



European Research Council
Established by the European Commission

Case reporting on scientific misconduct and conflict of interest

The ERC strategy on scientific misconduct provides for record keeping and reporting of cases dealt with by the CoIME. The following cases have been reported in the Annual Reports on the ERC activities and achievements in 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016.

Report of cases dealt with in 2012

The ERCEA and COIME have analysed 13 cases of scientific misconduct in 2012: seven cases of conflict of interests involving peer reviewers; two cases of alleged plagiarism; two cases of copy/paste of ERC applications; and two cases of scientific misconduct allegedly committed by an ERC applicant in the past.

Two more cases were still under examination by COIME at the end of 2012.

CASES OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

In four of the cases of conflict of interest involving peer reviewers, the reviewers were invited to step down from the evaluation panel, and they all did so.

In one other case, where a conflict of interest was declared with delay by a member of the evaluation panel, it was concluded that it could not be proven that there was more than negligence and therefore the reviewer could continue to complete his service in the panel but would not take part in the discussions related to the application for which he declared his conflict of interest. The same conclusion was reached in another case where a member of the evaluation panel declared on time her conflict of interest with one of the applications evaluated by the panel on which she was serving.

In one more case, the appointment of a member of the evaluation panel was formally terminated by the ERCEA.

CASES OF PLAGIARISM

In the first case, the ERCEA and COIME received a request to have an accusation of plagiarism clarified in connection with a Starting Grant proposal to the ERC. The complainant, a university professor, sent an allegation that one of the Starting Grant proposals submitted to the ERC included a considerable overlap in topics, project and works with another research project contained in an unsubmitted PhD thesis of one of the professor's students. The ERCEA contacted the Host Institution (HI) of the applicant describing the allegations received and asking for clarifications. The HI conducted an investigation and concluded that the ERC application was properly referenced to previous work, including the parts mentioned by the complainant and did not constitute in any way a form of scientific plagiarism.

In the second case the complainant, an external reviewer, requested clarifications on a potential plagiarism claiming that his own material, from a yet unpublished book, had been partly plagiarised in a Starting Grant proposal submitted to the ERC. As evidence, the reviewer provided a table

comparing the texts of the application and his own unpublished book which he had shared earlier with the ERC applicant. Based on the fact that a clear suspicion of fraud was evident in the case, the ERCEA Director decided to disqualify the proposal from the evaluation.

COPY/PASTE OF ERC APPLICATIONS

In one case, a 2012 Starting Grant application had been suspected of substantial overlaps with an unsuccessful 2011 Advanced Grant proposal, while in another a Starting Grant application had been suspected of a significant overlap with an unsuccessful 2011 Starting Grant application. In both cases the conclusion was that no misconduct had been committed.

CASES OF ALLEGED MISCONDUCT COMMITTED IN THE PAST

The first case concerned alleged falsification of data committed by a Starting Grant applicant more than 10 years before submitting the proposal to the ERC. The ERCEA sent a request for information to the body dealing with research integrity in the country where the alleged misconduct took place. This office could neither confirm nor deny that an investigation on the case was taking place. The decision of the ERCEA, shared by the COIME, was to proceed with the award of the grant to the proposal that in the meantime was selected for granting, with the reservation that if any new information would come from the abovementioned office on research integrity a new decision could be taken, including terminating the grant.

A last case dealt with an allegation of scientific misconduct concerning a 2012 Advanced Grant application. The complainant, an external reviewer, informed the ERCEA that the applicant misbehaved in 2007 publishing two review papers in which he (or co-authors) plagiarised sections of a previous monograph written by the reviewer. The case is still open.

