Hungarian coalition has pro-science leanings

Munich. Science has not escaped entirely from Hungary's new belt-tightening programme — but it fared better than most other sectors of the economy in the revised 1994 budget announced by the new government last week.

The coalition of socialists (reformed communists) and free democrats which formed a government in July has inherited a severe budget deficit, and the cabinet has spent the summer discussing how it can claw back some HUF17 billion (around US$150 million) from this year's budget.

Its conclusions — to be ratified by parliament later this month — together with the new government's declared interest in building a more robust structure for science policy, indicate that this government may be more sympathetic towards science than its predecessor.

Negotiations with the Hungarian Academy of Sciences persuaded the socialist prime minister, Jyula Horn, that the academy, which runs more than 40 research institutes in Hungary and also acts as a learned society, should be considered a special case because of the severity of its treatment over recent years.

"It is not possible for the government to look only at one year and make the right decision," argues László Keviczky, general secretary of the academy, whose budget has more than halved in real terms since 1992. The academy has also had to deal with perpetual political hostility — including charges of harbouring communist sympathies — despite the extensive reforms it has undergone. After years of fighting for legal status, the academy finally achieved it last spring. "We have cut 35 per cent of our staff [since 1989] — the highest percentage cut of any state-owned sector," says Keviczky.

Young, gifted and left-of-centre: Gábor Fodor, Hungary's fourth most popular politician, is now in charge of basic science.

The government has been responsive to these arguments, and is now asking the academy to sacrifice only HUF120 million from its 1994 budget of around HUF5 billion. Keviczky sees this as a strong sign that the new government is sympathetic towards science. But he is under no illusion that it will be easy to hold its ground when the 1995 budget is set in late autumn. The academy comes under the aegis of the ministry of culture and education, whose new minister, the 31-year-old free democrat Gábor Fodor is an unknown quantity as far as his position on science goes.

Applied science did not fare so well last week, suffering severe cuts comparable with other, non-science sectors. The National Committee for Technological Development (known as the OMFB), which is responsible for allocating grants for applied research, will lose HUF600 million from its 1994 HUF4.6 billion budget. Lajos Myiri, deputy director of OMFB, says that savings will probably be made in its infrastructure funds rather than in its competitive research awards, which it is determined to defend at all costs.

The government is also considering new ways of organizing Hungary's research policy now that the dust is starting to settle on post-communist reforms.

The OMFB, whose president, Ernö Pungor, was a minister without portfolio in the previous government, will now report to the minister of industry, socialist László Pál. This move is intended to streamline government, but it almost certainly also has a political intent. Although it will no longer have direct contact with the cabinet, OMFB will nonetheless maintain its current structure and functions. The agency is also responsible for international relations in both basic and applied science, and advises the government on research policy.

The government is considering setting up a science and technology committee at cabinet level, which would comprise the ministers for industry and education, and representatives from the academy, OMFB, the independent grant-giving agency OTKA and other scientific bodies.

The prime minister has welcomed the idea in principle, and, says Keviczky, has indicated that he might be prepared to act as chairman, should the committee be established. Such a committee might be similar to the Czech republic's new government advisory committee on science and technology, whose round-table meetings include scientific advisers as well as the finance and economics ministers (see *Nature* **368**, 386; 1994).

Alison Abbott

Euroagency for drug evaluation sets up shop in London's East End

London. **The new European Medicines Evaluation Agency (EMEA) sets up home this week in the Canary Wharf development in London's East End, with an initial staff of around 200.**

It will be headed by Fernand Sauer, former head of pharmaceuticals at the European Commission. The agency will coordinate licensing of medicines in all 12 member states of the European Union (EU). At the moment companies must apply to each state individually: under the new system, a medicine whose safety, efficacy and production standards are approved by the EMEA may be sold in all EU countries.

Tom Stoddart/Katz Pictures

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Some biotechnology products will be obliged to go through the EMEA instead of national agencies. For other products the new route will be optional, but the advantages are clear — products should reach a bigger market more quickly. The EMEA hopes to cut licensing time from several years to a maximum of 12 months.

But drug companies are reserving judgement on the new system. The EMEA will delegate assessment of particular medicines to a national agency that will act as rapporteur. A second national agency will act as co-rapporteur, to provide a "double-check". Bob Blakie, head of British Biotechnology, says that the role of these rapporteurs remains unclear. And as companies will not have a final choice of rapporteur country (they are invited to make suggestions) they may lose the advantage of having dialogue with the relevant regulatory agency during product development.

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