

# Hybrid threats and disinformation: the role of civil society in Armenia's elections

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*On 21 April 2026, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF), in cooperation with Miriam Lexmann, Member of the European Parliament, and with the support of the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF), organised an event titled "Hybrid threats and disinformation: the role of civil society in Armenia's elections" at the European Parliament.*

With Armenia approaching its parliamentary elections scheduled for 7 June 2026, the event created a timely space to discuss the growing impact of hybrid threats, disinformation and social media manipulation. The discussion highlighted the crucial role of civil society in identifying and countering false narratives, as well as in observing electoral processes. It also explored practical approaches to safeguarding electoral integrity in Armenia and across Europe.

The event brought together around 80 participants - policymakers and civil society representatives working on democracy and security in the Eastern Partnership region. The speakers were:

- **Miriam Lexmann** – Member of the European Parliament
- **Andrey Kovatchev** – Member of the European Parliament
- **Jan Latal** – Strategic Communications Expert, East Stratcom Task Force, European External Action Service
- **Lousineh Hakobyan** – President, NGO Europe in Law Association; Co-Chair, EU-Armenia Civil Society Platform
- **Daniel Ioannisyán** – Director, Union of Informed Citizens
- **Dorina Baltag** – Researcher, Institute for Diplomacy and International Affairs at Loughborough University London

The discussion was moderated by **Etienne Soula**, Research Fellow, German Marshall Fund of the United States and closing remarks were delivered by **Hovsep Khurshudyan**, Chairman, Free Citizen NGO, Armenia; Steering Committee Member, Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum.

## Nature of the threat

Armenia is increasingly exposed to serious hybrid threats, with disinformation and foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) at the forefront. These operations are multifaceted, combining digital manipulation, coordinated narratives, and in some cases direct interference in electoral processes. **In particular, Russian-linked networks are actively working to influence public opinion and electoral outcomes, including through the mobilisation of voters from abroad.** For example, as noted during the discussion, Armenian businessmen in Russia are being threatened and forced by the FSB to send their employees to Armenia to vote for pro-Russian parties (since voting from abroad is not possible).

Disinformation campaigns in Armenia focus heavily on exploiting societal divisions and emotional triggers. **Narratives frequently target sensitive issues such as national identity, religion, historical memory and security concerns.** A recurring theme is the portrayal of Armenia as weak, corrupt and incapable of independent, democratic governance, coupled with messaging that promotes Russia as a necessary security guarantor and a reliable partner. Other narratives aim to undermine peace efforts with Azerbaijan and discourage regional cooperation, thus reinforcing a sense of insecurity within Armenian society.

In addition to efforts to influence election outcomes, attempts to delegitimise electoral processes have become more prominent. False claims of widespread electoral fraud and violations are disseminated to erode public trust in democratic institutions. **As elections approach, such activities are expected to intensify, with increasing use of AI-generated content and coordinated online networks.** The space is further distorted by actors, including some non-governmental organisations, that present themselves as independent voices while amplifying pro-Kremlin messaging. The Armenian information environment is challenged by a limited and financially constrained independent media sector, political pressures, and the continued presence of Russian media content, all of which hinder the production of high-quality and impartial journalism. These dynamics are compounded by post-war insecurities, which make parts of the population more susceptible to fear-based and distrustful messaging.

## Role of civil society

In this challenging environment, civil society organisations play a central role in safeguarding electoral integrity. Armenian civil society has developed a range of tools to counter disinformation and monitor elections, beyond traditional observation methods. **Civil society actors identify and debunk false reports of violations, explain electoral procedures, and raise awareness of foreign interference tactics, including through trainings that clarify the difference between election violation and election falsification.** These efforts are essential in countering attempts to delegitimise the electoral process and in maintaining public trust.

**However, civil society operates under significant constraints.** The sector is diverse but fragmented, with varying levels of capacity and resources. While some organisations demonstrate strong expertise in policy advocacy, monitoring, and countering hybrid threats, they often do so with limited resources and reduced external support, especially after the exit of the USAID. Structural challenges, including limited funding and outreach capacity, further constrain their ability to engage citizens, particularly in remote areas. At the same time, it was noted during the panel that **there are concerns about certain civil society actors being co-opted into advancing narratives aligned with foreign interference, either deliberately or inadvertently.**

The broader political context further complicates the role of civil society. High levels of political polarisation and the absence of a strong and constructive parliamentary opposition have increased expectations for civil society to act as a watchdog and a source of state accountability.

**Despite these challenges, civil society remains a key pillar of Armenia’s democratic resilience.** It plays a critical role in strengthening transparency, countering disinformation, and fostering citizen awareness and participation, even as it navigates an increasingly complex and contested information and political environment.

## EU support and regional perspective

The European Union plays an increasingly important role in supporting Armenia’s efforts to counter hybrid threats and strengthen democratic institutions, with its overall engagement intensifying in recent years in line with the country’s growing alignment with the EU. Building on its experience in other Eastern Partnership countries, particularly more recently in Moldova, the **EU has provided targeted assistance focused on institutional capacity-building, strategic communication and resilience against disinformation.** Initiatives such as support for independent media and civil society, and the deployment of expertise on countering disinformation are contributing to enhancing Armenia’s preparedness ahead of the elections. The EU has also emphasised the importance of strengthening law enforcement, judicial institutions and electoral bodies to effectively respond to hybrid threats.

From a regional perspective, Armenia shares many challenges with other Eastern Partnership countries. Experiences from across the region—particularly Moldova, demonstrate that both past shortcomings and effective practices offer valuable lessons, as disinformation campaigns tend to evolve over time, shifting from targeting electoral processes to undermining broader societal trust. **The Moldovan case also highlights the importance of coordinated responses, including closer cooperation between institutions, civil society, and international partners, as well as stronger engagement with diaspora communities and independent media.** Furthermore, as emphasised in the discussion, resilience ultimately hinges on sustained

investment in citizen engagement, education, and institutional credibility to ensure that democratic reforms are both understood and supported by the population.

## Policy recommendations

- **Improve interagency cooperation** among electoral bodies, law enforcement, and intelligence services, addressing current coordination challenges where institutions “are only seeing their own field,” in order to ensure a more coherent and timely response to hybrid threats.
- **Adopt a whole-of-society approach** by enhancing coordination between state institutions, civil society, media, and international partners, recognising that resilience boils down to coordinated action and requires joint efforts across sectors.
- **Enhance support for civil society**, including more targeted and flexible funding, to enable organisations to counter disinformation, conduct public awareness campaigns, and engage citizens, particularly given existing resource constraints and the need to reach remote communities.
- **Develop clearer criteria and monitoring mechanisms for civil society support**, ensuring that assistance is directed to organisations genuinely contributing to democratic resilience and not those coopted by the anti-democratic actors.
- **Strengthen public communication and awareness-raising efforts**, including targeted campaigns to explain electoral processes, and counter manipulative narratives.
- **Promote citizen engagement and trust-building initiatives**, including outreach to rural and vulnerable groups, as well as displaced populations, through needs-based and people-to-people approaches, while avoiding their instrumentalisation for political purposes.
- **Facilitate peer-to-peer exchanges and regional learning**, drawing on experiences from Eastern Partnership countries such as Moldova, including cooperation between institutions, civil society, and diaspora communities to strengthen resilience against disinformation.

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