

OR-56

Protecting Research from Foreign Interference: Risks and Challenges from the Lens of the French Office for Research Integrity

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In France, research integrity (RI) and research security (RS) have until now been addressed separately – involving different actors and different control and prevention mechanisms at national and local level. During the last ENRIO congress (2023), the presentation of the OECD report on Integrity and Security in the Global Research Ecosystem by C. Smith raised a number of RS issues that could affect RI. Something relatively new, that have been perceived as a ‘wake-up call’ for the RI community according to the reaction of one participant.

The French Office for Research Integrity (Ofis) has since been conducting prospective work to better understand how RS overlap with RI, particularly through the prism of foreign interference in science. The aim is twofold:

- 1) Investigate whether the various forms of foreign interference pose a risk to RI, i.e. the extent to which foreign states or third parties are likely to hinder the reliability of results and the proper functioning of research communities;
- 2) Determine Ofis’ area of action in response to these risks, by mapping the scope of the current RS framework and identifying potential gaps in the protection of RI.

We analysed the grey literature, looking in particular at official reports (at European and French level) and cases reported in the press. We also conducted exploratory interviews with national and local stakeholders in RS. At this stage of our work, we have identified the following:

First, foreign interference constitutes a risk for RI. To illustrate this, we propose a typology of three forms of threat to the research community (RC). 1) The RC can be deceived (honest researchers may spread false results or information without noticing it); 2) the RC can be discredited (e.g. by disseminating false information about research results or researchers); and 3) the RC can be coerced or very strongly influenced (e.g. intimidation or political pressure that may lead to self-censorship).

Secondly, there are gaps in the current RS framework with regard to the protection of RI. The public authorities have mainly focused their efforts to protect research on the very high risks of capturing knowledge and expertise (e.g. for nuclear proliferation and terrorism) and disciplines with a technological dimension (e.g. with potential military applications). However, other disciplines - particularly in the social sciences - are also affected, even if the risk is lower in terms of the global Nation’s security.

Given the current geopolitical context, we believe that these risks are likely to increase. As well as giving shape to C. Smith’s warning, we believe this communication can be useful to other RI offices. It also invites the RI community to focus on how to work with the RS community and respond to foreign interferences while preserving academic freedom.