

# Keeping Yerevan in Moscow's Orbit: Russia's FIMI Playbook in Armenia

Areg Kochinyan, President of Armenian Council, August 2026

## I. Country context and strategic relevance

Armenia is the only country in the South Caucasus that is a formal member of Russia-led proxy organizations both in the military-political sphere (the Collective Security Treaty Organization, CSTO) and in the economic sphere (the Eurasian Economic Union, EAEU), organisations which serve as instruments for preserving Russia's geopolitical dominance across the post-Soviet space. Armenia suspended its participation in the CSTO following Azerbaijan's attacks on Armenia's sovereign territory in September 2022. Armenia is also the only country in the region in which Russia continues to maintain a legal military presence. This presence includes the 102nd Military Base, consisting of the main garrison in Gyumri, the Kanaker garrison (Yerevan), and the 3624th Air Base at Erebuni Airport (Yerevan). In addition, under a 1992 agreement, Russian border guards are responsible for protecting Armenia's borders with Iran (45 km) and Turkey (327 km). The withdrawal of these forces would mean the end of Russia's physical military presence throughout the South Caucasus, excluding the occupied territories of Georgia.

Current Armenian-Russian relations are characterized by the weakening of what have traditionally been close ties and growing diplomatic and economic tensions. Russia is no longer Armenia's primary supplier of military equipment (it accounted for 94% of Armenia's arms imports in 2020 but less than 7% by 2026).<sup>1</sup>

Russia began imposing bans on imports of various Armenian agricultural products, as well as certain alcoholic beverages, mineral water, and other goods ahead of Armenia's June 2026 parliamentary elections and has continued to introduce new restrictions since the election. Simultaneously, Moscow increased its diplomatic pressure on Yerevan, demanding that it "choose between the European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union".

### Exploited vulnerabilities:

1. The unresolved conflict with Azerbaijan and the closed border with Turkey, including issues relating to:
  - the occupation of Armenian territory
  - refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh

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<sup>1</sup> Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), *SIPRI Arms Transfers Database*, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers> (accessed July 2026).

- the destruction of Armenian cultural heritage in Azerbaijan
  - the trauma of the Armenian Genocide
  - aggressive rhetoric from Baku, including the “Western Azerbaijan” narrative
2. Armenian seasonal migrant workers in Russia, whose vulnerability stems from the possibility of deportation, work restrictions, and limitations on the transfer of remittances to Armenia.
  3. Socio-economic problems within Armenia.
  4. The conflict between Armenia's secular authorities and the leadership of the Armenian Apostolic Church.
  5. Armenia's economic and energy dependence on Russia.

## II. The Russian FIMI playbook

The peace process with Azerbaijan and normalization of relations with Turkey are portrayed as a betrayal of national memory.

Russian influence operations are synchronized with political messaging and increasingly confrontational diplomatic rhetoric. This has included demands that Armenia consider the interests of Russian citizens in its domestic political processes, notably during the Pashinyan-Putin meeting of 1 April 2026.

Russia regularly reminds Armenia of the discount rates Armenia pays for gas and of Armenia's dependence on the Russian market. Since late May 2026, these narratives have been accompanied by bans on imports of Armenian products, turning what had previously been threats into concrete economic pressure.

As Russia has lost many of its traditional leverage mechanisms in the security domain, its information operations increasingly focus on portraying the Armenian–Azerbaijani and Armenian–Turkish peace processes as doomed to failure and emphasizing the alleged existential threat that Turkey and Azerbaijan both pose to Armenia.

Diplomatically, Russia's rhetoric toward Armenia has grown harsher; Moscow increasingly puts Armenia in the same group as Ukraine and warns against the “Ukrainization of Armenia”.<sup>2</sup>

### Russia's strategic objectives in the information domain

Russia's objectives in the information domain are to promote pro-Kremlin narratives that reinforce Moscow's preferred interpretation of regional developments and to undermine alternative perspectives. At the same time, Russia seeks to destabilize Armenia's domestic political environment by eroding public confidence in state institutions, amplifying social tensions, and weakening the government's ability to govern effectively. A further objective is to increase political polarization by deepening divisions between different political and social groups, making it more difficult to achieve consensus on key national issues and creating conditions that enhance Russia's leverage over Armenia's internal decision-making.

