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WORKING DOCUMENT

From: General Secretariat of the Council
To: ERAC (European Research Area and Innovation Committee)

Subject: Debate on “Foreign interference”

Delegations will find attached document on the above mentioned subject with the view to the meeting of the European Research Area and Innovation Committee (ERAC) on 12-13 April 2022.

ERAC Plenary

Debate on foreign interference

Scientific research is a collaborative process by nature in which researchers and organisations typically build upon existing research and collaborate to further scientific development. Higher Education Institutions and Research Performing Organisations are of particular interest to foreign actors due to their prominent role in society, their co-operation with the public, private, and third sectors, and their creation of knowledge and innovative new technologies that are crucial for tackling societal challenges and ensuring prosperity and are often relevant for dual civil and military usages.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been accompanied with a campaign of disinformation, which is the result of the groundwork that has been laid for years. Foreign interference in all democratic processes in the EU, including disinformation, has also been the focus of the special committee of the European Parliament.

As a response to foreign interference threats that specifically target EU R&I institutions, the Commission has published on 18 January a toolkit on how to mitigate foreign interference in research and innovation. The publication outlines best practices to support EU Higher Education Institutions and Research Performing Organisations in safeguarding their fundamental values, including academic freedom, integrity and institutional autonomy, as well as to protect their staff, students, research findings and assets. In the toolkit, specific attention is given to cyber-security and disinformation.

Foreign interference threats target critical vulnerabilities and extend across all research activities, scientific domains, research outputs, individuals, organisations and regions and therefore a multi-dimensional approach is needed to tackle this issue. The toolkit emphasizes that building resistance and responding to foreign interference incidents should be done in consultation with and with the support of local and national authorities.

Now we are looking beyond the toolkit, further guidance from ERAC is welcomed on the following possible initiatives:

1. Awareness raising and facilitating access to relevant information

Addressing foreign interference in R&I institutions requires awareness and vigilance by all members of the academic community, who are collectively responsible for identifying, reporting, and responding to cases of foreign interference. Raising awareness should not create a culture of fear towards collaboration with foreign researchers or organisations but rather a culture of awareness and collective responsibility to combat foreign interference. As highlighted in the toolkit for tackling R&I foreign interference, it is necessary to have education and training in place to understand the nature and types of foreign interference that can occur.

The toolkit has been published, but that does not mean that it is being used. The next step will be to work together with Member States and R&I actors to **promote and operationalise this toolkit**. In addition, while many R&I institutions have welcomed the toolkit, they might experience a lack of knowledge and capacity to implement some of the preventive measures.

In addition to the toolkit published by the Commission, several Member States, university associations, RTOs, and universities are developing their own set of guidelines. This might make it for the end users challenging and time-consuming to navigate through the different documents. In addition, this also causes duplication of efforts and increases the risk of contrasting information.

A one-stop shop, in the form of a digital portal accessible to everyone, can make it easier for the end-users to navigate through the different publications, avoid duplication of efforts and align better the content. Even more, this would facilitate the identification of information gaps. This portal should provide different content depending on the type of user (R&I institution or individual researcher) and would redirect to other relevant sources of information such as websites and single point of entry with the government.

Finally, **mutual learning exercises** can focus on exchanges of national practice at the operational level in relation to how to best raise awareness and prevent foreign interference from occurring. Mutual learning exercises can address topics such as, but not limited to, disinformation, international cooperation with third countries, cybersecurity and the protection of academic freedom.

What is the view of ERAC members on how the awareness of research organisations about foreign interference can be improved and how research organisations can be supported at the local, regional, national, and EU levels?

2. Identification and assessment of opportunities and risks of international cooperation in research and innovation

Today, when collaborating internationally, R&I institutions need to be able to conduct a more detailed assessment of the research, educational and institutional environment in specific third countries to more strategically identify the opportunities and be sufficiently aware of the risks involved. This can be highly challenging for many R&I institutions because it requires particular expertise on individual third countries and extensive resources. At the same time, it is pivotal that our international cooperation in research and innovation brings mutual benefits and does not violate fundamental values or expose the EU to undesired risks.

In order to remain open we must increase our level of awareness. This overall approach was discussed, building on the Global Approach to Research and Innovation of May 2021¹ during the Marseille conference that took place on 8 March 2022 under the auspice of the French Presidency of the Council of the EU, where the need to respect our fundamental values in global R&I engagements was strongly reaffirmed.

Open-source intelligence (OSINT) is the collection and analysis of data gathered from open sources (overt and publicly available sources) to produce actionable intelligence and has the potential to solve some of the challenges related to the identification and assessment of opportunities and risks. By processing this data and presenting it in a simple dashboard, R&I institutions should be able to easily access certain information about a foreign institution or individual, assisting them in their due diligence process and in identifying opportunities. For instance, in the case of China, a lot of

¹https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/research_and_innovation/strategy_on_research_and_innovation/documents/ec_rtd_com2021-252.pdf

information about universities, specific affiliations and collaborations with certain entities, research projects, and where government funding is directed is already public, but this information is highly fragmented and in the Chinese language. Collecting and understanding this data would require advanced knowledge on how to navigate the Chinese internet and the translation and comprehension of numerous Chinese documents related to a vast array of fields (policy plans, funding programmes, publications, partnership announcements). Exploring the possibility to create an R&I-specific OSINT system that could be owned or coordinated by the Commission with the support of Member States and provide universities, researchers, and public institutions with detailed and readily accessible third country information on specific technologies, affiliations, research projects, and universities, could be extremely beneficial to maintain the integrity of our research ecosystem and to develop international cooperation opportunities that are increasingly fruitful. This system could be developed starting from open source information gathered on key selected third countries and be expanded to include additional countries as needed. To be noted that countries like China have worked with OSINT systems to target specific technologies in the West for a considerable amount of time².

Another initiative can build on one of the possible mitigation measure mentioned in the governance chapter of the toolkit on tackling R&I foreign interference: the establishment of a **Foreign Interference Committee** in each Higher Education Institution or Research Performing Organisation. In the view of limiting administrative burden of such committee, this committee should be integrated as much as possible with the existing institutional structure. Foreign Interference Committees could benefit from additional support for national intelligence services and exchanging with local and cross-border committees in a structured and recurrent manner. EU action could focus on the latter by creating an environment in which Foreign Interference Committees can exchange best practices, for example through mutual learning exercises, and work together on projects of common interest.

What is the view of the ERAC Members on how the identification and assessment of risks and opportunities of international cooperation in R&I can be supported and what role can a network of foreign interference committees play?

² <https://cset.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/CSET-Chinas-STI-Operations.pdf>