



# COUNTERING FOREIGN INFLUENCE OPERATIONS IN ARMENIA:

## Building Democratic Resilience ahead of the June 2026 Elections and Beyond



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# Countering Foreign Influence Operations in Armenia: Building Democratic Resilience ahead of the June 2026 Elections and Beyond

**A policy brief by Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor, International Partnership for Human Rights**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Armenia has emerged as a frontline state in the contest for geopolitical influence in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, alongside Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. Over the past several years, foreign influence operations (FIO) have evolved from episodic disinformation campaigns into complex, multi-layered efforts to shape Armenia's political trajectory. These operations extend well beyond information manipulation. They encompass electoral engineering, illicit political finance, institutional cooptation, coercion, and cyber disruption.

The primary source of these operations is Russia and its Armenia-based proxy networks, with the Kremlin aiming not merely to influence public opinion but to preserve long-term Russian control over Armenia's geopolitical orientation by leveraging longstanding, multifaceted dependencies in the economic and security spheres. As Armenia seeks to diversify its international partnerships and deepen cooperation with the West, Russia's incentive for interference increases.

With parliamentary elections scheduled for June 2026, foreign influence activity is likely to intensify. Elections provide optimal conditions for manipulation: heightened polarisation, accelerated information cycles, and greater institutional strain. Yet, the challenge is structural, not cyclical. Armenia's response must therefore extend beyond short-term electoral protection and recognise the necessity of developing the long-term resilience of its democratic institutions.

To strengthen Armenia's resilience to foreign influence operations ahead of the June 2026 elections and beyond, this policy brief proposes practical measures to improve institutional preparedness, strengthen legal safeguards, and enhance cooperation with civil society and international partners. A key priority is establishing a permanent interagency coordination mechanism to monitor, analyse, and respond to foreign interference activities. This should be accompanied by clearer institutional roles, improved analytical capacities, and targeted training for officials responsible for election integrity, national security, and law enforcement.

At the regulatory level, Armenia should further strengthen its legal framework to address covert foreign political financing and coordinated interference activities while maintaining full respect for democratic freedoms and civil society space. Measures should include stronger transparency requirements in political finance, improved oversight of campaign financing and third-party actors, and enhanced

enforcement powers for relevant oversight bodies. Ensuring that investigative authorities have the necessary legal tools and resources to pursue cases of foreign interference will also be essential.

Finally, Armenia's response should rely on closer collaboration with independent civil society organisations and international partners. Civil society actors play a critical role in detecting and documenting influence operations and should be integrated into structured information-sharing and early-warning mechanisms. At the same time, Armenia would benefit from deeper cooperation with the European Union and other partners on cyber defence, financial intelligence, election security, and sanctions coordination, enabling the country to build a more comprehensive and sustainable system for countering foreign influence operations.

## ARMENIA AS A TARGET OF SYSTEMIC INFLUENCE OPERATIONS

Armenia's geostrategic position makes it particularly vulnerable to external interference. While the greatest and most longstanding threat to Armenia's national security arguably remains a military one posed by Azerbaijan, the spectre of hybrid warfare by other actors has also begun to rear its head, as the head of Armenia's National Security Council outlined earlier this year<sup>1</sup>.

Armenia occupies a key position in Moscow's regional architecture of influence, including through security arrangements, energy dependencies, and economic ties. As Yerevan has begun to expand its international partnerships and deepen engagement with Western actors, so too has the Kremlin expanded its interference in Armenia's political processes. Like Moldova and Georgia before, Armenia is now seen by Moscow as a new front in a hybrid war where it is unwilling to cede ground to its perceived Western enemies<sup>2</sup>. In such contexts, the Kremlin has repeatedly deployed tactics ranging from the co-opting of elites to the exploitation of economic leverage, cyber operations, disinformation campaigns, and illicit funding of proxies<sup>3</sup>. As parliamentary elections draw nearer, indications of Russia deploying such measures in Armenia are becoming more evident.

