

Risk assessment for international partnerships

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Slaven MISLJENCEVIC
RTD.A.3 - R&I Actors and Research Careers
DG Research and Innovation



WHAT is foreign interference?

WHY HEIs?

HOW to protect against it?

1. WHAT is foreign interference?

Definition

Activities that are carried out by, or on behalf of a **foreign actor**, which are **coercive, covert, deceptive or corrupting** and are **contrary** to the **EU's sovereignty, values and interests**.

Examples

A **research leader** which is collaborating with a foreign actor is **pressured** into **restricting** or **cancelling** lectures, workshops, conferences, or projects on specific topics.

A **foreign state-sponsored hacker group** runs a **phishing campaign** on students and staff of a HEI to harvest their accounts and gain **unauthorised access** to publications, data, and code.

A **technology transfer officer** is recruited by a foreign actor and is subsequently **coerced** or **blackmailed** into gaining **access** to and sharing confidential research and IPR.

1. WHAT is foreign interference?

Possible tactics

- **Political pressure** by influential representatives on strategic decision makers.
- **Financial support** in the form of investments, donations, funding, and loans.
- **Exploiting people** in strategic positions who are coerced, recruited, or placed.
- **Digital intrusions** breaching cybersecurity remotely or physically on location.
- **Spreading disinformation** against local interests or promoting foreign interests.

Multi-dimensional threats

Often multidimensional, combining coercive and **subversive measures**, using both **conventional** and **unconventional** tools and tactics. They are designed to be **difficult to detect or attribute**. These threats **target critical vulnerabilities** and extend across all **research activities, scientific domains, research outputs, and individuals at the organisations**.

2. WHY HEIs?

Objectives of foreign interference

The objectives of foreign interference serve to further the **political, socio-cultural, economic, and technological interests** of the foreign actor:

- to **retrieve information** of interest to the foreign actor,
- to **influence decisions** in favor of the foreign actor,
- to **undermine values** contrary to the foreign actor.

Higher Education Institutions

- Europe's HEIs have a **strong record of internationalisation**.
- This openness and collaboration has greatly contributed to their success but has simultaneously **facilitated foreign interference**.
- HEIs are often **insufficiently aware of potential threats** and have not taken **preventive measures**.
- Provided the complexity of the threats, it is **difficult to tackle these issues in isolation**.

3. HOW to protect against foreign interference?

1. Make use of support provided by **local** and **national authorities, associations, etc.**

2. Guidelines on tackling R&I Foreign interference

Available
soon

Aim

1. Protect fundamental values by safeguarding academic freedom, integrity and institutional autonomy.
2. Protect our key research findings and intellectual assets.

Areas of attention

Four areas of attention, which are especially vulnerable to foreign intervention

- **Values**
- **Governance**
- **Partnerships**
- **Cyber-security**

3. HOW to protect against foreign interference?

Approach



Characteristics

- **State-agnostic.**
- On **voluntary basis.**
- Based on a **positive agenda** of partnership coupled with the constructive management of differences.
- **Not designed to burden** the organisations with **additional administration** but to encourage integration of recommendations in existing structures.
- Aim to be as **concrete as possible**, but each organisations should tailor their own set of actions as there is no one-size-fits-all approach.
- **Not exhaustive** and do not prevent HEIs from adopting other guidance on the same subject.

3. HOW to protect against foreign interference?

Possible actions

- Continue to cooperate with partners in repressive settings
- Conduct a vulnerability assessment to understand external pressures on your institution.
- Raise broad awareness of potential risks involved in engaging in a partnership and of the ways the institution seeks to mitigate them.
- Ensure that knowledge security and academic integrity is safeguarded in all partnerships by reviewing procedures and expanding and strengthening them where needed.
- Define the minimum levels of due diligence for different types of partnerships.

Possible procedure for partnership agreements

1. Develop a positive agenda
2. Prepare for partnership
3. Develop a sound knowledge of the partner organisation, of its place in the national research system of its country.
4. Perform due diligence.
5. Carefully negotiate partnership agreement.
6. Monitor the implementation of the agreement.
7. Assess the outcomes of the collaboration and draw lessons for future engagement.

THANK YOU!

slaven.misljencevic@ec.europa.eu

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