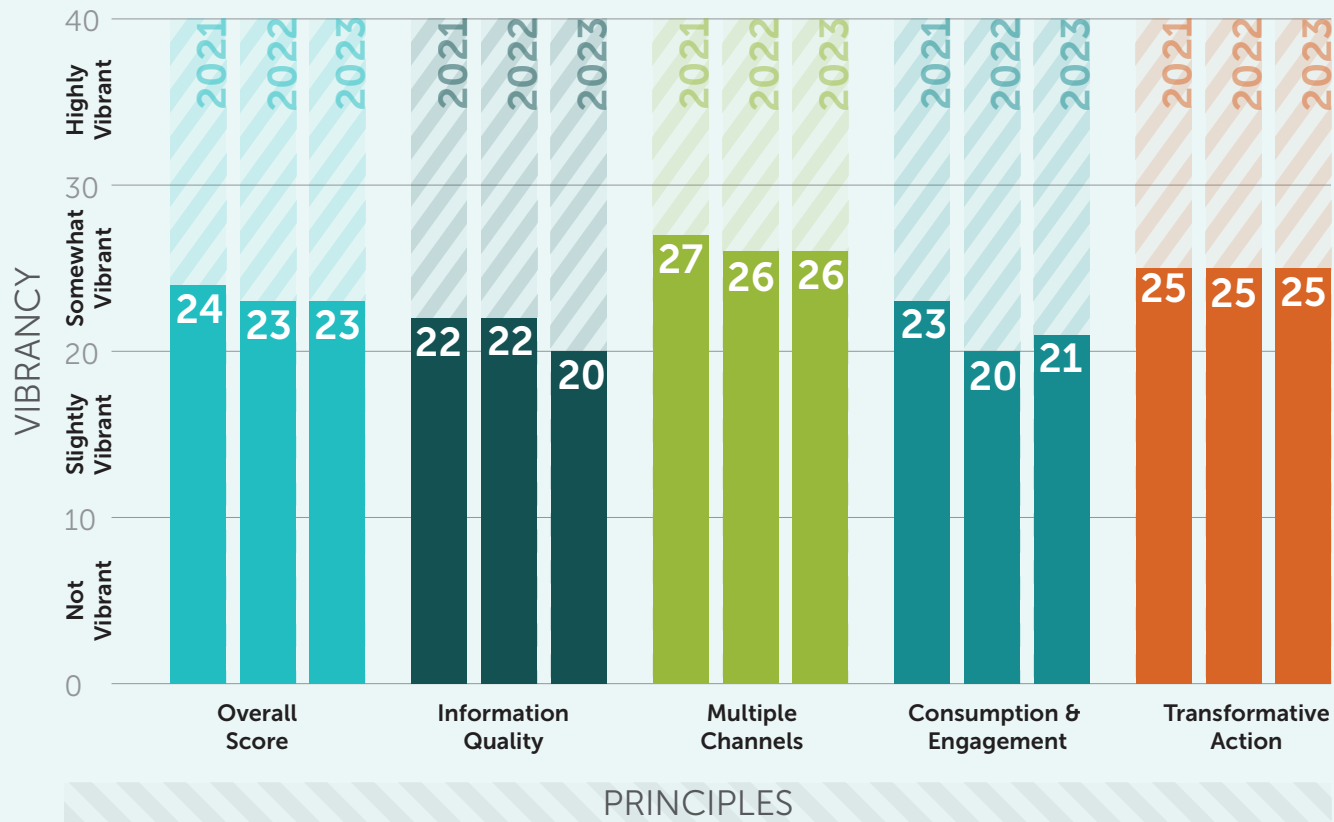


KOSOVO

Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 3





Highly Vibrant (31-40): Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.

Somewhat Vibrant (21-30): Quality information is available in this country and most of it is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Most people have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information, although some do not. Most people recognize and reject misinformation, although some do not.

Slightly Vibrant (11-20): Quality information is available on a few topics or geographies in this country, but not all. While some information is editorially independent, there is still a significant amount of misinformation, malinformation, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.