### Signs of FIMI ahead of the June Elections

In April 2025, the Kremlin tasked the First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration, Sergei Kiriyyenko, with advancing Russian interests in Armenia through so-called "soft power"<sup>4</sup>. Kiriyyenko's previous assignments include similar "informational" work in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Moldova, while the rest of his team are also well known for overseeing hybrid operations in support of Kremlin-aligned campaigns<sup>5</sup>. This "soft power" project has reportedly been allocated a budget equating to roughly 165 million USD, illustrating the vast scale of the resources Russia is ploughing into solidifying

1 Armenpress. 'Security Council Secretary: Hybrid Threats to Armenia Increasing'. 14 January 2026. <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1239569>.

2 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 'Russia Won't Give Up Its Influence in Armenia Without a Fight'. 3 February 2026. <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2026/01/armenia-russia-drifting-apart>.

3 Kennedy, John, and William Dunbar. Countering Russian Influence: Support for Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova in the 'Waiting Room of the West'. 2025. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2025/07/countering-russian-influence-support-for-armenia-georgia.html>

4 'Куратором Отношений с Арменией в Администрации Президента Стал Сергей Кириенко - Ведомости'. <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2025/04/30/1107619-kuratorom-otnoshenii-s-armeniei-stal-kirienko>.

5 Kopalyan, Nerses. 'Subversion and Electoral Interference: Russia and Armenia's 2026 Elections'. EVN Security Report. EVN Report, 2 May 2025. <https://evnreport.com/statecraft-governance/evn-security-report-en/russia-and-armenias-2026-elections/>.

its influence over countries including Armenia<sup>6</sup>.

In Armenia, in particular, Moscow has launched an “unusually early” disinformation campaign compared with previous operations aimed at influencing elections, such as in Moldova in 2025. As early as April 2025, observers such as NewsGuard identified disinformation operations attributed to notable information warfare groups, including Storm-1516 and the Foundation to Battle Injustice, which fabricated claims of corruption, sexual crimes, and other misconduct by the Armenian government. These narratives were disseminated through fabricated news sites and NGOs, coordinated social media accounts, and AI-manipulated videos<sup>7</sup>. Others have also reported on the organised spread of similar “hostile narratives” concerning Armenian institutions, such as framing European rapprochement as “Ukrainisation” leading to economic collapse and general insecurity or the purported “revelation” that the US is running secret biological experiments on Armenian citizens with Yerevan’s consent<sup>8</sup>. In line with Russian practice in other countries, escalation of such operations should be expected as parliamentary elections draw closer.

### **Beyond Disinformation: The Multi-Dimensional Nature of Influence Operations**

Though public debate often conflates foreign interference with disinformation, information manipulation should be recognised as only one component in the malign actor’s broader toolkit. In the Armenian case, a dense web of legacy ties to Russia – spanning security cooperation, energy infrastructure, trade dependence, and longstanding business networks – provides Moscow with a series of structural points of leverage that can be exploited for the purpose of distorting political outcomes in the country<sup>9</sup>.

Russia maintains considerable control over the Armenian economy, notably in terms of trade and in critical sectors such as energy, where regulatory protections insulating strategic assets from external leverage are limited. Armenia’s gas market is monopolised by Gazprom, while its nuclear capacity is concentrated in the Rosatom-managed Metsamor plant<sup>10</sup>. This lopsided dependency means that the issue of energy supply can and has been used by Russia to exert pressure on the Armenian government<sup>11</sup>. This fact was evident in the recent conflict over Armenia’s electricity distribution networks, which are controlled by Electric Networks of Armenia CJSC. The firm is owned by Russian-Armenian billionaire – and associate of Vladimir Putin – Samvel Karapetyan, who Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan accused of engineering power outages to stir public discontent, prompting government efforts to nationalise the company<sup>12</sup>.