Report of cases dealt with in 2013

The ERCEA and COIME have analysed 10 cases of scientific misconduct in 2013: four cases of conflict of interests involving peer reviewers; one case of forgery; two cases of copy/paste of ERC applications; one case of plagiarism; one case of scientific misconduct allegedly committed by an ERC applicant in the past; and one case of cheating and double funding.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST (COI)

- 1.** A shadow panel member, without declaring any conflict of interest, participated in the remote evaluation of proposals directly competing with an application of his/her partner, which was evaluated by the same panel. It was decided not to re-invite the shadow panel member to the next term of his/her active panel service.
- 2.** The ERC was alerted that a panel member was married to a researcher who had submitted a proposal to the panel where the panel member was serving.

When asked for clarification, the panel member confirmed a family relation with the applicant but did not clarify which one. The panel member also claimed that he/she thought that 'this was understood and was declared' when a COI with the applicant's proposal was acknowledged at an

earlier stage. In fact, the declared CoI was related to the applicant and the panel member being in the same Host Institution, which had the consequence that the panel member did not evaluate the specific proposal, but could evaluate competing proposals assigned to the same panel. When confronted with the fact that a strict family relation was a stronger conflict of interest than being colleagues in the same Host Institution, the panel member agreed to step down from the evaluation panel.

3. A panel member had declared at step 1 of the evaluation a CoI due to personal reasons with an applicant. The panel member did not evaluate that specific proposal due to the declared CoI.

It was later discovered that the panel member and the applicant had a close personal relationship and had received a joint offer to move to the same Host Institution. In the meantime the proposal of the applicant had been selected for step 2. The panel member clarified the situation and agreed to step down from the evaluation panel.

4. At the end of a step 1 meeting, the ERC was informed that the applicant of a proposal, which was taken to step 2, was the son/daughter of the chair of the panel that had evaluated the proposal.

When contacted, the panel chair immediately accepted to resign adding that he/she believed that declaring a conflict of interest for personal relations (which he/she did) was enough and did not require panel members to be excluded from evaluating any proposal in the panel.

By reflecting on all these cases, the Scientific Council felt that the rules on CoI should be clarified in the instructions to panel members and remote referees. All recent cases seemed to indicate that the rules on CoI involving personal relationship between an applicant and a panel member were not always understood as the ERC intended to. It was decided that a clarification was mandatory in some of the ERC documents dealing with the issue.

As a first step, an easy-to-read version of existing rules was distributed to all evaluators. As a second major step, rules on CoI for ERC experts were modified and strengthened in the new package of legislation accompanying the Horizon 2020 framework.

FORGERY

In late 2010 an applicant submitted a proposal to the StG2011 call with the wrong Host Institution template. The ERC contacted both the applicant and the Host Institution (HI) asking them to submit the HI letter in the correct format, at which point the HI informed the ERC that the signature of the HI representative in the letter was forged and that the proposal was plagiarised from a project by another researchers funded in a national call. The ERC declared the proposal ineligible and reported the case to OLAF.

The same researcher applied again for a StG2013, stating a date for his/her PhD diploma different from the one of the 2001 application. The applicant was asked, with the HI in copy, for clarifications about the two dates appearing on the documents, under the suspicion that the date in the 2013 application was forged. In February 2013 the ERCEA received an official letter from the HI informing the ERC that no application by that researcher was supported by them. The case was reported to OLAF and a letter was sent to the Rector of the HI stressing the ERC's concerns and asking them to keep the ERC informed about the actions that the university would be taking to deal with this case of misconduct.

COPY/PASTE ERC APPLICATIONS

1. Two proposals submitted to the 2013 Starting and Advanced Grant call respectively were found to be very much alike.

Whereas the StG applicant listed the AdG applicant as a collaborator, the AdG applicant did not do so. The StG applicant stated that the proposal submitted was indeed his/her original work, whereas the AdG applicant explained that there was no reason to modify the formulation of the research problems stated and shared by the StG applicant, because they both intended to solve them together. The StG application was passed to step 2. The AdG application was not.

