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How dare you call us diplomats

Amaya Moro-Martín is furious about Spanish government attempts to brand her and other exiled scientists as strategic partners.

I never considered myself a diplomat, so it came as a surprise to be labelled as one last month by the Spanish government. Officially, Spanish emigrant scientists like me, forced to leave Spain because of the dire circumstances surrounding research at home, did not previously exist. We were told we were an ‘urban legend’. Now, I learn, not only am I real but I am also part of a deliberate and cunning political strategy by the Spanish government to send scientists overseas to seed international collaboration and to strengthen, not weaken, Spanish science.

The new US administration is credited with coining the term ‘alternative facts’. But the Spanish government is a world leader in incorporating them into the fabric of its science policy as it cuts funds and support. As populism spreads its influence, other governments will surely follow. So scientists everywhere must be on their guard, and must challenge misleading statements that attempt to hide the political downgrading of science.

The latest collection of alternative facts is presented in a paper published online last month in the journal *Science & Diplomacy*. I found the article, written by Spanish public officials, so loaded with spin that it is dizzying to read. It talks about the Spanish government enlisting emigrant scientists like me “to serve as key partners”. And, while countries including the United States are cutting back on the use of scientific diplomacy, Spain boasts of how researchers who have been forced abroad are now part of its effort to “reinforce its scientific presence in strategic countries”.

I thought I was seeing a brain drain, as fed-up and hard-up scientists leave Spain in droves. Yet, according to the government officials, this one-way flow of talent is part of a “brain circulation” that, naturally, has positive impacts for all. These scientists uprooted themselves and their families because of severe and damaging cuts to domestic-research capacity. To misleadingly present their decision as part of a deliberate strategy by Spain to “strengthen its science diplomacy” abroad is insulting and callous. It should be challenged.

The brain drain that the government is trying to hide affects all scientists. Drastic budget cuts in public investment have restricted grant and employment opportunities and left research institutions at the edge of bankruptcy. It is difficult to keep track of how many scientists have left the country. But between 2010 (when the budget cuts began) and 2013, the Spanish National Statistics Institute reported a drop of 11,000 in the number of people carrying out research activities. If we are diplomats, we represent merely a Potemkin village.

The misrepresentation goes further. According to the article in *Science & Diplomacy*, Spain is strategically “embedding the priorities

of the national research, development, and innovation (R&D&I) strategy in Spanish foreign policy” so that Spain can “tap into this national talent, wherever it may be, and explore flexible formulas for allowing the resulting knowledge to benefit the country”. Spanish politicians, in other words, intend to take credit for the science done and funded abroad, and will claim it is ‘Made in Spain’.

The article also claims that “Spain needs to promote a culture of science in public policy within both the legislative and the executive powers”. As a first step, it mentions its efforts to include “scientists in diplomatic missions” such as in London and Berlin. Spain lacks a politically independent, high-level advisory council for science (long demanded by the scientific community), and it is absurd that the best the government can offer is to place scientific advisers in overseas

embassies, far from the centre of decision-making in Madrid. So there is some underlying truth to the article in *Science & Diplomacy*. At the current rate, Spanish science might end up being an issue discussed only as part of foreign policy.

The ‘alternative facts’ approach in Spanish science policy is not limited to the brain drain. In mid-February, young researchers in Spain were dismayed to find the terms of their contracts changed retroactively, going back to 2013. Officially, these scientists no longer render a research service — a hard-won concession written into law in 2011 that delivers better benefits.

These are the most common contracts at the entry level, and about 10,000 researchers are affected. Now, two alternative facts will prevail: first, their research activities are not classed as labour; and second, their former contracts

never existed. The government claims the researchers will not be disadvantaged. Labour experts disagree. Ignore the spin. The reality is that the environment for research in Spain is worrying. Just this month we saw the dismantling of Abengoa Research, the flagship of the Spanish R&D private sector, the largest basic-research laboratory in the country for renewable energies and a world leader in the field. Its closure is symptomatic: public investment in R&D attracts private investment, and the latter cannot flourish if the former shrivels.

Spanish researchers need to find their voice again. They must demand that their policymakers replace alternative facts with sound initiatives, backed up by sustained investment, that urgently address the critical state of science in the country. The time to be diplomatic is long gone. ■

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