Moscow may also weaponise its presence and influence within Armenia’s economic domain more directly during the election campaign through corporate mobilisation (i.e., “encouraging” employees to vote in line with employer interests). This tactic has been a notable feature of Sergei Kiriyyenko’s previous

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6 OC Media. ‘Russia’s Soft Power Project Focused on Armenia Funded through Presidential Grant’. 14 January 2026. <https://oc-media.org/russias-soft-power-project-focused-on-armenia-funded-through-presidential-grant/>

7 ‘Russia Targets Armenia’s Elections — Early and Viciously’. NewsGuard, n.d. <https://www.newsguardtech.com/special-reports/russia-targets-armenias-elections-early-and-viciously>

8 Dw.Com. ‘Russia’s Disinformation Campaign in Armenia Gains Momentum’. <https://www.dw.com/en/russias-disinformation-campaign-in-armenia-gains-momentum/a-74868051>

9 @ClingendaelInstitute, @Clingendaelorg, and @clingendael-institute. ‘Armenia’s Changing Relationship With Russia | Clingendael’. Accessed 19 March 2026. <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/armenias-changing-relationship-russia>

10 *Ibid*

11 ‘Gazprom Trying to Squeeze Armenia | Eurasianet’. <https://eurasianet.org/gazprom-trying-to-squeeze-armenia>

12 dw.com. ‘Арест миллиардера в Армении: новый виток противостояния’. <https://www.dw.com/ru/arest-rossijskogo-milliardera-v-armenii-novyj-vitok-vnutrennego-protivostoania/a-72974303>

electoral operations<sup>13</sup>. Similarly, vote-buying schemes were, for example, documented in Moldova, where vulnerable communities received financial incentives in an operation supported by the pro-Russian oligarch Ilan Shor<sup>14</sup>. Illicit campaign financing, meanwhile, represents a further lever that Russia will likely pull. Independent observers have flagged “persistent problems” with political party financing in Armenia, particularly a lack of transparency and inconsistent enforcement of existing regulations<sup>15</sup>. Across Moldova, Georgia, and Romania, financial operations were deployed by the Kremlin to fund pro-Russian parties and groups, as well as to exert undue influence on media outlets and public figures<sup>16</sup>. Yerevan should be prepared for Moscow to deploy similar measures in Armenia as June draws nearer.

The large Armenian diaspora in Russia provides Moscow with an additional lever. Recent reports by Armenia’s foreign intelligence service suggest that the Kremlin is seeking to mobilise an estimated 80,000 Armenians living in Russia to travel to Armenia to vote for pro-Russian candidates, with a reported cash incentive equating to more than 1,000 USD for each voter. Reportedly, Russia’s FSB is putting pressure on Armenian businessmen to finance the scheme. Meanwhile, it has also been reported that Russia-linked criminal elements are using financial blackmail to apply pressure to Armenians living in Georgia<sup>17</sup>.

Finally, the prospect of cyberattacks poses a direct threat to the integrity and legitimacy of democratic processes in Armenia. Instances of politically-motivated cyberattacks attributed to Kremlin-aligned groups have been increasing in Armenia in recent years, and there is every reason to expect that this trend will continue<sup>18</sup>. Building institutional resilience to such attacks is therefore a long-term strategic imperative for Armenian authorities.

## THE CASE FOR URGENT AND LONG-TERM ACTION

Given the context outlined above, Armenian authorities must move swiftly to insulate democratic processes from the dangers of Russian malign interference. This means, on the one hand, taking decisive action to address the immediate threats posed by Russia and, on the other, developing a coherent long-term strategy to develop institutional resilience to foreign influence. Though the danger posed by Russia is an imminent one, foreign influence operations are continuous and adaptive. Armenia’s response must, therefore, be institutional and sustained.

