

## General Information

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### Dealing with Risks in International Research Cooperation

The DFG presents recommendations for greater certainty in the proposal submission and review process / Meaningful assessment and reflection rather than “red lines”

The potential risks involved in international research cooperation projects funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) shall henceforth be subjected to a more thorough and systematic reflection. To this end, the largest research funding organisation and central self-governing organisation for science and the humanities in Germany has put forward recommendations that have recently been approved by its Joint Committee. These recommendations, which apply particularly to the cooperation with researchers in authoritarian countries, aim to enable researchers to realistically assess the risks of misuse of research results, on the basis of which carefully balanced decisions can be reached. While primarily aimed at individual and institutional applicants, the recommendations can also be drawn on in the DFG’s review and decision-making process.

“The exchange of data, experience and skills between people, which is integral to research cooperation, can always entail risks. These not only depend on the research subject, but also on the cooperation partners as well as the political objectives and powers of the authorities within the cooperation country”, said DFG President Professor Dr. Katja Becker when presenting the recommendations. “The DFG therefore considers it necessary to obtain a balanced view of all international collaborations within DFG funded projects. We are deliberately refraining from drawing general ‘red lines’ with regard to specific countries, partner institutions or research topics, because freedom of research is of high and constitutionally protected value. We have instead compiled a list of assessment and reflection steps that are intended to point out potential risks and give our applicants greater clarity and safety. This will enable us to react jointly and in a timely manner to geopolitical shifts, and to promote a reflective approach to the benefits and risks associated with research activities.”

According to the recommendations now published, applicants wishing to cooperate with international partners are tasked to be as specific as possible in explaining the risks that could arise. This should include a review of aspects such as whether the respective partner institution conducts research for military or comparable purposes and whether systematic diversion of research data is conceivable or even likely. The research subject should also be reviewed in terms of critical application or exploitation opportunities. The reflection should also consider any restrictions on the freedom of research in the cooperation country, for instance with respect to the publication of project results.

The basic principle behind all recommended assessment and reflection steps is that the greater the risks or the appearance of risks are, the more precise and detailed the justification for the research project must be. Conversely, a brief explanation is sufficient if there are no discernible risks relating to a proposed project.

Researchers should also be able to rely on their higher education institutions and non-university research institutes, which bear the legal responsibility for such cooperations and can actively shape the framework conditions of research. In addition to assistance with adherence to legal obligations, this includes the ongoing support via the Committees for Ethics in Security-Relevant Research (Kommissionen für Ethik sicherheitsrelevanter Forschung, KEF). Researchers are also encouraged to closely exchange relevant information in their research communities and seek the cooperation of the committees and commissioners already established at many research institutions when weighing up the risks and benefits of specific collaborations.

The corresponding information for applicants on dealing with risks in international research cooperation and for those involved in the evaluation process are currently being added to the relevant documents and technical systems at the DFG Head Office. Furthermore, an overview page with additional links and information is to be made available on the DFG's website in the near future.

The new risk assessments will supplement the existing provisions, such as the Recommendations for Handling Security-Relevant Research and its Challenges (Dual Use) published in 2015 by a joint scientific commission established by the DFG and Leopoldina, which also addressed the international dimension of research and was last updated in November 2022. The recommendations now published are also to be regularly adapted to new developments.

### **Further information**

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The recommendations can be found via:

[www.dfg.de/download/pdf/dfg\\_im\\_profil/geschaeftsstelle/publikationen/stellungnahmen\\_papiere/2023/risiken\\_int\\_kooperationen\\_en.pdf](http://www.dfg.de/download/pdf/dfg_im_profil/geschaeftsstelle/publikationen/stellungnahmen_papiere/2023/risiken_int_kooperationen_en.pdf)

Further information relating to the DFG and Leopoldina Joint Committee on the Handling of Security-Relevant Research:

[www.dfg.de/en/research\\_funding/principles\\_dfg\\_funding/security\\_relevant\\_research/joint\\_committee](http://www.dfg.de/en/research_funding/principles_dfg_funding/security_relevant_research/joint_committee)