The final decision was that the StG applicant did not commit any scientific misconduct and was therefore invited to the interview in step 2. With regard to the AdG applicant, even if the project did not pass to step 2, he/she was sent a letter stating that the ERC found his/her behaviour unethical.

2. Through the IT 'similarity tool' that it uses to identify submitted proposals that contain text similar to other proposals submitted to the ERC, the ERCEA came across a case where scientific misconduct might have occurred. After a more careful examination, it appeared that the proposal contained concepts, goals and ideas which were essentially the same as those presented in a previous application by another PI. The applicant was contacted and, confronted with the allegations, replied with the request to withdraw his/her application.

Since the application had been withdrawn, there was no reason to move forward with the case, but a personal letter of reprimand, summarising the conclusions reached, was addressed to the applicant. In his/her reply, the applicant reassured the ERC that he/she had learned the lesson well and would strictly take into account scientific integrity questions in any of his/her future actions.

PLAGIARISM

A remote referee made the ERCEA aware that a researcher copied *ad verbatim* in his/her application extracts of a paper published by the remote referee's group. The paper was not cited in the proposal. In addition, the applicant 'borrowed language' from Wikipedia describing terms without quoting.

The applicant admitted the plagiarism, but down-played it saying that it was only related to technical matters and not to the substance of the proposal which was based on the applicant's original ideas.

The result of the case's examination was that the extracts in question were just part of the description of the 'state of the art' and were not part of the idea put forward for funding, in the sense that absent from the parts affected by the alleged plagiarism, the proposal would not be affected. Therefore, this appeared to be a case of negligent omission of citation of another person's work, but with no intention of appropriating its authorship and using such ideas to obtain the EU funding. The explanations provided by the applicant appeared plausible.

The decision was to continue with the interview and evaluation of the proposal. Nevertheless, the panel needed to be informed about these findings and should take them into account in the course of the evaluation, in case evidence of plagiarism or other misconduct was found which would put in question the proposal itself. The proposal was finally not selected for funding.

ALLEGED MISCONDUCT COMMITTED IN THE PAST

A director at a research institute notified the ERC of a case of potential scientific misconduct concerning an applicant whose ERC StG application had made it to step 2, but failed at the interview and was therefore not awarded an ERC grant.

The applicant allegedly falsified data during his/her time as postdoc at the research institute of the complainant in 2008–10. What the applicant claimed to have discovered could not be repeated in the lab of the research institute after he/she had left to another country, and ex-colleagues came to the conclusion that data had been manipulated and that this was a serious case of misconduct. The scientific misconduct office of the research institute was informed and so were the colleagues

working with the applicant at his/her new HI. The applicant was apparently confronted with these findings and seriously reprimanded for his/her misconduct in a letter from misconduct officers at the original HI but the case was not further pursued.

An explanation was requested and was received on the alleged facts both by the applicant and the research institute from which the allegation initially came. Finally, a letter of reprimand was sent by the ERC to the applicant.

CHEATING AND DOUBLE FUNDING

The ERCEA was informed that an ongoing ERC StG project was based on a proposal which was very similar to a project for which the Principal Investigator (PI) had already received funding from another funding institute. When contacted, the PI initially denied any scientific overlap between the two projects, but finally indicated that he/she was now planning to change the entire research methodology that he/she had originally proposed to the ERC. The PI finally submitted a request for amendment where he/she considerably changed the original project (according to his/her declaration, the change is about 70 %).

The ERC decided to carry out a more detailed technical review in order to assess the degree of the proposed changes, whether these changes were motivated and whether the project objectives and research methodology still had relevance and breakthrough potential, which would justify the continuation of this ERC project. Independent scientific opinions on the proposed changes were asked from five experts (only one of them was among the evaluators of the original project). The experts' opinion showed that the alternative proposal would be viable, but its scientific value could no longer be considered a breakthrough and the proposal would not likely be funded if presented as an ERC application.

The other funding organisation was also contacted, both to provide them with the information in possession of the ERC and to ask for clarifications from their side.

