

## ACADEMIC FREEDOM INSIGHTS SERIES

# Foreign Interference in Academia and its impact on academic freedom and institutional autonomy

## INTRODUCTION

The rise of geopolitical tensions has led to growing worries about foreign interference in European academia. This brief discusses different forms of foreign interference in academia, reflects on the role of the Council of Europe in strengthening the protection of academic freedom against foreign threats, and suggests policy options for further action.

Prepared by Council of Europe experts — Paola Matei and Hans de Wit— within the framework of the Education Department project “Academic Freedom in Action,” exploring the key challenges and policy responses that shape academic freedom in Europe

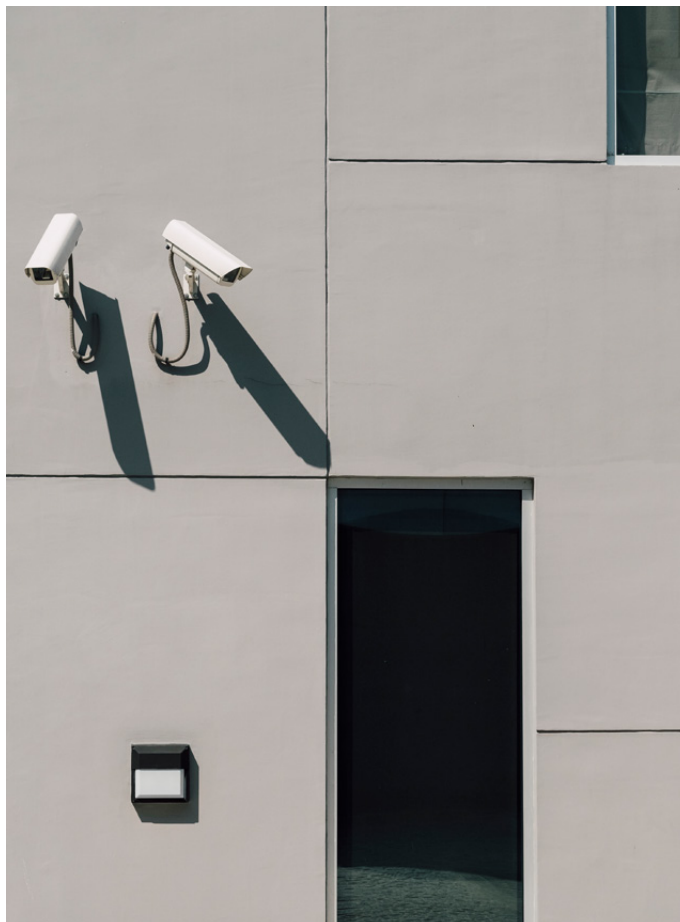


## CONTEXT

The rise of geopolitical tensions and conflicts over the past 10 to 15 years has led to increasing instances of foreign interference in European academia. The resulting concerns about the undesirable transfer of knowledge and technology underlie national and European security policies that may negatively affect academic freedom in Europe.

The EU, national governments, as well as regional and international institutions have adopted in recent years policies, guidelines, regulations, and measures to safeguard the academic community from the possible impact of foreign interference. At the same time, a discussion is taking place about the impact of such measures on academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

Shih (2024) refers to challenges for international science collaboration in this new geopolitical situation: “Responsible internationalization focuses on the discretionary responsibilities that researchers have when building international relationships. This means that researchers need to develop their ability to reflect on contextual factors so that a complex portfolio of risks encountered when national borders are crossed can be proactively and realistically managed.” (p. 4)



## FACTS & FIGURES

**Indirect channels of foreign interference may involve third parties – such as student organisations, NGOs, or private companies – as well as individual academics or administrators, who may be subjected to pressure or coercion. Such actions can undermine and endanger academic freedom in various ways, for instance:**

- 01** Authoritarian and ‘illiberal’-democratic governments and their think tanks, and recently also traditionally liberal democratic regimes.
- 02** The funding of EU-based think-tanks and media to attack and discredit academic reports, pieces of research or research teams.
- 03** Cyberattacks on higher education infrastructures and technologies to slowdown, hamper or block knowledge production.

**Foreign governments may also exert indirect influence through third parties – such as student organisations, NGOs, private companies – or through individual academics. Examples include:**

- 01** The spread of systematic disinformation on social media aimed at harming members of the academic community and delegitimising specific research agendas.
- 02** Large-scale scholarship programmes creating financial dependencies among European academics towards foreign governments, which can lead to pressures to modify or remove content from syllabi, study programmes or research agendas.
- 03** The provision of financial or other incentives to European academics to influence academic debates and research activities, including the formulation of research questions and the publication of results.

Most of the available information consists of isolated case studies, including instances where research data have been used for military purposes by authoritarian regimes. Nonetheless, knowledge security has clearly become a major concern for the member States of the Council of Europe.

## KEY CHALLENGES & DEVELOPMENTS

Open science is grounded on international cooperation and transparency, which is at the heart of the European Research Area and EU research policies and funding instruments. However, this openness may be misused by foreign powers who try to gain advantages from civil-military research and technology.

European-based researchers and innovators may be targeted to obtain state-of-the-art knowledge and technology, in some cases by using methods that are deceptive and covert, or through outright theft or coercion. However, most of the times undesirable transfer and use of European knowledge and technologies takes place through exploiting trust-based international scientific cooperation between European and non-European academics.

