Foreign interference can be hard to see

Foreign interference refers to an act by a foreign state, often through a proxy, which is intended to influence, disrupt, or subvert New Zealand's national interests by deceptive, corruptive, or coercive means. Normal diplomatic activity, lobbying and other genuine, overt efforts to gain influence are not considered interference.

In 2025, Parliament passed the Crimes (Countering Foreign Interference) Amendment Act 2025 to strengthen New Zealand's criminal justice response to foreign interference and espionage. Foreign interference is now a criminal offence in New Zealand. You can learn more about the Act on the Community Resilience to Foreign Interference Hub.

Foreign interference can happen in subtle ways, sometimes over long periods of time, and can affect communities across New Zealand. Foreign interference is not always obvious, and it can be difficult to know who is involved or what their motivations are.

Foreign interference activities can sometimes take place alongside everyday community, cultural or professional activities. This can make it difficult to recognise when actions may form part of a broader effort to unduly influence or pressure communities.

On their own, these activities may not seem concerning. However, repeated or ongoing activity can harm individuals and communities by limiting people's ability to make their own decisions and express their views freely.

Over time, this can create fear, discourage people from participating in their communities and weaken trust. It can also have wider impacts on New Zealand by damaging our democracy, communities, independence, economy and reputation.

In some situations, it can be difficult to distinguish between legitimate engagement with foreign states and activities that may become more harmful over time. It is important to remember that not all activity involving a foreign state is harmful or constitutes foreign interference.

Some activities may become harmful over time

Foreign states, or people acting on their behalf, may sometimes offer gifts, funding, invitations or other opportunities to community members or organisations. These offers can be part of normal and legitimate community activity. However, in some cases, you may begin to feel that you owe something in return, or that there are strings attached. Over time, this can leave you feeling uncomfortable, uncertain or under pressure.

The person may then try to influence your decisions or put pressure on you or others in your community. This can develop gradually, making it difficult to notice or understand what is happening at first.

For example, you might experience pressure to:

- attend certain events or activities
- exclude particular people, groups, or organisations
- share information with foreign state officials or someone acting on their behalf
- watch, collect information about, or report on other people in your community
- stay silent about any concerns
- keep information secret from other community members
- withdraw any support or not support community members who hold different views
- promote or repeat particular messages on social media or within the community
- follow and share specific media outlets or channels that support particular views
- make decisions that benefit a foreign state rather than your community's or organisation's interests
- make decisions because you feel you owe someone something, rather than because it is your own choice
- continue a relationship, activity, or programme because you feel indebted or obligated.

Pressure like this can stop people from speaking openly and taking part in community activities. It may also lead people to make decisions or take actions they do not feel comfortable with. Everyone should feel safe to express their views and participate in their community without fear of pressure or intimidation.

If something does not feel right, ask questions, get advice, and report your concerns.

You do not need proof to report a concern

People sometimes do not report concerns because they are unsure whether the situation is serious enough. Even small pieces of information may help government agencies connect information, identify broader patterns of activity and take action where appropriate.

You do not need proof before reporting a concern. You also do not need to know exactly who is involved or why it is happening.

If something feels unusual or does not seem right, trust your instincts, get advice, and report it. You will not get in trouble if you report a concern and it later turns out there was an innocent explanation.

You can report to the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service (NZSIS), Police and Crime Stoppers. If you would prefer not to share your personal details, the NZSIS and Crime Stoppers provide anonymous reporting channels.

Reporting concerns helps government agencies understand, investigate, and respond to possible foreign interference and other harmful activities.

Support is available, and no one has to deal with foreign interference and other harmful activities on their own.

Learn more about reporting on the Community Resilience to Foreign Interference Hub.

What concerning behaviour could look like

Example 1 – Questions about other community members

A new person joins a community organisation and becomes friends with someone on the committee of that organisation. As they get to know each other, the new person sometimes asks questions about other people in the group.

Over time, the questions become more focused on a community member who has publicly criticised a foreign state. The conversations seem casual, but the new member asks for them to be kept private.

Be cautious if someone repeatedly asks for information about others, especially if they ask you to keep those conversations secret. Behaviours which are suspicious, ongoing, unusual or persistent can be a warning sign.

Reporting this type of behaviour can help New Zealand government agencies better understand how individuals or communities may be targeted and support efforts to prevent further harm and take action where appropriate.

Example 2 – Gifts that come with expectations

A community leader is invited to events in New Zealand by a foreign state. Later they receive gifts from representatives connected to that government.

At first, the gifts seem harmless. Over time, the gifts become more valuable, and the community leader is asked to provide access to information on specific community members. Gradually, the requests for information become more frequent and harder to say no to.

Receiving a gift is not necessarily a concern. However, gifts that come with pressure or expectations can be a warning sign. They may affect a person's ability to make independent decisions.

Sometimes, pressure or expectations can build over time and may not be stated directly. Reporting concerns early can help agencies build a clearer picture of possible foreign interference activity and respond appropriately.

Visit the Community Resilience to Foreign Interference Hub for further information on managing gifts, funding and donations.

Example 3 – Pressure to support certain views

A young professional is offered mentoring and networking opportunities through an organisation connected to a foreign state. The programme helps them build new skills, expand their professional network, and access career development opportunities.

Over time, organisers begin encouraging the young professional to promote certain views by sharing information on their social media platforms and avoid discussing topics that may be seen as critical of that government. While these suggestions are made informally, rather than being directly required or enforced, the young professional notices that those who support these views receive more opportunities, while those who express different opinions are overlooked or excluded from some activities. As a result, they start to avoid certain topics and adjust what they say to fit in, concerned that speaking out could affect future opportunities.

Mentoring, networking, and professional development opportunities are often legitimate and beneficial. However, if you feel pressure to support certain views or avoid certain topics, it is important to ask yourself why. Pressure like this can make people feel they need to stay silent or agree with certain views in order to maintain access to opportunities or relationships.

Additional examples

Additional examples of foreign interference can be found on the Community Resilience to Foreign Interference Hub.