



**The future depends on our minds, our vision and our leadership**

Speech of the President of the Max-Planck-Gesellschaft

Professor Dr. Patrick Cramer

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– Check against delivery –

“I have a mind that is superior than when I was 20 - thanks to experience.”

This is what Rita Levi-Montalcini said when she turned 100 years old! For her, the Nobel laureate, discoverer of the Nerve Growth Factor and former CNR director, getting older was an opportunity to advance. What a great inspiration for our celebration today! Auguri CNR to 100 years, Auguri MPG to 75 years!

Dear friends and guests, thank you for joining today. Dear President Carrozza, dear Ambassador Varicchio, dear Andrea Musacchio, thanks to the CNR and the Italian Embassy for the opportunity to celebrate our birthdays together!

Birthdays are an opportunity to look back, but also to look forward. Let me attempt to do this for the Max Planck Society. Where do we stand and where are we going?

Let me explain this using three keywords: people, strategies, responsibilities.

Our heart beats for science. To do the best science, we recruit, retain and foster the best people. If you wish, the MPG is a scouting agency. Finding people who surprise us is our guiding principle. We are looking for people whose scientific inspiration is exceptional. People who may change the world – not today, not tomorrow, but in the medium term. When I say people, I mean the best researchers, but not just: I also mean the most suited personalities: passionate leaders, careful mentors, outstanding role models. People who lead by example. When we recruit such people, we give them freedom and resources so they are hopefully limited only by ideas.

In the future, we want to create more opportunities for early-career researchers. We are now working on a platform where postdocs can pitch their projects and where they obtain mentors from two MPIs



to foster synergy. A second measure concerns tenure-track. Most of our group leaders take professorships worldwide. That's wonderful and that is one reason why we will continue our Research Group Leader program. But we have an interest in retaining the best where possible. We will therefore improve and extend our Lise Meitner Program, and will additionally provide tenure-track positions in special fields such as Computer and Quantum Sciences.

Why different measures? The explanation comes with the second keyword: strategies. We all know: there is no such thing as "one size fits all". Our 85 institutes cover a broad range of fields, from astrophysics to art. They are spread over 38 sites. By the way: two are in Italy - in Florence and Rome.

Since our institutes are scientifically autonomous and since directors are free in their science, they can decide on structures that best support the science. In Dresden, for example, we have a life science institute with many independent research groups, a good mixture of junior and senior groups. All groups enjoy access to state-of-the-art central service units that provide them with the latest technologies.

A different approach is taken by our institutes in Computer and Quantum Sciences. Several of these institutes have joined forces to offer tenure-track positions. Together they reach a critical mass. An exciting experiment. By the way, the idea of networking we are promoting across the board. The European Research Area is of particular importance to us. You can see that when you look at our collaboration partners: they are preferably in Europe. On a global scale, European countries will not stay competitive on their own. Therefore, CNR and MPG are part of an alliance of European research organizations – we call ourselves G6. And the MPG also strongly supports ELLIS, a network that brings the best AI researchers together. ELLIS has grown to comprise 40 units in 15 countries, including Germany and Italy. Among others, Silvia Zuffi is part of it, a researcher at CNR in Pavia.

However, over the last years we have unfortunately seen that our structures are increasingly endangered by overburdening regulations. We must work on the political level towards reducing bureaucracy. This is not only key for science, we also need to reduce bureaucracy to reach our aim of becoming carbon neutral by 2035. We develop a climate action plan. To deal with many challenges, we have expanded our leadership and now have four Vice-Presidents, including one who deals with digitalization and computing.

Dear guests, in the beginning I explained the importance of people for the Max Planck way of staying at the forefront of science. People not programs. Then I stressed the scientific autonomy of our institutes, and mentioned how they combine forces more effectively to foster talent in the next generation, share resources, and are enabled to open up new research fields. Finally, I would like to emphasize that our privileges come with responsibilities: societal, ethical and global responsibilities.



On the occasion of our 75th anniversary, the historian Jürgen Kocka described the MPG as "independent as a registered association; close to the state, but not a public authority or state agency; business-friendly, but not a free-market actor; in this sense between state and market." Indeed, the MPG sits – and this by no means implies a negative connotation – between many chairs. It has many bridging functions.

One of these bridging functions we use to engage in science diplomacy. To provide an iconic example: The first Max Planck President, Otto Hahn, was invited by colleagues from the Weizmann Institute in 1959, and this first official visit enabled a diplomatic relationship between Israel and Germany in the post-war period. We stand firmly in this tradition. We have quickly expressed our solidarity with our Israeli colleagues after the horrible terrorist attacks by Hamas two weeks ago. Our thoughts are with our friends and colleagues and their families.

When we look globally, we face multiple challenges. New laws impair the flow of knowledge and the exchange of researchers between nations. It also became more difficult to exclude military use of results from research collaborations. Scientific freedom is endangered in many countries. These changing boundary conditions I discussed also last week with the president of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, who visited us in Munich together with a high-ranking academic delegation.

But please, we should not forget: The future of science is to collaborate more, not less. The global challenges we will only be able to address together. Science has a huge, direct impact on our world. Think of Giulio Natta and Karl Ziegler. A researcher affiliated with CNR and a researcher affiliated with the MPG. Together they received the Nobel Prize in Chemistry for the synthesis of polymers. Their catalysts have changed the world, plastics are everywhere, but now they also pose a big challenge. This ambivalence of technological advances has become very pronounced in our times. Think of artificial intelligence, genome editing or synthetic biology.

What are the implications? I think more than ever, we have to deal responsibly with our opportunities. Here, communication is key. Not just science communication, which explains our findings. No, we also must continue our dialogue with society about the chances and risks of new technologies, and we also have to communicate science politics. In turn, we expect that politics continues to respect our autonomy and freedom, which are a crucial prerequisite for science. Even more: in a world in which illiberal, autocratic and nationalist tendencies are on the rise, the voice of science must be loud and clear.



This closes the circle to the beginning of my speech. Because when Rita Levi-Montalcini turned 100 years old in 2009 she also said:

“What I did in the past is not enough — there is only the future.”

Her fearless dedication remains a constant inspiration for us. She reminds us that gaining the future depends on our mind, our vision and our leadership. Thank you.