At the same time, Armenia must resist reactive overreach. Counter-influence strategies that restrict civil society risk undermining democratic space and weakening broader societal resilience to foreign influence. Effective resilience focuses on transparency, accountability, and enforceable conduct-based

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13 Kopalyan, Nerses. ‘Subversion and Electoral Interference: Russia and Armenia’s 2026 Elections’. EVN Security Report. EVN Report, 2 May 2025. <https://evnreport.com/statecraft-governance/evn-security-report-en/russia-and-armenias-2026-elections/>.

14 WI, devops. ‘Targeted Disruption: Russian Interference in the 2024 Elections of Moldova, Romania and Georgia’. GEOpolitics, 8 May 2025. <https://politicsgeo.com/targeted-disruption-russian-interference-in-the-2024-elections-of-moldova-romania-and-georgia/>

15 CivilNet. ‘Armenia Elections Face Mounting Internal and External Risks, Report Warns’. CIVILNET, 21 January 2026. <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/997986/armenia-elections-face-mounting-internal-and-external-risks-report-warns/>

16 WI, devops. ‘Targeted Disruption: Russian Interference in the 2024 Elections of Moldova, Romania and Georgia’. GEOpolitics, 8 May 2025. <https://politicsgeo.com/targeted-disruption-russian-interference-in-the-2024-elections-of-moldova-romania-and-georgia/>

17 nikama. “‘Russia Trying to Send Tens of Thousands of Voters to Armenia’s Elections’: Debate in Yerevan’. Jamnews in English, 12 March 2026. <https://jam-news.net/russia-trying-to-send-tens-of-thousands-of-voters-to-armenias-elections-debate-in-yerevan/>

18 OC Media. ‘Russian Hackers Reportedly Attack Armenian Government Database’. 19 September 2024. <https://oc-media.org/russian-hackers-reportedly-attack-armenian-government-database/>

rules rather than censorship.

## **A Strategic framework for building resilience**

### **Institutional Preparedness**

Resilience begins with capable institutions. Armenia should invest in role-specific capacity-building across the National Security Council, State Security Service, Central Election Commission, Prosecutor General's Office, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Justice, tax authorities, business regulators, and other national institutions to effectively tackle FIOs. Training must be tailored to each institution's mandate and grounded in realistic scenarios, covering such tools as covert financing, cyberattacks, coordinated inauthentic online behaviour, and economic blackmail.

A permanent monitoring mechanism should be established to track incidents and patterns of foreign influence. Standardised reporting templates and a centralised analytical function would enable actionable recommendations rather than fragmented responses.

Interagency coordination should be formalised on a permanent basis through a dedicated cross-government task force. Clear focal points, rapid response procedures, and secure intelligence-sharing protocols would prevent duplication and close operational gaps. External technical experts could provide specialised support and ensure compliance with human rights standards.

### **Enforcement of the existing legal framework**

Armenia already has a range of legal and regulatory provisions relevant to addressing foreign interference and influence operations. These include criminal law provisions related to national security and unlawful activities against the constitutional order, as well as regulations governing elections, political finance, media transparency, and campaign conduct. The Electoral Code and related legislation establish rules on campaign financing, reporting obligations, and oversight by the Central Election Commission, while other laws regulate media activities and prohibit certain forms of unlawful political influence.

However, the principal challenge lies less in the absence of legal provisions than in the effectiveness, consistency, and perceived impartiality of their enforcement. Ensuring that existing rules function as intended requires strengthening the institutional capacity of the bodies responsible for implementation and oversight. This includes allocating adequate resources and technical expertise to the Central Election Commission, law enforcement agencies, financial oversight bodies, and relevant regulatory authorities so they are able to investigate potential violations, monitor compliance with campaign finance rules, and respond promptly to allegations of foreign interference or coordinated influence activities.

### **Legislative Strengthening**

The Criminal Code should explicitly address clearly defined forms of covert foreign political financing and coordinated interference conduct. Legal reforms should focus on conduct rather than affiliation, maintaining high evidentiary standards to protect fundamental rights.