Not Vibrant (0-10): Quality information is extremely limited in this country. The vast majority of it is not editorially independent, not based on facts, or it is intended to harm. People do not have the rights, means, or capacity to access a wide range of information; they do not recognize or reject misinformation; and they cannot or do not make choices on what types of information they want to engage with.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

23

Like other countries in the region, Kosovo in 2022 was buffeted by the effects of the war in Ukraine, including higher energy prices and general inflation, and a new pool of refugees in Europe. Kosovo was among the first countries to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and it welcomed displaced Ukrainians. The government hosted some journalists from the country, providing them with housing, money, and other assistance. To ease the pain of inflation, and some lingering effects of the pandemic, the government implemented various fiscal packages.

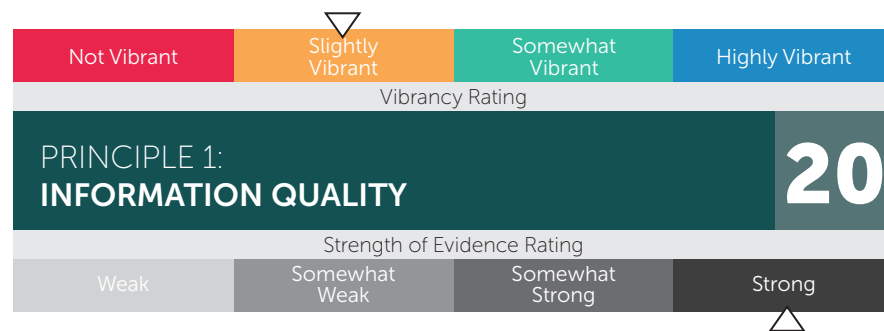
A dialogue brokered by the European Union to normalize relations between Kosovo and Serbia continued without any final agreement. The political situation in Kosovo remained stable, with the Vetevendosje Party firmly in control of Parliament. The European Union (EU) observers continue to cite Kosovo's extensive informal economy and corruption and the weak rule of law as the main obstacles to the country's development and, ultimately, accession to the EU.

Regarding media development, the newly constituted board of the public broadcaster, Radio Television of Kosovo (RTK), named a new general director for a three-year mandate. Local and international monitoring organizations have seen both processes as transparent and based on merit. RTK is chronically underfunded and, like most media in Kosovo, not financially self-sustaining, making it susceptible to political and business influence.

According to a public opinion survey conducted by the National Democratic Institute, television stations are considered one of the most reliable sources of

information by most of Kosovo's population, with 74 percent expressing trust in them. Additionally, social media platforms are an important source of information for young people in Kosovo: 48 percent of young ethnic Albanians and 24 percent of young Serbs get information from them each day, although trust in them is fairly low. Also less trusted are news websites and radio, although young Serbs tend to put more faith in them than young Albanians.

The overall country score for Kosovo for VIBE 2023 remains at 23. The score for Principle 1 (information flow) dropped from last year's study, indicating that there is still concern about the limited infrastructure for receiving quality content and financial instability for various media outlets. The score for Principle 3 (information consumption and engagement) saw a one-point increase, as the freedom of expression and access to information is exercised without consequence. The scores for Principles 2 (how information flows) and 4 (transformative action) stayed the same at 26 and 25, respectively, showing that people exercise their rights to create, share, and consume information and that civil society produces credible information to improve their communities.



An area of concern for Kosovo is the limited infrastructure for receiving quality news content, as broadcasting has not yet gone digital and the cable industry is monopolized. The indicators focusing on quality information along with the inclusivity and diversity of content received the highest scores, indicating that information is published in different formats and languages (the public broadcaster has an obligation to produce some of its content in minority languages). However, there is still underrepresentation of women, children, and marginalized groups in Kosovo's media. The indicator with the lowest score in Principle 1 is Indicator 5, highlighting the financial instability within media companies and the vulnerability of journalists working without permanent employment contracts. Media outlets depend heavily on advertising and sponsorships to finance their content, thus leaving them to struggle on securing alternative funding.

Indicator 1: There is quality information on a variety of topics available.