Based on the available facts, the experts' opinion and the reply from the other funding institution, it was concluded that the PI had deliberately committed serious irregularities in performing his/her grant and that his/her behaviour contravened fundamental ethical principles.

As a result the CoIME decided to recommend to the ERCEA Director to terminate the grant agreement for this project with all the legal consequences resulting from it. The grant was suspended.

Report of cases dealt with in 2014

SCIENTIFIC MISCONDUCT

SCIENTIFIC MISCONDUCT COMMITTED IN THE PAST

A PI of an ongoing ERC-funded project was dismissed by his/her HI on the basis of accusations of breaches of research integrity in relation to work entirely conducted at a previous HI. Before taking any final decision on the case, the ERCEA suspended the project for one year, waiting for the conclusions of an investigation being conducted at the previous HI of the PI. During the period of suspension, the PI did not propose a new HI to continue with the implementation of the project.

The final judgement of the Executive Board of the concerned HI was 'to be of the opinion that a violation of academic integrity has occurred'.

The ERC decided that the project should be terminated based on the fact that the PI was not hosted nor employed by any HI, his/her employment contract with the HI having been terminated based on the justification that his/her scientific conduct was not up to the HI's standards of scientific integrity, leadership and quality. Termination took effect retroactively as from the date of the termination of the employment contract by the HI.

PLAGIARISM IN ERC APPLICATION

A panel member who was also an ERC grant holder informed the ERCEA of a potential case of plagiarism from his/her own past ERC successful proposal in an application he/she was assigned to review in 2014. The ideas behind the two proposals were different and the alleged plagiarism concerned a set of specific sentences. The CoIME accepted the justification of the applicant that he/she had read several ERC projects online in order to prepare his/her own proposal, and especially to fit the expected format of the application. In so doing, the style and writing of some of them might have influenced his/her own, but that was limited to few standard sentences and did not concern the originality of the ideas. It was therefore concluded that no misconduct had taken place.

PLAGIARISM IN ERC APPLICATION

Following the normal procedure of checking applications against previous ERC proposals for similarity, the ERCEA found one application with a high similarity (52 %) to a proposal which had been funded by the ERC in the past. A thorough analysis of the two proposals showed that the 2014 applicant had copied verbatim in his/her application the previous successful ERC proposal that had been made available to him/her by the original author as an example of what a successful ERC grant proposal could look like. In addition, the original research proposal was not quoted as a reference in the 2014 application documents. The concerned proposal was in the meantime evaluated and rejected on scientific grounds, but the CoIME still considered this behaviour unacceptable and a letter expressing this concern was sent to the Rector of the HI of the applicant and to the applicant in copy.

This case was the starting point of a discussion within the CoIME and the Scientific Council on the possibility to a change of the regulation (perhaps modifying the ERC Rules for Submission or the Work Program) to implement a mechanism so that applicants misbehaving in terms of research integrity would automatically be graded with the lowest score. Proposals receiving a 'B' score would allow the applicant to re-apply to an ERC call the following year, while applicants graded with the lowest score 'C' are faced with restrictions on re-submission.

SUSPECTED DOUBLE FUNDING

In a 2014 application, some parts of the proposed research overlapped with a research project funded by a national funding agency. The CoIME analysed the matter and concluded that an overlap in itself was not disqualifying, and such things happen from the inner logic of a research carrier. A more serious issue identified was possible double funding, if the applicant would charge the same activities to the ERC and the national funder. An additional factor was the applicant's not fully honest response to the questions of the funding ID when asked to clarify. The CoIME's recommendation was

to proceed with the evaluation and invite the applicant to the interview, and at the time same inform the panel about the issue. A note was prepared for the signature of the ERC President to be sent to the applicant with copy to her/his HI expressing the ERC reprimand towards the behaviour of the applicant.

