European Parliament

The sharp power of knowledge:
Foreign authoritarian meddling in academia

The visibility of, and focus on, authoritarian hybrid threats – a mix of conventional and non-conventional hostile activities to undermine democracies – is increasing. Techniques and technologies keep evolving, and a growing number of authoritarian actors are adopting and adapting different tools to further their agendas. In this context, 'soft power' exerted through academic institutions and universities can become a 'sharp' hybrid tool, undermining academic independence and further eroding trust in facts and science.

What is going on? The academic sphere as a soft target for meddling

The role of universities role in society is constantly evolving. Higher education is facing 'unprecedented challenges in the definition of its purpose, role, organisation, and scope in society and the economy', according to a joint European Commission-OECD report back in 2012. Universities are increasingly expected to link research and education to a new 'third mission': helping resolve societal and economic challenges. Meanwhile, it is generally accepted that universities, to benefit democratic societies, should be free from restraints imposed by the state, religious institutions, special-interest groups or individual donors. Amid growing societal and economic challenges, as well as (partly strategic) pressure on facts and science, scarcity of funding is breeding vulnerabilities that can turn soft influence into sharp (unacceptable) interference.

The Kremlin's academic proxies

Russia has been using academic networks to further its foreign policy objectives since Soviet times. In recent years, the Kremlin has launched a new push to expand its 'soft' academic reach while at the same time increasingly using hybrid strategies to undermine democracies. Moscow's 2016 Policy Concept urged Russian academics to engage in public diplomacy through dialogue with foreign experts on international politics and security. According to a 2017 Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI) report on Moscow's efforts to influence foreign experts and public opinion, think tanks and government-organised NGOs target different audiences. Some target mainly Russian speakers, such as Rossotrudnichestvo (set up in 2008 under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, MFA) and the Russkiy Mir Foundation (launched in 2007 under the MFA/the Ministry of Education and Science). The Russkiy Mir Foundation has fostered links with and made donations to several British universities and paid an £85 000 fee to open a Russkiy Mir Centre at the University of Durham in 2017. Russian academic institutes targeting English-speaking experts include the Valdai Club (2004), the Russian International Affairs Council (2010) and Rethinking Russia (2015). In 2016, former head of Russian Railways, Vladimir Yakunin (targeted by the United States' 2014 sanctions list over Russia's actions in Ukraine), co-funded the Dialogue of Civilizations think-tank, with headquarters in Berlin. An ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin, known for his strong anti-LGBTQ stance, Yakunin was invited to speak at a Brussels event on EU Cultural and Science Diplomacy in 2019 but withdrew amid criticism.

Is China's 'soft power' sharpening its teeth?

There is growing concern about Chinese influence in the academic sphere, not least against the backdrop of China's 2017 National Security Law, which obliges Chinese individuals and institutions to support national intelligence work. In Australia, where Chinese businessmen with links to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have donated millions of Australian dollars to universities, the Australian Cyber Security Centre's 2017 threat report warned that the targeting of Australian universities continues to increase, 'given their research across a range of fields and the intellectual property this research generates'. The report also warned that state-sponsored cyber adversaries may use university networks as infrastructure. In August 2019, Australia's Department of Education launched a University Foreign Taskforce to protect 'universities against foreign interference'. Bringing together universities and government agencies in working groups focusing on four areas – cybersecurity; research and intellectual property; foreign collaboration; and culture and communications – the taskforce published its guidelines in November 2019.

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Confucius Institutes under increasing scrutiny

Since 2004, the Chinese Language Council International (Hanban) has set up 535 Confucius Institutes (CIs) across the world, including 184 in Europe. Hanban typically funds the establishment of the institute and provides teachers, whereas the local university offers infrastructure, including access to networks. Officially, Confucius Institutes promote Chinese language and culture. However, critics assert that they work to spread a positive vision of the 'China model' of development, hampering academic freedom by silencing discussions about 'sensitive' issues such as the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, the repression of Uyghurs (including scholars and students), or the Hong Kong protests. They are seen as attempting to 'correct' views of China as an autocracy that violates human rights while creating layers of support for its interests. In addition to warnings regarding the institutes' ambiguous role and mounting concern over espionage at campuses, a November 2019 House of Commons report cited 'alarming evidence' of the extent of Chinese influence on UK universities. In October 2019, it became public that the Director of the CI at Vrije Universiteit Brussel, after 10 years of Brussels networking, had been barred from entering the Schengen zone for eight years on grounds of espionage. Amid growing scrutiny, CIs have closed down in Canada and the United States. In Europe, CIs at universities in Sweden and the Netherlands closed in 2015 and 2017, respectively. Whereas the CI at the University of Lyon closed in 2013 over curriculum disagreements, universities in Pau, Paris and Orléans have opened new CIs over the past year.

Influence on universities in wealthier and poorer European countries

Following criticism from its own academics, in October 2019 the London School of Economics (LSE) suspended a proposed China programme financed by pro-Beijing businessman Eric Li, a supporter of the authoritarian Chinese government. Citing 'over-reliance on foreign donors' at the university, LSE staff had expressed concern about the threat to academic freedom. This echoes a previous controversy: LSE came under fire in 2011 for accepting donations from actors linked to Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi. Following reports of (unsuccessful) pressure from Beijing to force Oxford University's chancellor to stop visiting Hong Kong, in November 2019 Cambridge University made it clear that a new Chinese studies professor they were seeking would be 'free to research and scrutinise any area of Chinese' issues. Poorer countries may have less room for manoeuvre: in Albania, China (which has reactivated old ties with Tirana, which it sees as a key partner in Europe) and Turkey (which has historical cultural and religious links with Albania) play a key role in funding education institutions. The Maarif Foundation (set up under Turkey's Ministry of National Education in 2016 to replace Gülenist institutions) acquired the University of New York Tirana in 2018. Just as Beijing is trying to control its students abroad and disrupt protests against its Hong Kong policies, Ankara is seeking to monitor and control Turkish students and academics abroad.

Middle Eastern academic influence

Funding of universities in democratic states by non-democratic Middle East states continues to raise concern. Cambridge and Oxford Universities have received funding from Iran and Saudi Arabia; Durham University has accepted donations from the United Arab Emirates. The 2018 murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi forced the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Harvard University to re-examine their Saudi ties. MIT decided against severing Saudi ties, whereas Harvard terminated a Saudi fellowship programme. Research has shown that Gulf-funded Middle East research institutions in the UK are less likely than other Middle East research institutions to focus on democracy and human rights.

Role of the EU and Parliament

Although academic freedom is an integral component of democracy, and the academic sphere is vulnerable to foreign interference, this aspect is not mentioned in the EU's whole-of-society strategy to counter hybrid threats. Research and technological development (RTD) has been a key priority for Europe for many years, and Parliament has consistently promoted an ambitious EU RTD policy, calling for a substantial increase in research spending to boost the EU's competitiveness. In a November 2019 resolution on academic freedom in the EU's external action, however, MEPs also underlined that democracy cannot exist without academic freedom, and that the academic sphere is increasingly vulnerable to interference, pressure and repression from states, the business sector and other non-state actors. They called for mechanisms to monitor and report attacks, threats and undue restrictions on academia.