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<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Press conference by Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova, June 2026, available at: [https://mid.ru/en/press\\_service/spokesperson/briefings/](https://mid.ru/en/press_service/spokesperson/briefings/) (statements referring to the alleged “Ukrainization of Armenia”).

The ultimate objective is regime change through the replacement of the current government with one more obedient to Russia.

An intermediate objective is to escalate diplomatic pressure, economic coercion, internal destabilization, driven by pro-Russian parliamentary parties and social discontent, to the point where governmental decision-making becomes paralyzed. This would compel Armenia's authorities to make concessions on issues important to Russia, such as the following: the preservation of Russian logistical assets; maintaining the Russian military base; retaining the Russian railway concession; and ensuring Russian involvement in regional connectivity projects, including the "Trump Road".

## **Dominant narratives promoted by Russian and pro-Russian actors**

The principal narratives promoted by Russian and pro-Russian actors portray Armenia as facing an existential threat of "Turkification", claiming that the government's foreign and security policies will ultimately place the country under Turkish political, economic, and cultural influence. At the same time, Russia is presented as Armenia's only reliable security guarantor and an indispensable economic partner, with narratives emphasizing that no viable alternative exists. These messages are reinforced by efforts to foster distrust toward the West, portraying European and Euro-Atlantic engagement as either ineffective or ultimately serving Turkish and Azerbaijani interests rather than Armenia's security.

The West is portrayed as synonymous with Turkey in the regional context, accompanied by narratives concerning the possible return of 300,000 Azerbaijanis and related security threats.

## **Tactics, techniques, and procedures**

Russian influence operations rely on a combination of information, political, and societal instruments. These include coordinated disinformation campaigns and the systematic dissemination of strategic narratives through state, proxy, and online media. Information activities are often synchronized with official diplomatic statements and political messaging to amplify their impact. Russian actors also seek to influence Armenia's domestic politics by mobilizing Armenians who live in Russia during elections, supporting or cultivating pro-Russian political forces, and maintaining a network of pro-Russian media outlets. At the same time, soft power institutions, such as the Russian Book House, are used to promote Russian cultural influence and reinforce pro-Kremlin narratives.

Russian influence operations involve a broad network of state and non-state actors. These include a significant portion of Armenia's pro-Russian opposition, Russian citizens engaged in business activities in Armenia, and segments of the Armenian diaspora residing in Russia. Information operations are amplified through Russian state media, including Sputnik Armenia, as well as Russian television channels available in Armenia's public broadcasting network. Additional influence is exercised through Russia-based commentators and experts who present themselves as sympathetic to Armenian interests, such as Konstantin Zatulin, alongside ethnic Armenian media personalities including Margarita Simonyan, Semyon Bagdasarov, and Karen Shakhnazarov.<sup>3</sup> Russian actors also seek to mobilize vulnerable social groups, particularly refugees from Artsakh, individuals maintaining close personal or economic ties with Russia, and sympathetic activists,

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<sup>3</sup> European External Action Service (EEAS), *2nd EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) Threats*, 2024, and EUvsDisinfo database, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/>, documenting the role of state-affiliated media personalities and proxy actors in Russian information manipulation campaigns.

bloggers, and civil society representatives, who knowingly or unknowingly contribute to the dissemination of pro-Kremlin narratives.

## **Primary target audiences**

Russian influence operations target audiences that are considered to be particularly susceptible to security, economic, and identity-based narratives. These include people directly affected by the conflict with Azerbaijan, farmers and businesses impacted by Russian trade restrictions, relatives of Armenians living and working in Russia, socially vulnerable groups, and citizens dissatisfied with the policies of Prime Minister Pashinyan. Particular attention is devoted to the population of Armenia's Syunik Province, where Russian and pro-Russian actors actively promote narratives claiming that the region is under threat of occupation, "Turkification", or eventual transfer to Azerbaijan in order to heighten insecurity, fuel public anxiety, and undermine confidence in the government's policies.