ALLEGED MISCONDUCT COMMITTED IN THE PAST

After the completion of a step 2 panel meeting, the ERCEA was informed that a successful proposal was in fact the resubmission of a proposal submitted in 2013 by the same applicant, the originality of which was questioned at that time by a remote referee. During the interview in the 2013 call, nothing indicated that the proposal was not original and in fact it was scored as fundable, but just few positions below the funding threshold. As the proposal was not funded no further inquiries were pursued at the time. After collecting all the documentation, the 2014 case was consulted with the CoIME and analysed by the ERCEA Integrity Standing Committee. The conclusion was that no scientific misconduct had been committed.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST (COI):

COMPANY SUPPORT TO AN APPLICANT

After the first step of evaluation, a reviewer informed the ERCEA that he/she was a consultant of a company supporting one of the proposals he/she had evaluated, stating that he/she did not know of such project through this company (discovering the company's support only when evaluating the project) nor did he/she know the applicant. The supporting company would not be a beneficiary of the project if funded, but wrote a letter which was annexed to the proposal supporting the research to be made by the applicant. As usual, the supporting letter was not distributed to the evaluators by the ERCEA, but the support of the company was nevertheless mentioned in the proposal itself.

The recommendation of the CoIME was that being a consultant to a company which supports a project, even without any obvious financial profit, represents a CoI. Consequently, the 'out of room' CoI rule was applied at least *a posteriori*, i.e. the panel member's evaluation of this specific proposal was discarded.

COI WITH BROTHER IN LAW

The CoIME discussed the case of a member of a 2014 evaluation panel, whose brother-in-law had applied to the same panel. Apart from the close family tie, the two were also in the same department and collaborated. This was considered an 'out of the call' CoI and the evaluator was asked to step down from the panel.

COI WITH SPOUSE

During the CoI checks for proposals submitted to a certain panel, it was found that almost all publications of an applicant were in co-authorship with one of the evaluators in that panel. ERCEA asked the Panel Chair for clarification and he/she clarified that the two were married and major collaborators. There was no answer from the panel member when asked for clarifications, but the applicant asked for a panel transfer for his/her application. The CoIME considered this as an 'out of the call' CoI and the panel member was asked to step down from the panel.

COI PANEL MEMBER MENTIONED IN APPLICATION

A member of one of the 2014 panels was mentioned several times in one of the proposals submitted to that panel. Particularly alarming were references in the proposal to the crucial nature of the help expected from the panel member for the success of the project, and a potential financial support to a post-doc working with the panel member.

The CoIME judged this conflict of interest as strong enough to be considered as an ‘out of the call’ CoI, due to a very close relationship between the applicant and the panel member who was therefore asked to step down from the entire call.

COI — COLLABORATION

An ERC panel member was listed in a national grant awarded in 2013 as one of the Co-Investigators to a Principal Investigator who then applied for a 2014 ERC grant to the panel where the concerned panel member was serving. In addition, the panel member also contributed to three multi-authored papers with the applicant published in 2010.

Claims were that in practice there was no joint work between the panel member and the applicant, they never met or had discussions about the national grant, because the last one left the country shortly after the grant was awarded, did not do any work on the grant or use the money and there were no outputs with his/her name associated with it.

The CoIME concluded that this was an ‘out of the room’ conflict of interest, since the co-publications and the joint application to the national grant indicated a collaborative relationship between the panel member and the applicant.

COACHING APPLICANTS

A member of a 2014 panel admitted to have coached an applicant from his/her same institution for the ERC step 2 interview. The panel member had declared a CoI because they both came from the same institution, but was still doing mock interviews with the applicant for an interview that took place in the panel where he/she was serving. The proposal was finally not selected for funding, but as a follow-up of this case, the CoIME discussed the need to draft a text to be provided in the briefing to evaluators clarifying that this practice is not allowed. Similar rules on ‘coaching’ practices by members of the Scientific Council should also be clarified.

