution, but also one of the flagships of Hungarian higher education, as 45% of medical doctors, 44% of dentists and 39% of pharmacists working in Hungary graduated from our university.

Anyone who calls themselves a Semmelweis student is a member of a truly international community. Of the thirteen thousand five hundred students in our six faculties, one in three (that is, 4,500 students) are enrolled in our English or German language programs. They have come and continue to come to Budapest from 110 countries on five continents. In total, our university has joint teaching and research partnerships with more than 200 higher education institutions globally.

Last year, **Semmelweis University** awarded around 920 diplomas in medicine, dentistry and pharmacy, and **since its foundation it has awarded more than 80,000**. Every year, we have a significant over-enrolment.

As a medical and health sciences university, we have done all we can to help refugees fleeing the war at our eastern borders. So far, we have treated around 2,000 Ukrainian refugees in our clinics. The staff of the András Pető Faculty have on several occasions provided in-patient care for children from the Berehove region afflicted with congenital central nervous system injuries.

In addition, immediately after the outbreak of the war, the university used its own financial resources to grant the “visiting student” status for around 200 students studying in Ukraine. As of September 2022, 150 students continued their studies at our university within the frame of the Hungarian government’s “Student at Risk” program. We also provide support to hospitals in Ukraine in the form of equipment and medicines



essential for patient care. We also regularly provide training for Ukrainian medical staff and doctors in our clinics.

Furthermore, Semmelweis University is also the largest healthcare institution in Hungary. The university clinics are places of practical training, but they also provide patient care at the highest level of progressiveness. This means that they have a national duty of care in most specialized medical fields, and thus play a leading role in treating the most severely ill patients requiring complex treatments.

In 2022, we treated more than half a million patients.

The university has a prominent role in innovation as well. Research is focused on maintenance of health, disease prevention, early diagnosis and effective treatment of pre-existing conditions, and healthy aging. In 2022, the university's research activities were supported by 334 projects, 66 of which were international, but our participation in various international consortia is also significant.

Just as our predecessors have done over the centuries, we cooperate with state leaders and the government, but more importantly, we believe, above all, in the autonomy of universities. Over the past 254 years, governments and even political regimes have come and gone, but our quest for autonomy has remained unchanged. **Two years ago, we had the opportunity to take a further step away from the state towards university autonomy.**

Therefore, in January 2021, the Senate of our university proposed a resolution to the Government of Hungary to change the maintenance model in order to follow international best practices, to achieve greater management autonomy, long-term predictability and financial sustainability. **Consequently, Semmelweis University started to operate under the control of a public-interest trust foundation from 1 August 2021.**

The university is now maintained by the Foundation for National Health Care and Medical Education, whose professional board of trustees consists of 4 physicians and an economist. The Board of Trustees is chaired by the CEO of an internationally renowned pharmaceutical company and includes a world-renowned professor of vascular surgery



at the US Mayo Clinic and myself, the Rector elected by the University Senate.

The change of maintenance has not altered the rights and obligations involved. However, it resulted in a more competitive wage structure for employees, the transfer of our clinics and educational buildings to university ownership, and an increase in autonomy for education, research and medicine.

The university has concluded a long-term, performance-based contract with the Hungarian government to finance its public functions.

The Senate of the university operates autonomously in compliance with all legal requirements, and its legal powers remain unchanged in all respects. Following the change of maintenance, 224 Senate resolutions were adopted by the university's main decision-making body, 33 of which concerned the university's Organizational and Operational Rules. Of these, only once did the quasi-shareholder, the Board of Trustees, which exercises ownership rights, make comments and propose amendments.

Nor did the change of maintenance affect the election of the Rector, the university's main leader. Just like five years ago, this year, in 2023, the Senate chose between two candidates. Of the 45 members of the Senate, the highest decision-making body, 44 are elected by the citizens of the university.

The use and accountability of EU funds has been transparent and seamless for decades.

This is why the Council of the European Union's Implementing Decision excluding Semmelweis University students, and indeed all Hungarian medical and health science institutions, from the European student exchange program is baffling, inexplicable and devastating. The decision made last December is unrelated to the protection of the European Union's budget and funds, but it will cause irreversible and disproportionate damage and will adversely affect both the scientific and student communities of the universities.

Since last December, **Semmelweis University has suffered a loss of nearly 8 million euros** due to the inability to contract for tenders already won or submitted, **but perhaps even more significant is the damage to our reputation, which puts our students and researchers at a competitive disadvantage compared to students of**



other universities.

We can only hope and trust that this was not the aim of the decision.

Our key research partners and funders are receiving letters warning about the dangers of working with Hungarian universities. All this without any objections from the European Commission or the Council of the European Union regarding our operation. Nor did the Implementing Decision on universities having changed maintenance contain any justification, which would clarify or explain the sanctions imposed on Semmelweis University. To this day, we have not been told where, when and how we have violated the rule of law or endangered EU finances. Furthermore, the exclusionary decision was taken against our university, which has been operating for 254 years, without addressing us a single question, without visiting us, without studying our Organizational and Operational Rules, without commenting on them and without engaging in active dialogue with us.

In fact, we were punished without being listened to even once!

I am convinced that the European Union's task is integration. To enhance successful partnerships between countries in the field of research and education as well. But the exclusionary decision and sanction made last December not only fails to achieve this objective, but also directly penalises the researchers and students of Semmelweis University, and at the same time causes losses for our EU partners, except, of course, our competitors. **The Council's exclusionary decision affects the university community and violates its integrity.** Therefore, Semmelweis University has transparently appealed to the European Court of Justice to represent the interests of its teachers, researchers and students. **Our goal is to be heard,** to see this exclusionary decision withdrawn and to ensure that in the future no sanctions are imposed on a higher education institution without a precise assessment of how and when it has violated the rule of law and the harm it has caused to the EU in this context. We would also like for the universities to be involved in consultations on the measures that affect them. We believe **that the Council of the European Union should revise decisions that exclude Semmelweis University and its researchers from shaping the future, and our students from**



the free movement and exchange of experience in Europe.

When politicians argue with each other, that is their business, but that is no excuse and should not be a justification to punish students, doctors and health care professionals who are preparing for or wish to practice their profession.

The sick and injured children are waiting for doctors, nurses and conductor-educators. This is a fundamental right for every Hungarian and European Union citizen. Thank you for listening.

Dr. Béla Merkely

Rector of Semmelweis University

Brussels, 7 June 2023