Kosovo media has the infrastructure and technology to produce quality news content across different formats. The infrastructure to receive it, however, is limited because broadcasting still has not gone digital, leaving viewers to subscribe to cable providers to access the country's three national channels. At the same time, the cable industry is becoming monopolized, and the Independent Media Commission, which regulates the broadcast industry, and other monitoring bodies have done little to stop this process. Kosovo has had no print newspapers

since 2020, and Kosovo Serbs have not had any print media since 2008.

There are training programs available for content producers, mainly organized with the help of donors and occasionally journalists' associations, but senior journalists and managers show little interest. Journalism education maintains an outdated focus on theory rather than practice. The educational system does not yet promote critical thinking.

Content producers are not always ethical or accountable and do not always respect facts or strive to present the truth. Only a few media outlets in the country follow ethical standards and inform their readers when they make corrections on facts. Many online media outlets work without editors, and national media outlets do not have fact-checkers or legal experts to review content.

In Kosovo, there are rarely any consequences for media that make mistakes because of a lack of media education, the fragile rule of law, and the weakness of regulators. Television media hew to the rules more than other types of media, largely because audio-visual media are regulated by the Independent Media Commission, which can impose fines for breaches of their code of ethics. In contrast, written media are self-regulated. Kosovo law provides for professional sanctions and consequences for disseminating inaccurate information, but court delays and the ineffectiveness of the media regulator, especially in monitoring, allow producers to avoid punishment.

Most media content in the country focuses on politics rather than policy or contextual reporting. Coverage of economic and social issues and critical reporting on government policies get short shrift. Debates on television have replaced informative and critical journalism, leading to a lack of public discourse on important issues.

The current government in Kosovo is less open with the media, making it harder for journalists to hold it accountable. The news mainly covers political developments in Prishtina, with very little coverage of local events. The media covers regional and international events, but it is mainly news taken and translated from foreign media agencies.

Some media outlets maintain editorial independence. Online journalism is dominated by sensationalized news constructed from individual quotes, often lacking context, explanation, and diverse sources. A high turnover among journalists in Kosovo results in reporting that lacks context and detail. Additionally, the common tendency to rely on anonymous sources erodes public trust in journalism.

Indicator 2: The norm for information is that content is based on facts. Misinformation is minimal.

Most content in Kosovo is usually fact-based, but it is not always well-sourced and objective. Misinformation in Kosovo is less often a question of facts and more often a function of how news is constructed and interpreted, especially by nonprofessional news producers. The public often must gather information from multiple sources and decide for themselves where the closest “truth” lies. There has been a decline in fact-checking and reporting on facts in many media outlets in Kosovo, and some consistently and knowingly publish false statements from politicians. Similar situations occur with other information, especially material translated from the Serbian language and foreign sources of information.

Professional content producers generally do not intentionally create or spread false or misleading information in Kosovo, but others sometimes use their platforms to do so, especially during debates with analysts or politicians, whose claims pass unchecked by debate moderators or are not challenged later.

With limited resources to verify information, such as fact-checking or legal review, journalists face a tide of false information on social media and struggle to uphold standards. The law against defamation and insult targets those who disseminate false information, yet few journalists and information portals are held accountable for doing so, even as the problem grows.

Nonprofessional content producers generally put out a high rate of false or misleading information. Kosovo is considered to be at high risk of foreign influence, especially from Serbia and Russia, and its information

space is awash in inaccurate and misleading content.

The government does not intentionally spread false information, but its lack of transparency and habit of releasing little information feed misinformation. Politicians are often accused of spreading false information or misinterpreting data.

The professional consequences for creating or sharing false information are minimal, as courts have been slow to address such cases. The Independent Media Commission has not established an effective monitoring mechanism, and the nongovernmental Press Council of Kosovo can name and shame but cannot levy financial penalties or shut down outlets.

Journalists seek to hold the government accountable by asking questions, attending press conferences, and confronting politicians with their statements, though it is easier for the major media in Prishtina than for less influential regional outlets, and journalists lack the capacity for oversight of all functions of government.