The CoIME underlined that in addition to their main role the ERC Scientific Council members, panel chairs, and panel members are natural ambassadors of the ERC mission. In fulfilling this task they come often into contact with grant applicants and regularly face questions concerning the ways to succeed in the ERC competitions. In such a situation, it is welcome to explain, to a group or an individual, the principles of evaluation and the factors which may help the applicant to succeed. It is not acceptable, however, to become involved in the preparation of an individual proposal, especially to reveal panel internal practices.

Report of cases dealt with in 2015

In 2015 the CoIME gave its advice on 12 cases of alleged scientific misconduct, including three cases of peer reviewers’ conflict of interest. The following is a report of the six cases dealt with and closed in 2015. In six more cases (including the three cases of conflict of interest) the final decision was still pending at the end of the year.

CASES OF SCIENTIFIC MISCONDUCT

PLAGIARISM

An allegation on potential scientific misconduct was sent to the ERC by a panel member who seemed to have identified a plagiarism case in one of the proposals assigned to his/her evaluation panel: the background section of one part of the application seemed to have been copied from the introduction

of a paper, and a figure seemed to have been copied from another paper. The case was closed with the proposal being kept in evaluation, but the applicant received a letter warning him/her about the inappropriateness of extensive rephrasing from other authors. The director of the applicant's HI was also informed.

In a second case of alleged plagiarism, a remote referee alerted the ERC that an applicant had reused text from a research article in a proposal submitted to the ERC. The case was closed with a letter of reprimand sent to the applicant letting him/her know that proper acknowledgement of sources was expected.

A third case of alleged plagiarism examined by the CoIME in 2015 referred to a pending case. The ERCEA received an allegation from a scientist arguing that some of the concepts related to an ERC-granted project and published by the PI and co-authors had been presented by the complainant earlier at a conference in 2004 and then published. The close comparison of concepts and texts of the papers published respectively by the PI and the complainant led to the conclusion that there was no sign of lack of originality or evidence of plagiarism in the PI's publications. No scientific misconduct was detected in this case.

DISCREPANCY IN ORDER OF AUTHORSHIP

The ERCEA was alerted by a panel chair that in an application to the ERC there were discrepancies in the order of authorship in the 10-year publication record of the PI compared to Scopus. In particular, for two *Nature* publications the order of authorship in the application did not correspond to the order in the published papers. The CoIME concluded that the behaviour of the PI was to be considered ethically incorrect, but of a relatively minor nature. Also, as the outcome of the evaluation was negative for this proposal, there was no need for any further action.

ACCUSATION OF MISMANAGEMENT OF INSTITUTIONAL FUNDS

The former director of an institute in the HI of an ERC-funded PI accused the PI of 'unbecoming conduct', bringing forward arguments concerning conversations about discontent on the way the institute was functioning. The complaint seemed rather to result from internal tensions within the HI and should therefore be addressed by the governing body of this research centre, since this was not a case of scientific misconduct related to the ERC grant.

UNAUTHORISED USE OF UNPUBLISHED INFORMATION

A researcher warned the ERC that he/she had some reasons to fear that the PI of an ERC proposal would make use of his/her team's still unpublished research results. The complainant believed that it was important for the ERC to take this aspect into consideration when deciding about the proposal. Following a request for clarification, the CoIME was satisfied with the explanation given by the PI that neither he/she nor any other member of the research group had ever received or was ever made aware of any confidential or unpublished or even partially published information about experiments made by the 'competing group'. This was confirmed by members of the 'competing group'. No scientific misconduct was detected in this case.

Report of cases dealt with in 2016

In 2016 the CoIME gave its advice on 15 cases of alleged scientific misconduct, including 11 cases of peer reviewers' breaches of their Code of Conduct. The following is a report of five cases which were still pending at the end of 2015 and were closed in 2016 and of the 12 cases dealt with and closed in 2016. In three more 2016 cases the final decision was still pending at the end of the year.

