

Examples of foreign interference impacting community organisations

Community organisations play a vital role in supporting and shaping communities, influencing decision-making, and connecting diverse groups.

Community organisation's extensive networks and trusted relationships make them key players in community leadership and engagement.

Foreign interference targeting a community organisation through **covert, coercive, deceptive, or corruptive actions** can undermine the organisation's independence, erode community trust and social cohesion.

It can also threaten the safety, security, and freedoms of expression and association of both the organisation and the wider community.

Learn more about [how foreign states engaging in foreign interference may target community organisations in New Zealand and how you can safeguard against it](#).

Examples of foreign interference impacting community organisations

Below are three examples of how foreign interference can affect community organisations. In these examples, "foreign state" means any country other than New Zealand.

These examples draw on insights that Multicultural New Zealand - The New Zealand Federation of Multicultural Councils has shared with the Ministry for Ethnic Communities. We thank them for their valuable contribution to this resource and the '[Safeguarding your community organisation against foreign interference](#)' resource.

The examples below are hypothetical scenarios that illustrate activities that could potentially be considered foreign interference under the Crimes Act 1961.

This is general information. It is for your understanding only and is not legal advice. For specific legal advice, talk to a qualified legal professional.



Example 1: Newly elected board members acting on behalf of a foreign state

What happened

A community organisation holds Board elections every two years. Two new members were elected after campaigning and engaging with the community.

After their election, these two members acted as proxies for the government of their country of origin. They acted under the direction of the foreign state's government, and this connection was deliberately hidden from the organisation.

The two members deliberately attempted to suppress certain community issues that conflicted with the foreign state's interests. They presented their actions as ordinary organisational decision-making, but they were deceptively trying to advance the foreign government's interests. They also pressured other Board members who disagreed and promoted views aligned with the foreign state.

When other board members said they were reflecting views from people in the community, the two members challenged them, asking "Who are they?" and demanded private personal information about those community members. Suspecting that the new members may be acting as proxies for the foreign state the other Board members did not provide this information.

The organisation suspected that the new members were reporting back to the foreign state after other Board members received anonymous threats on social media following discussions of contested issues in Board meetings. These meetings were not open to the public or community members, and the information discussed was not made publicly available.

What makes it foreign interference?

A foreign state used proxies to covertly interfere in the organisation's internal decisions and suppress opinions that differed from the foreign state's interests.

Deliberate attempts to suppress opinions undermine the community's freedom of expression.

Demands for personal information may also impact the safety of community members.

A '*proxy or proxies*' is an individual or group, often based within New Zealand, who acts on behalf of a foreign state to undertake activities of security concern.



Example 2: Attempts to control who can take part in a community event

What happened

A community organisation was organising its annual cultural festival to celebrate heritage, identity, and the community's history in New Zealand.

A person widely known to represent a foreign government pressured the organisers of the event to exclude specific community members whose views were considered "against the country's interests."

The person warned that if the organisers did not comply, they would approach influential community leaders to publicly criticise the organisation, circulate negative messaging, and undermine the organisation's standing and credibility within the community.

The foreign state knew that this would negatively affect the organisation's ability to secure community funding from New Zealand Government agencies and other funding organisations.

The organisation identified that these threats were being used to coerce them into acting against their inclusive values and to interfere with its decision-making. The organisation refused to exclude people but was worried about potential damage to their reputation.

What makes it foreign interference?

A foreign state intended to control community participation by using coercion and reputational threats to force decisions that conflicted with the organisation's inclusive values.

The foreign state interfered in a community organisation to achieve its own goals, and the threat of their retaliatory actions prevent the organisation from fully participating in New Zealand society.



Example 3: Funding and gifts used to access community members' personal information

What happened

A new community organisation started growing their profile and influence within their community.

They were invited to meet with the embassy of their country of origin and accepted. They felt pleased that their work was being acknowledged and thought it was a valuable opportunity to build a positive relationship with the embassy.

At the meeting, they were offered ongoing financial support for the organisation and gifts for individual members. They were also offered public support by the embassy for the organisation's activities. The community organisation appreciated the recognition and encouragement for their work from the embassy. Over time, some of the organisation's activities became dependent on the financial support.

Six months later, the embassy asked for private personal information about community members the organisation worked with, saying the organisation "owed them back" because of the support provided.

The organisation was coerced and intimidated to provide the personal information, but they declined. The embassy's support stopped, which impacted some of the organisation's activities.

What makes it foreign interference?

A foreign state deliberately used gifts and funding with the intent to gain leverage over the organisation and then tried to access sensitive personal information about community members.

This was a coercive attempt to collect information and interfere in organisational decisions for the foreign state's own purposes.