There are reliable fact-checking resources available, including the new Hibrid.info platform, in addition to third-party fact-checkers for Facebook and other domestic platforms certified by the International Fact-Checking Network. The other digital platforms besides Facebook (like Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, etc.) do not have fact-checking mechanisms to review and remove false content in the Albanian language.

Indicator 3: The norm for information is that content is not intended to harm. Mal-information and hate speech are minimal.

The pervasiveness of hate speech, especially in politics, is well-documented in Kosovo. The country’s people hear it every day in the news, in television debates, at protests, and on social media.

The conflict in Ukraine has led to an uptick in slanted and unverified news from Russia and Serbia. This mal-information has had a significant impact, especially in the predominantly Serbian northern part of Kosovo.

But it is also often translated into Albanian and makes its way into online media that is read by most people in Kosovo.

There was a general agreement among the panelists that the government does not create or spread harmful content, such as hate speech, although some politicians do. During 2022, for example, the Association of Journalists of Kosovo reacted several times to protest the attack campaigns of advisors to the prime minister and at least two members of Parliament. This was included as a concern in the European Commission's report for Kosovo in 2022. Government officials who promote hate speech might be pressured to apologize or resign and face a loss of credibility or elections. But there are some individual politicians who represent the main ethnic groups, who in some cases, spread hate speech. Professional content producers are careful not to create or spread harmful content such as mal-information or hate speech, as this is a criminal offense. Some might, however, produce sensationalistic content that may contain mal-information to attract clicks. This practice is common in online journalism, but there are generally no significant consequences for journalists or media outlets. The Nacionale news website, for example, faced a public backlash after reporting false information about a shooting in the northern part of Kosovo and subsequently apologized.

Nonprofessional content producers often promote hate speech and incite hateful comments to increase their audience. Hate speech is prevalent in user-generated content on social media, and the perpetrators usually elude punishment due to the difficulties in investigating cybercrime. Although hundreds of incidents of hate speech are reported annually, fewer than 10 cases are initiated by prosecutors.

Many media outlets in Kosovo have codes of ethics, and some have banned comments on their websites. However, according to Kreshnik Gashi, managing director of kallxo.com, comments have not been banned on social networks, where most hate speech is spread. Only a few media have set filters for certain words in comment sections, and very few edit comments on Facebook or Instagram. According to

Flutura Kusari, a media lawyer, mal-information and hate speech is present online, and it seems that it originates mainly from social media rather than from established media outlets. Topics around religion and domestic violence attract and generate hate speech against specific groups, with women often being the main target. However, there is no evidence to prove that nongovernmental actors engage in coordinating the production and dissemination of mal-information or any type of dangerous speech.

Indicator 4: The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse.

Most media content in Kosovo is in the Albanian language, with limited content available in other languages. The multichannel RTK is the only public broadcaster in Kosovo, and it is working to fulfill its legal obligation to provide programming in the languages of minority communities. According to the Law on Radio Television of Kosovo, RTK 1 is obliged to share 15 percent of its program schedule with the languages of other communities. RTK 2 is in the Serbian language but has the same obligation as RTK 1 to produce 15 percent of its programming in minority languages. However, many media outlets are monoethnic and tend to report on problems faced by their own communities to the exclusion of others. Most government ministries produce information in only the Albanian language, with little or no translation into Serbian or other languages.

Women, children, minorities, and marginalized groups are underrepresented in Kosovo's media. Online media have not developed diverse formats to inform people. Explanatory journalism, podcasts, and visual storytelling are scarce for complex stories. Reports about women are limited to cases of domestic violence, while LGBTIQ+ topics are often reported in an inflammatory and unprofessional way. Content contains different perspectives, but often they are based on opinions rather than expertise, knowledge, and facts, and are of questionable

“Kosovo has had no print newspapers since 2020, and Kosovo Serbs have not had any print media since 2008.”

value. Marginalized groups struggle to access mainstream media and are usually relegated to shows or media with smaller audiences. The media focus mainly on political news, at the expense of social, cultural, or regional coverage. Men dominate the content produced, and marginalized groups turn to social media as an alternative platform to express their views.