CASES OF SCIENTIFIC MISCONDUCT

BREACHES OF THE ETHICS PROVISIONS ON THE GATHERING AND KEEPING OF DATA

The ERCEA received a joint complaint from six former postdocs of an ERC-funded project reporting breaches in the ethics provisions over the gathering and keeping of data for this project. From the information received by the ERCEA following a request for clarifications, there seemed to be several instances pointing to unsecure storage of sensitive data. There seemed to be also issues related to anonymisation of data as well as handling informed consent from interviewees, all these points being in contradiction with the statement provided at granting stage by the PI.

Conformity with the ethics and personal data protection rules together with the commitments undertaken in this regard in the project could only be checked with an ethics audit conducted through the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation of the European Commission. The ethics audit conducted revealed data protection issues related to the project and ethics approval problems in the Host Institution. The findings were immediately recognised by the PI, who was asked to comply with the ethics requirements as per the ethics clearance which would be given to the project further to the audit.

Following information received, the ERCEA considered that the measures taken by the PI were appropriate. Few pending points will be followed up by the Agency according to the developments of the project. In consultation with the CoIME, the case was closed as no scientific misconduct case.

MADE-UP PAPERS

In the process of the evaluation of a proposal submitted to the ERC, a remote reviewer claimed that some results presented in two published papers co-authored by the applicant had been made-up. One of the papers was related to the on-going ERC grant of the applicant. After receiving additional information from the PI and after consultation with the evaluation panel about the link between the proposal and the publications potentially related to some wrongdoing, the matter was considered as clarified and the unanimous decision of CoIME was that no action should be taken in this case.

INFLATED ROLE OF PI

During the evaluation of a proposal, the evaluation panel became aware of the allegation of a panel member's review regarding the inflated role of the applicant in the list of papers reported in the application. The evaluation panel decided to disregard the allegations and finally retained the proposal for step 2 of the evaluation. After analysing the case, the decision of CoIME was that no serious breach of research integrity had taken place.

MANIPULATION IN SEVERAL PUBLICATIONS (CASE STARTED IN 2015)

The ERCEA was informed about measures taken by a research institution against the PI of an ERC-funded project, reporting allegations of data manipulation in several publications. The PI was on leave from that organisation and was at the time employed by another one, the HI of the PI's ERC

grant. The original organisation had set a two-year time period during which the PI could not ask to be reintegrated. For the same reasons, a well-known research organisation had revoked a prestigious award conferred to the PI, after the PI admitted data manipulation in some papers, seven of which were retracted. The current HI did not take any official sanctions against the PI but would closely be monitoring the PI's future work.

In this context, the ERCEA assessed if the papers for which the allegations were made were related to the PI on-going ERC grant or to a former grant of the PI, already completed. It could be confirmed that four of the PI's papers related to the first project had been found sloppy and had required several errata and corrigenda. One paper had been retracted. However at that stage there was no evidence of scientific misconduct or of a deliberate wish to falsify results.

In view of this situation, the ERCEA and the CoIME did not consider this case to be a case of scientific misconduct in the context of the current and former ERC grants of the PI. In consultation with the CoIME, the case was closed. However, in case new elements would arise with the implementation of the running ERC grant, the ERCEA and the CoIME would re-assess the situation.

PAPERS QUESTIONED IN PUBPEER

The ERCEA was informed that the PI of an ERC-funded project had co-authored 20 papers that had been questioned in PubPeer. One of the papers had been retracted and another four had been corrected. None of these five papers seemed to be related to the ERC grant. Five of the papers in the PubPeer list were identified by ERCEA as included in the final activity report submitted by the PI and acknowledging ERC funding. These papers did not seem to be directly related to the objectives of the ERC project.

