

Event report

European knowledge pool - is it leaking?

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On the 26th of September 2022 the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Multinational Development Policy Dialogue (MDPD) and China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE) organized a close-door, Chatham House rules roundtable discussion titled “European knowledge pool - is it leaking?”.

At the beginning of the event Dr. Ivana Karáskova presented the main results of a recent study titled “[How to Do Trusted Research: China-Specific Guidelines for European Stakeholders](#)”, in which the study authors recommend the EU to develop a holistic approach on foreign interference in research institutions. The short input was followed by a discussion with experts from European institutions, academia, industry representatives as well as members of the European Parliament.

Key findings of the discussion

The awareness of European stakeholders on foreign interference is low

The discussion underlined the need to raise awareness about foreign interference among European stakeholders. Several studies as well as high-level cases have shown that malign foreign influence is not only focused on dual-use or military technology but that foreign actors use the openness of the European research field to their advantage. The discussants pointed out that research fields which are not seen as vulnerable, like agriculture or medicine, are of great interest to foreign actors.

Current international tensions also demonstrate that research is becoming more and more politicized. The assumption that “research is apolitical and neutral” is outdated. European stakeholders should look at the bigger ideological picture behind every cooperation agreement. European research organizations should also make sure that research cooperation is based on reciprocity, meaning that both partners contribute

equally brainpower to the common projects and that results are equally available for all involved partners. If this is not the case, Europe risks losing its competitive advantage without gaining tangible results in return.

Countering foreign interference requires a multi leveled approach

The invited experts agreed that the current measures which are in place to prevent foreign interference are not enough to stop the leak in the European knowledge pool. Current guidelines, published by the EU, mainly focus on export controls, investments screenings and regulations targeting new technologies. A more holistic and EU-wide approach is needed, which should focus on the specific characteristics of each foreign actor (e.g. China).

A European approach, broken down to the national level, is needed to tackle the issue of foreign interference. The EU and European member states should take a stronger role in raising awareness on the issue and by offering guidance to European stakeholders. This could be done through national contact points which have already been established in some European countries.

The participants also discussed examples of foreign interference from the industry, where in many cases company internal guidelines have been put in place to tackle economic espionage. Equally, higher education institutions and research organizations should adopt internal guidelines to tackle foreign interference.

Battling foreign interference should not be done at the cost of academic freedom

Participants agreed that any European efforts to tackle foreign interference needs to be done without compromising academic freedom, as this is one of the main factors behind the competitive edge of the EU.

Participants discussed to what extent universities and research institutions can be obliged by government authorities to screen, report or even to stop their cooperation with foreign actors. The consensus was that any possible screening mechanisms should be made transparent and without a lot of red tape.