Likewise, Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities rarely appear in media coverage or even represent themselves in discussions or debates on their circumstances. Most often, they are portrayed only within the framework of poverty or other stereotypical or prejudiced depictions, rather than exploring how and why institutions continue to fail to integrate or offer equal opportunities in society.

Media owners are mostly men, while editorial staff have a better gender balance. As for nonprofessional content producers, there is not much information or data about their gender and ethnic composition.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Media companies are not financially stable, and most journalists do not have permanent employment contracts, making them vulnerable to the whims of those who own their media outlets and testing their commitment to quality work. The media rely primarily on financing from businesses and international donors, as government funds are not allocated to media. Cable systems, dominated by two companies, pay little or nothing for the rights to carry domestic channels.

Professional content producers are struggling to find alternative funding streams as traditional sources of revenue such as subscriptions dry up. Media outlets rely on advertising and sponsorships to finance their content--which threatens editorial independence in the form of favorable reporting--especially when these sponsorships come from government institutions or big businesses that thrive from government contracts. One panelist, Brikenda Rexhepi, editor-in-chief of Kohavision,

mentioned that her media employer had at least one case in 2022 when one of the biggest private banks withdrew an advertisement when it did not like a news report.

According to Goran Avramović, editor-in-chief of RTV Kim, independent media in the Serbian language are project-financed, with little income from marketing, and some have closed as a result. Furthermore, as Gashi noted, advertising revenues have decreased as advertising moves to social networks and other platforms. Since Kosovo's public broadcasting law mandates that government advertising be broadcast at no

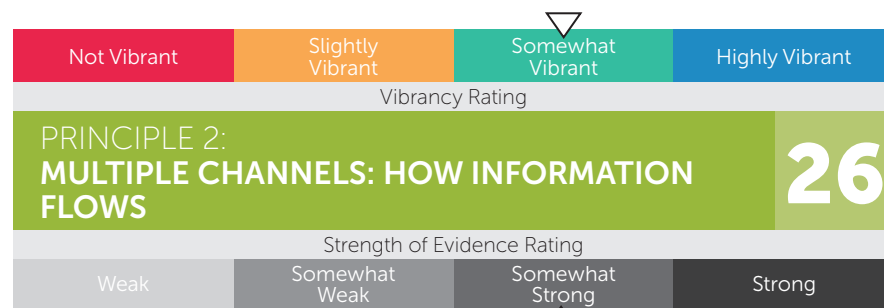
additional cost, the government advertises exclusively on the public broadcaster, exacerbating the dearth of advertising revenue for private media.

The lack of government subsidies has resulted in a financial crisis for some

media, making them more vulnerable. According to Gashi, some media companies have been sold to big businesses with foreign ownership, especially from Albania. In addition, the ethnic-Serb audience is influenced by content from Serbia, while the ethnic-Albanian audience turns to programs produced in Albania and North Macedonia.

While some media executives and editors earn up to €6,000 (\$6,500) per month, journalists are paid as little as €300 (\$325), making them financially vulnerable. According to Kusari, while television channels pay policy analysts around €200 (\$215) for a single debate appearance, they do not make the same investment to increase the quality of information or pay journalists better salaries. Many journalists end up leaving the profession by the age of 30 in order to support themselves and their families.

“ The current government in Kosovo is less open with the media, making it harder for journalists to hold it accountable.



Kosovo has a strong legal framework supporting free media and expression; however, panelists expressed concerns about the implementation and enforcement of these laws. Issues such as government restrictions on access to information, public pressure on journalists, and strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP) were identified. Of the Principle 2 indicators, the one examining access to information channels received the highest score, as internet access and technology infrastructure are widespread in Kosovo. However, the lowest-scored indicator was on the independence of information channels, reflecting concerns about some media organizations' ownership and funding influencing editorial content--as well as perceived political influence on the Independent Media Commission.

Indicator 6: People have rights to create, share and consume information.