Following consultation with the COIME, the PI was contacted to provide clarifications about the allegations and the link between the papers questioned and the objectives of the ERC project. The PI confirmed that there was no link between the papers listed in PubPeer and the objectives of the ERC project. The PI also indicated that the Host Institution conducted an investigation of all these anonymous accusations and informed the PI in a preliminary letter that it was concluded that there was no scientific misconduct in any of the papers subject to those accusations.

In view of this situation, the ERCEA and the CoIME did not consider this case to be a case of scientific misconduct in the context of the current ERC grant. The case was closed as a no scientific misconduct case.

BREACHES OF THE CODE OF CONDUCT OF REVIEWERS

In one case, the evaluation panel observed that in the review of a panel member it was declared that he/she had been a collaborator in a FP7 project coordinated by the PI. The panel excluded the review in the evaluation of the proposal due to conflict of interest.

In a second case, the evaluation panel observed that a panel member was explicitly mentioned in the proposal as expected project advisor. It was also noticed that the reviewer was the applicant's former post-doctoral supervisor. The panel excluded the review in the evaluation of the proposal due to conflict of interest.

Another seven cases similar to those described above were observed, involving remote referees. As was done in the past for similar cases, the decision of CoIME and the ERCEA was to send letters to the reviewers alerting them on the breach of the code of conduct occurred.

In another case, a reviewer remotely evaluated a proposal that was competing with a proposal submitted to the same panel by the reviewer's partner. When asked, the remote reviewer confirmed

having reviewed the application without reading carefully the Code of Conduct and therefore without realising the specific point on the potential conflict of interest related to the other application from the reviewer's partner. The members of CoIME unanimously approved the ERCEA's suggestion to send the reviewer a letter of reprimand signed by the ERC President.

In a last case, the Head of the Research Grants of an HI informed the ERCEA of email correspondence suggesting that an evaluator had contacted at least two scientists by email (one is an excluded reviewer, the other a postdoc supervisor of the PI), identifying himself/herself as evaluator of a proposal and disclosing the name of the PI. The panel reassessed the proposal after the panel meeting ignoring the review of the suspected reviewer.

When contacted, the reviewer claimed that there had been no breach of confidentiality concerning the evaluation. The reviewer had asked some scientific questions to colleagues to make a better assessment of the proposal, but never disclosed that he/she was evaluating for the ERC, neither the identity of the applicant. The ERCEA concluded that the reviewer did not breach confidentiality. The unanimous CoIME decision was to write a mild letter, thanking the expert for the job and for the clarifications and very gently asking him/her to be more careful in the future.

Finally, there were two cases of undeclared potential conflict of interest of remote referees dealt with in 2015. The final decision after thorough analysis of both situations was that there was no conflict of interest.

SHARING OF EVALUATION INFORMATION (2015 CASE)

A PI, who submitted a redress request about his/her rejected application, contacted one of the panel members who had evaluated his/her proposal for clarification. It appears that the latter could have provided some inside information regarding the discussions held during the evaluation of the proposal. When giving out the mentioned information, the expert might have been in breach of the contract for independent experts. After thorough analysis, it was decided that the evaluator should be written a letter of reprimand, but not removed from the evaluation panel.

PLAGIARISM (2015 CASE)

A 2015 proposal seemed to have plagiarised a previously funded one. The 2015 proposal was anyway declared ineligible because the applicant applied the year before with a proposal that was rejected as category C and therefore could not submit a proposal in 2015. The PI and the HI were nevertheless contacted by the ERCEA in relations to the alleged plagiarism. Since after several iterations they never replied to the ERCEA requests, the case was not pursued further.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST (2015 CASE)

A case of potential scientific misconduct was opened triggered by information which appeared in the national press of an EU country concerning allegations of conflict of interest of an ERC grantee as member of the national Health Council of that country. It turned out that the potential CoI was in fact related to the roles of the PI within the national research system and it was decided to follow-up the reactions of the authorities of the country in question. The ERCEA did not receive any information indicating that the national authorities were observing any CoI and the case was not pursued further.