Political finance regulation requires particular attention. Transparency in third-party campaigning, beneficial ownership disclosure for political advertising, and traceability of funding channels are essential. Clear legal bases for interagency data-sharing and digital evidence handling should also be codified.

## **Government–Civil Society Cooperation**

Armenia’s civil society possesses analytical capacity, investigative expertise, and community trust. Structured dialogue platforms would allow secure information exchange between state institutions and credible CSOs.

Procedures for receiving, verifying, and integrating civil society evidence into investigations should be clarified. When properly safeguarded, CSO-generated analysis can strengthen prosecutorial cases and improve early detection of coordinated interference.

Public communication should also be coordinated. High-confidence, evidence-based messaging reduces the risk of amplifying hostile narratives while reinforcing institutional credibility.

## **International Cooperation**

Foreign influence is inherently cross-border. Armenia should strengthen mutual legal assistance processes to trace financial flows and secure evidence abroad. Targeted sanctions, coordinated with partners, can also raise the costs of interference.

Technical assistance should be requested in clearly defined areas: cyber forensics, political finance analytics, corporate investigations and asset tracing, digital advertising transparency, and institutional training. International cooperation must be precise and operational rather than declarative.

## **CONCLUSION**

Armenia stands at a critical juncture. The June 2026 elections will test not only political competition but institutional resilience. Malign actors behind foreign influence operations seek to exploit vulnerabilities in governance, economy, and social cohesion to preserve external leverage over Armenia’s future.

The Armenian government’s response should be neither complacent nor disproportionate. Rather, it should be centred on disciplined institutional strengthening, targeted legislative reform, structured cooperation with civil society, and calibrated international engagement.

If implemented effectively, these measures will not only safeguard the 2026 elections but also establish durable defences against systemic interference. Democratic resilience should not be seen as a campaign-season objective, rather as a strategic state imperative.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Recommendations to the Government of Armenia**

Establish a Permanent Interagency Task Force on Foreign Influence Operations

The Government should formally establish a standing Interagency Task Force (IATF) mandated to detect, assess, and coordinate responses to foreign influence operations. The Task Force should be chaired at a sufficiently senior level, preferably under the National Security Council, to ensure political authority and operational coherence.

The IATF should:

- Designate permanent focal points within each relevant institution.
- Develop a unified threat taxonomy defining categories of influence operations (covert financing, cyber interference, coercion, coordinated inauthentic behaviour, institutional capture indicators, etc.).
- Create rapid-response protocols that specify decision timelines, attribution thresholds, public communication procedures, and prosecutorial referral pathways.
- Produce quarterly classified assessments and annual public threat summaries; and
- Maintain a secure reporting channel for civil society and media submissions.

A campaign-period escalation protocol should be operational no later than three months before the June 2026 elections.

### **Implement Role-Specific Institutional Capacity-Building**

Training should be practical and tailored to the mandate of each national institution:

The National Security Council should focus on strategic threat assessment and interagency coordination doctrine.

- The State Security Service should prioritise the detection of covert networks, foreign financing channels, and coercive tactics.
- The Central Election Commission should strengthen oversight of political finance transparency, third-party campaigning compliance, and digital advertising disclosure.
- The Prosecutor General's Office should develop expertise in complex financial investigations, digital evidence handling, and prosecutions of foreign agent conduct.
- The Ministry of Interior should enhance cyber incident response and election-period security protocols.
- The Ministry of Justice should review legislative gaps and ensure compatibility with constitutional safeguards. and
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should integrate influence risk assessments into diplomatic engagement and sanctions coordination.

At least two national-level simulation exercises should be conducted before the election campaign peak, testing cross-agency response to a coordinated interference scenario.

At the same time, the Interagency Task Force should aim to better coordinate the provision of capacity-building support between international partners, the Armenian government, and implementing organisations to prevent duplications of efforts, to ensure that the right institutions and individuals receive the appropriate support, and to ensure that needs are addressed on a more systematic basis.

