

# Civil Society and Democratic Resilience in Armenia

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## Strengthening Democratic Resilience Ahead of the June 2026 Elections

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This brief is addressed to:






- Armenian government and policymakers
- European Union policymakers and institutions
- Civil society organisations in Armenia

## INTRODUCTION

Armenia stands at a historic geopolitical crossroads. The forced displacement of approximately 120,000 ethnic Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 accelerated a fundamental strategic reorientation: the government initiated EU accession proceedings in early 2025, adopted the EU–Armenia Strategic Agenda in December 2025, and effectively suspended its CSTO membership. The Washington Declaration of August 2025 initialled a peace framework with Azerbaijan, reducing the risk of renewed military escalation – but simultaneously intensifying hybrid operations targeting Armenia’s democratic institutions and the June 2026 parliamentary elections.

To better illustrate the balance between resilience and vulnerability, the table below outlines the main structural factors shaping Armenia’s democratic trajectory.

**TABLE: Factors of Democratic Resilience vs. Vulnerability in Armenia**

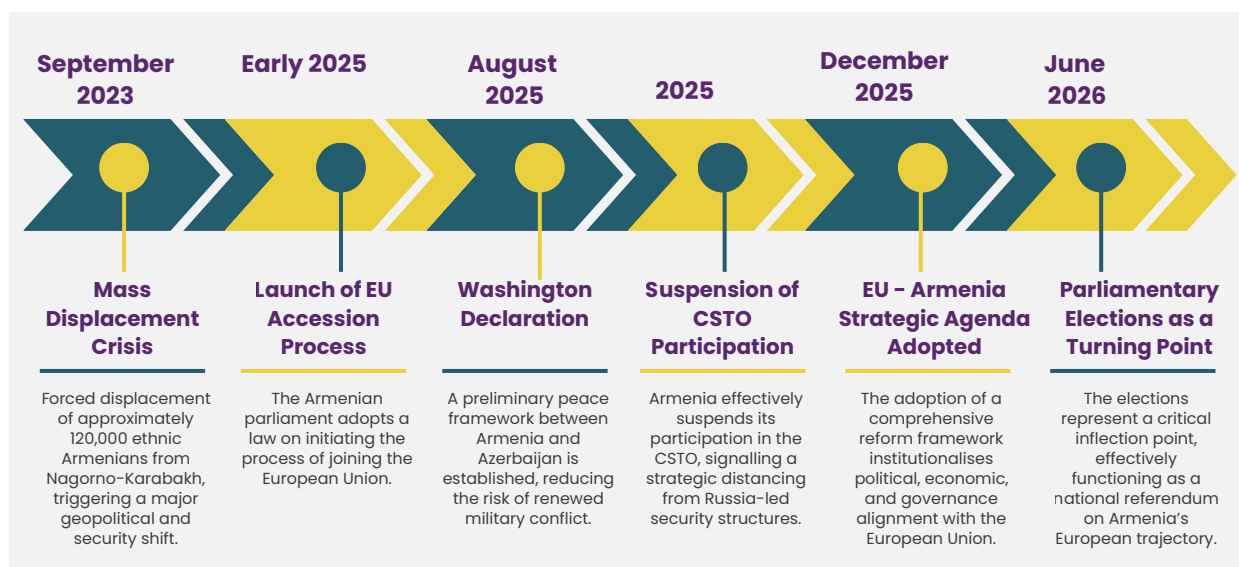
Dimension	Positive Elements (Resilience)	Vulnerabilities / Risks
 <b>Geopolitical</b>	Initiation of EU accession process (2025)	External hybrid pressures
 <b>Security</b>	Washington Declaration reduces military risk	External electoral interference
 <b>Institutional</b>	EU–Armenia Strategic Agenda	Institutions exposed to manipulation
 <b>Electoral</b>	Competitive elections (2026)	Early disinformation campaigns (14 months)
 <b>Civil Society</b>	Key role in resilience	Weakened following the termination of US assistance

Source: author

The June 2026 elections are a strategic inflection point: effectively a national referendum on Armenia’s European trajectory. Armenia’s Foreign Intelligence Service (FISA) has assessed that foreign interference will be “comprehensive, complex and large-scale.” Russia’s disinformation campaign began 14 months before election day – earlier than comparable efforts against Germany (3 months) or Moldova (5 months). Meanwhile, the sudden termination of US foreign assistance in 2025 has devastated the civil society and media ecosystem that serves as the primary democratic resilience infrastructure.

To contextualise these developments within a broader temporal framework, the timeline below highlights the key milestones of Armenia’s strategic reorientation.

## Timeline: Armenia's Strategic Reorientation (2023 - 2026)



Source: author

This brief synthesises the findings of a structured country-level research exercise covering four analytical groups: institutional and governance foundations, hybrid threat response, civil society capacity and reform sustainability, and external drivers of reform. It presents conclusions drawn from the research and targeted recommendations for three audiences with distinct and complementary roles in supporting Armenia's democratic transition.

## KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

### Legislative progress is real, but implementation lags

Armenia's 2025 governance reform cycle - the Law on Cybersecurity, Law on Public Information, establishment of a Regulatory Body of Information Systems, and the 2024 - 2026 Action Plan against Disinformation - represent significant legislative advance since the 2018 democratic transition. The EU - Armenia Strategic Agenda (December 2025) and the Visa Liberalisation Action Plan (November 2025) provide structured alignment incentives. However, a persistent "readiness gap" exists between legislative adoption and operational capacity: the autonomous cybersecurity oversight body will most probably not be fully operational at the time of the election cycle, judicial independence deficits remain, and enforcement of anti-corruption commitments is inconsistent.