## **The most significant Russian FIMI operations during the past three to five years**

1. Promotion of narratives regarding the return of 300,000 Azerbaijanis, "Western Azerbaijan", and related themes. Although these narratives originated in Baku, their active promotion became a main communication tactic of pro-Russian political forces during Armenia's election campaign.
2. Distribution of coordinated messaging ("talking points") to Russian media outlets and bloggers following Azerbaijan's military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023, aimed at assigning full responsibility to the Armenian government, including the narrative that "Pashinyan recognized Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan in Prague".<sup>4</sup>
3. The disinformation campaign alleging that Turkish mosques were being built in Armenia.
4. Exploitation of the conflict between Prime Minister Pashinyan and the Catholicos (the head of the Armenian Apostolic Church) as part of the broader "Turkification of Armenia" narrative.
5. The deployment of Russian oligarch Samvel Karapetyan to Armenia during this political confrontation.

## **III. Resilience and countermeasures**

### **What has worked**

The most effective countermeasures have combined government action, civil society initiatives, and public awareness efforts. These have included identifying and exposing mechanisms used to transport Armenian citizens from Russia to participate in elections, as well as uncovering coordinated disinformation networks, particularly through the work of the Union of Informed Citizens. Legislative reforms criminalizing both vote-buying and vote-selling, accompanied by extensive public awareness campaigns, including at airports, have also strengthened electoral resilience. In addition, Russia's own economic restrictions on Armenian exports generated an

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<sup>4</sup> DFRLab (Atlantic Council), *Breakout from the Black Box: Russian Information Operations after the Fall of Nagorno-Karabakh*, 2023; European External Action Service (EEAS), *2nd EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) Threats*, 2024.

unintended backlash, contributing to growing public scepticism toward Moscow's policies and reducing the effectiveness of some pro-Russian narratives.

## **Remaining vulnerabilities and gaps**

Armenia continues to face several structural vulnerabilities that can be exploited by Russian influence operations. These include its significant economic and energy dependence on Russia, as well as the continued presence of Russian military forces on Armenian territory. Existing capability gaps include the lack of adequate mechanisms for detecting and prosecuting covert foreign financing of election campaigns and other forms of political interference. Russia also benefits from narratives that originate in Azerbaijan, which Russia then amplifies to reinforce its own strategic messaging. Additional vulnerabilities stem from the presence of pro-Russian political forces that are capable of contributing to domestic destabilization and political paralysis, the continued broadcasting of Russian television channels through Armenia's national multiplex, the operation of Russian media outlets such as Sputnik Armenia and proxy platforms including Euromedia24 and Channel 5, and the activities of Russian soft power institutions such as the Russian Book House.

## **How effective is cooperation with the EU, NATO, and other international partners?**

The major international political developments including the European Political Community Summit, President Emmanuel Macron's state visit, and enhanced cooperation with the United States have created a favourable information environment. This is reflected in consistently high approval ratings for the European Union and France, alongside rising negative perceptions of Russia (currently approximately 43%).<sup>5</sup>

General lessons include understanding mechanisms being exploited in multiple countries in relation to cyber operations, societal polarization, and the exploitation of sensitive political and historical issues. At the same time, Armenia's case remains unique due to several distinctive factors, including its conflicts with Azerbaijan and Turkey, as well as Russia's extensive influence and physical presence inside the country.

## **Policy recommendations at the national and European levels:**

- Adapt legislation to address the specific characteristics of Russian interference, including covert financing mechanisms and voter bribery.
- Provide expert and technical assistance to identify hidden mechanisms of Russian influence.
- Strengthen intelligence cooperation, operational information-sharing, and exchange of data, including information on Russian citizens involved in FIMI activities within the EU and targeted countries.
- Train specialists to identify and counter the principal narratives and messaging techniques used by Russian propaganda.
- Expand cybersecurity assistance (partially underway through the new European Mission in Armenia).

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<sup>5</sup> International Republican Institute (IRI), *Armenia Poll, 2025–2026*; International Republican Institute, *Center for Insights in Survey Research*, public opinion surveys measuring attitudes toward the European Union, France, the United States, and Russia in Armenia.

- Provide technical and institutional support for developing Armenia's border management capacity, enabling the eventual replacement of Russian border guards.
- Develop contingency plans, including economic and energy crisis scenarios, with rapid assistance mechanisms for Armenia, similar to the support provided to Moldova since 2022 (energy assistance, food supply, opening European markets to Armenian exports, etc.).



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