As de Wit and Glass (2024) state, there are legitimate concerns about risks of political influence via international academic collaboration: “Concerns over intellectual property theft are not unfounded, with documented cases of economic espionage and unauthorized technology transfer occurring through academic channels. Additionally, there are real risks of ethics dumping, where less stringent ethical standards in some countries could be exploited, and of dual-use research being misappropriated for harmful purposes.” (p. 2)

At the same time, knowledge securitisation policies in response to foreign interference reframe fundamental academic values such as academic freedom, through the idea of responsible internationalisation, to legitimate governmental intervention into internationalized academic activities. An interim report from the Swedish Council for Universities & Higher Education in 2024 describes the tension well: “Internationalisation is (...) an inalienable value that needs to be protected and nurtured. At the same time, universities and colleges operate in an increasingly complex and fragmented world with increased geopolitical tensions... This entails an increased focus on protecting national interests, knowledge and technology” (p. 5)

There is no universally agreed definition of research security, but it can be understood as a deliberate set of actions taken by governments or funding bodies to safeguard against various risks, including:

- ✚ The undesirable transfer of critical know-how and technology from a security perspective.
- ✚ Malign influence on research by third parties.
- ✚ Theft of knowledge and technologies for economic gain.
- ✚ Ethical violations where knowledge or technologies are used to suppress fundamental values.

The first risk concerns the transfer of knowledge and technology to third countries in ways that may strengthen their military capabilities and affect national security. Critical technology areas include advanced semiconductors, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and biotechnology. Malign influence includes activities aimed at spreading disinformation or inciting self-censorship among researchers and students. Disinformation



is the intentional dissemination of information that is wholly or partly false. This includes interviews with fake experts, counterfeit documents, retouched photos and videos, and others. Foreign states use these activities to influence foreign population, such as Russia in the 2017 presidential elections in France and in 2024 in the one in Romania.

The third risk includes intellectual property theft and the illegal acquisition of knowledge and technologies for competitive gains. The fourth risk concerns the violation of integrity where knowledge and technologies are used to infringe upon fundamental values and academic freedom. Artificial Intelligence and quantum computers have the potential for both civilian and military use, as well as being the focus of intense economic competition.

All these risks make it necessary to have security policies to protect academic integrity and responsibility of higher education for society. At the same time, as stated by The Guild, “effective, well- balanced risk assessment relies upon expertise” (The Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities, 2023). And that expertise is in the academic community itself. Several national governments (Australia, Sweden, The Netherlands for instance) and the European Union address the need of balancing risks of foreign interference with autonomy and academic freedom. In the 2024 Proposal for a Council Recommendation on Enhancing Research Security, European Commission, states:

“In accordance with institutional autonomy and academic freedom, higher education institutions and other research performing organisations are primarily responsible for developing and managing their international cooperation. Public authorities at all levels should provide them with assistance and support, empowering them to take informed decisions and manage the risks to research security involved, ensuring that international cooperation in research, innovation and higher education remains both open and secure.” (EC, 2024, p. 9)

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER ACTION

The future policy scenario should encompass common European strategies to protect the continent's researchers and students from malign foreign interference and illegitimate activities carried out in the European higher education and research areas. Research security needs to be increased through policy regulatory and new measures in a joint common European framework. National governments have adopted new guidelines to limit the technological threats posed, for example, by cyberattacks on information systems. However, the protection of academic freedom of European scholars and student who are involved in international collaboration projects and activities with non-European partners, and especially partners from countries with authoritarian political regimes, is still insufficient.



It is important to maintain institutional commitment to international cooperation and encourage open science in order to foster innovation and excellence.



Currently, there is a proliferation of national approaches to design guidelines and measures to avoid risks associated with foreign interference. However, it is essential that the Council of Europe and the European Union carry out coordinated efforts of risk management.



The European institutions should support member states by strengthening their capacity building to protect the European Research Area (ERA).



As recommended by the Council of the European Union (2024), it is important to ensure the proportionality of measures, for the objective is to manage rather than to avoid risks.



Higher education institutions should develop guidelines in consultation with national and European authorities and institutions to safeguard their academic communities from foreign interference. This creates potential for cross-sectoral transfer of knowledge and data.



Raising awareness and training opportunities for researchers, academics, students about how to handle risks attached to international academic collaboration is crucial for preventing undesirable transfer and use of knowledge and technologies.

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## CONCLUSION

The academic sector has benefited from international collaboration and partnerships with foreign institutions for a long time. Since it is crucial that this commitment to open science continues, greater awareness and training for researchers are necessary at times of heightened security and economic threats. The return of power politics in global science relations and the changed geopolitical context have increased the risk of disinformation and research security, and facilitated the erosion of academic freedom, in many countries around the world. Consequently, there is a need for a tailored-made approach strongly rooted in academic freedom and institutional autonomy, supported by government capacity in the field of intelligence, foreign affairs, and research security. Universities and academics do not have the tools to thoroughly screen traditional and possible new research partners, and all international students and academic staff. Governments and international entities as the Council of Europe and the European Union are essential to provide crucial support and capacities in this. But the final decision with respect to international collaboration and the handling of research risks needs to stay in the hand of the academic community itself, in respect of its autonomy and academic freedom.

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