### Hybrid threats are at unprecedented scale and sophistication

FISA (2026) identifies five categories of hybrid activity: cyber operations targeting critical infrastructure and elections; AI - driven information operations; agent activation and political engineering; economic coercion; and targeted smear campaigns. NewsGuard (2025) documented 18 specific Russian false narratives generating 45 million views across 11 platforms and 8 languages, attributed to Storm - 1516 and Prigozhin-linked structures. The "Matryoshka" AI bot network deployed deepfakes impersonating international media outlets, while a multilingual nuclear waste hoax was amplified by major AI chatbots. Crucially, the

current institutional response remains predominantly reactive – no Common Operational Picture (COP) framework synchronises cyber and narrative threat intelligence across institutions.

### Civil society is under severe resource stress

The sudden termination of US foreign assistance in 2025 has been catastrophic for Armenia's civil society ecosystem: approximately 40% of Armenian CSOs relied on USAID grants for substantial portions of their budgets. Programme closures, staff reductions, and the contraction of fact-checking and media literacy activities have directly weakened democratic resilience at the most vulnerable moment. The CSO Meter overall score of 4.8/7 masks significant structural problems: State-CSO Cooperation scored the lowest at 4.0/7, reflecting absent national CSO policy, no tax incentives for private giving, and VAT applied to grant revenues. Freedom of Expression declined from 4.9 to 4.7 due to increased SLAPP threats and journalist smear campaigns.

### Public support for EU integration is a critical democratic anchor

72% of Armenians support EU accession (IRI, February 2026); 51% would vote to join in a referendum. This broad public mandate – initiated through a citizen legislative initiative rather than a top-down decision – represents a durable foundation for the reform agenda. However, 48% of respondents trust no political figure (IRI, փետրվար 2026թ.), and only 32% express confidence in the National Assembly. This trust deficit creates a vulnerability: disinformation actors actively exploit institutional distrust to delegitimise the pro-European government and the accession process itself.

### The peace process creates new hybrid threat dynamics

The Washington Declaration's partial normalisation with Azerbaijan has reduced conventional military risk but intensified influence operations. FISA notes a 36% increase in "western Azerbaijan" narratives following the August 2025 agreement. Azerbaijan's 2026 military budget increased to AZN 9 billion, maintaining structural asymmetry. Pro-Kremlin actors – including the "Eurasia" NGO employing charity-washing tactics linked to the Shor network – exploit domestic political tensions (notably the May-June 2025 government-Armenian Apostolic Church conflict) to recruit domestic amplifiers of anti-European narratives.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### For the Armenian Government and Policymakers

- Fully operationalise the Strategic Communication Department as a whole-of-government function. Establish a Common Operational Picture (COP) framework integrating NSS cyber intelligence, FISA threat assessments, and civil society fact-checking into a real-time pre-election coordination mechanism – no later than 60 days before the June 2026 elections.
- Accelerate judicial independence reform. The low levels of trust in the Judiciary and parliament are not only democratic failures – they are primary vectors that hybrid actors exploit to delegitimise the entire reform agenda.
- Establish a domestic CSO sustainability framework as an emergency response to the USAID withdrawal. This must include tax incentives for individual and corporate donations to CSOs, removal of VAT on grant revenues, and a legal framework for social enterprises.

## For the Armenian Government and Policymakers

- Formally embed civil society as independent monitors of EU accession reform benchmarks under the December 2025 Strategic Agenda – not as consultees, but as institutionalised participants with access to implementation data.
- Accelerate the Visa Liberalisation Action Plan as a democratic incentive. Visa liberalisation is the single most tangible EU benefit for Armenian citizens. Visible progress before June 2026 would strengthen the pro-European public mandate against hybrid delegitimisation.
- Provide direct technical assistance to Armenia’s new Strategic Communication Department. EU FIMI (Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference) expertise – a “Hybrid Mission” – should be directly deployed in Yerevan before the election.
- Integrate Armenia into EU hybrid resilience cooperation structures. Armenia should be included in pre-election disinformation monitoring exercises alongside Moldova and Ukraine.

## For Civil Society in Armenia

- Build a cross-organisational financial sustainability coalition. The USAID funding crisis requires collective action: joint grant applications, shared administrative platforms, and a coordinated fundraising approach to donors are essential to prevent further programme closures ahead of the anticipated funding vacuum after the elections.
- Establish a civil society monitoring coalition for EU accession reform benchmarks. This should produce quarterly and annual scorecard reports on implementation progress under the Visa Liberalisation Action Plan and the Strategic Agenda – creating accountability pressure and providing credible evidence against disinformation claims that EU integration is cosmetic.
- Build real-time technical threat-sharing capacity with Moldovan and Ukrainian civil society counterparts. Armenian, Moldovan, and Ukrainian organisations face shared threat actors (UNC5792, UNC3890, Storm-1516). A structured trilateral indicators-of-compromise sharing mechanism would provide early warning and shared analytical capacity.
- Develop a unified coalition to resist SLAPP threats and defend civic space. The declining Freedom of Expression score and increased smear campaigns against journalists signal a systematic effort to self-censor. A shared legal defence fund and rapid-response communications protocol would deter escalation.

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