## **Strengthen Political Finance and Transparency Regulations**

Legislative amendments should address the following areas:

- Introduce clear transparency requirements and spending limits for third-party campaign actors;
- Require beneficial ownership disclosure for all entities purchasing political advertising or engaging in political campaigning;
- Establish real-time campaign-period reporting obligations for large political expenditures.
- Introduce traceability standards for digital asset contributions and prohibit anonymous crypto donations above defined thresholds; and
- Create explicit penalties for undisclosed foreign funding of political activities.

The Central Election Commission should be granted expanded audit powers during the campaign period, including expedited review procedures.

## **Criminalise Covert Interference Conduct with Clear Safeguards**

The Criminal Code should define and criminalise narrowly tailored forms of foreign-directed political interference, including:

- Knowingly acting on behalf of a foreign state to covertly influence political processes without disclosure;
- Coordinated foreign financing of political actors or campaign structures; and
- Foreign-directed coercion or blackmail of political actors.

All provisions must include strict intent standards, evidentiary safeguards, and judicial oversight to prevent politicised enforcement.

## **Establish a National Monitoring and Analytics Centre**

A centralised monitoring and analysis unit should aggregate:

- Incident reports from government institutions;
- Verified civil society submissions;
- Cyber threat intelligence; and
- Political finance irregularity indicators.

The Centre should use structured analytical methodologies and publish periodic public briefings to

enhance transparency without compromising investigations.

### **Develop Strategic Public Communication Protocols**

The Government should adopt a communication doctrine that:

- Ensures timely, evidence-based disclosure of confirmed interference incidents;
- Avoids speculative or politically charged messaging;
- Differentiates between verified foreign interference and domestic political disagreement; and
- Provides citizens with clear reporting channels.

### **Recommendations to Armenian Civil Society**

#### **Establish a Coordinated FIO Monitoring Consortium**

Leading civil society organisations, investigative journalists, and digital analysts should form a structured monitoring consortium that:

- Standardises evidence documentation practices;
- Shares verified findings across organisations;
- Develops common reporting templates for submission to state authorities; and
- Conducts joint public briefings when high-confidence interference patterns are identified.

#### **Develop Court-Admissible Evidence Methodologies**

Civil society actors should adopt formalised procedures for:

- Digital evidence preservation;
- Timestamping and chain-of-custody documentation;
- Source verification standards; and
- Secure data storage protocols.

This will increase the usability of civil society findings in prosecutorial contexts.

#### **Expand Public Resilience Programming**

Civil society should prioritise voter-focused programming explaining:

- How does the influence operations function;

- How to verify information sources;
- How political finance manipulation occurs; and
- How to report intimidation or coercion.

Messaging should be non-partisan and grounded in democratic values rather than geopolitical framing.

### **Enhance Protection Mechanisms for Journalists and Whistleblowers**

CSOs should establish secure intake mechanisms for anonymous tips related to illicit financing or coercion. Collaboration with international press freedom organisations can enhance protection capacity.

## **Recommendations to the European Union and International Partners**

### **Enhance Targeted Technical Assistance**

The EU should further enhance specialised assistance in:

- Political finance auditing and compliance systems;
- Digital advertising transparency tools;
- Cyber forensic training; and
- Secure interagency information-sharing platforms.

Support should be embedded and sustained rather than episodic.

### **Support Sanctions and Asset-Freezing Coordination**

Where credible evidence identifies foreign actors engaged in interference, EU institutions and Member States should consider targeted sanctions, including asset freezes and travel restrictions.

### **Strengthen Cross-Border Financial Intelligence Cooperation**

The EU should facilitate enhanced cooperation between Armenian financial intelligence units and EU counterparts to trace illicit flows linked to interference operations.

### **Fund Civil Society Monitoring and Security Infrastructure**

Sustained funding for investigative journalism, open-source investigation capabilities, and secure communications infrastructure will strengthen Armenia's democratic ecosystem.