Kosovo has an advanced legal framework for free media and expression, but implementation and enforcement are lacking. The laws are uniformly applied, except in some enclaves where the country's institutions have not been able to assert their sovereignty. Notably, the northern part of Kosovo remains outside the control of Kosovo's institutions, and law enforcement agencies have a limited presence in this territory. There is no evidence of government efforts to legally restrict freedom of speech, but the government lacks transparency and restricts access to information. It tends to cooperate more with international media outlets than with domestic ones.

The government does not censor media, but officials retaliate against those they do not like by not taking part in television debates, not responding when asked for comments, and not calling on certain journalists during press conferences. According to Kusari, attempts to censor media tend to take the form of public pressure on journalists and verbal attacks. For example, Fitore Pacolli, a MP from the ruling party, made an open call during her speech in Kosovo's Parliament in July for direct intervention by the government of Kosovo to control the media, which prompted a reaction from Association of Journalists of Kosovo.¹ More often, people who have served in different positions in the ruling party, Vetevendosje, or in public institutions appointed by the party, often pick certain journalists to attack.²

Some journalists and activists have faced SLAPP lawsuits as a means to suppress criticism, as the government has not yet implemented the EU's recommendations against them.

The government does not pressure information and communications technology providers to censor media, although self-censorship is widespread. Whether from financial dependence, political bias, or low standards, some journalists and editors steer clear of sensitive topics, especially corruption and crime.

Journalists and media outlets are often the targets of hate speech or other attacks by social media groups that aim to discredit them; one example of this is the Facebook page "meKryeministrin," which has around 27,000 members and frequently attacks media outlets and journalists that criticize the government. Journalists are not imprisoned, fined, or killed for doing their work, but members of the ruling Vetevendosje Party lob verbal attacks at some media and journalists and freeze them out of coverage.

1 "AJK AND PCK Concerned with MP Pacolli's Narrative Toward Media," Association of Journalists of Kosovo. July 14, 2022. <https://agk-ks.org/en/news/agk-ja-dhe-kmshk-ja-e-shqetesuar-me-fjalimin-kunder-mediave-te-deputetes-fitore-pacolli/>.

2 "AGK Condemns the Continuous Attacks of Power Exponents on the Media," Association of Journalists of Kosovo. September 3, 2022. <https://agk-ks.org/en/news/agk-ja-denon-sulmet-e-vazhdueshme-te-eksponteve-te-pushtetit-ndaj-mediave/>.

The confidentiality of sources is protected by law, except when a court determines it could pose “a serious threat to physical integrity which could lead to the death of one or more persons.”³ Laws protect journalists and others from persecution for their opinions or news coverage. However, there is an increase in SLAPP lawsuits aiming to threaten journalists or critics. According to Kusari, “Koha journalist Saranda Ramaj has 10 lawsuits with damages totaling about €1 million (\$1.74 million). Because they attack journalists individually and not the media company, instead of dealing with investigative stories journalists have to deal with courts.”

Indicator 7: People have adequate access to channels of information.

The information and communications technology infrastructure in Kosovo meets the information needs of most people, but there are still challenges and limitations. The low level of digital literacy among journalists and the public, for example, leaves them vulnerable to online risks and threats. Additionally, the government is unable to provide sufficient digital protection to its citizens due to weak institutional capacity.

Access to information and technology is widespread in Kosovo, where more than 97 percent of households have access to the internet. As a result, citizens have access to various information channels, but misinformation spreads easily in the country.

Most people can afford access to most information channels, including radio, television, newspapers or magazines, and digital or social media. However, Kosovo has lagged in the switch to digital broadcasting, frustrating efforts for more diverse and widely distributed channels. Many residents are forced to pay a

cable operator for access to various television channels, which is a hardship for some. According to Ardita Zejnullahu, executive director of the Association of Kosovo Private Electronic Media, since the issue of media concentration and ownership is not regulated and over 90 percent of the audience receives television signals through cable operators, it is crucial to digitize the transmission through terrestrial frequencies. This would enable the provision of free-to-air television signals for the audience. The digitalization of transmission frequencies is an obligation that Kosovo has failed to implement over the years and is extremely important, especially at this time when there is a permanent risk of monopolization of the cable operator sector.

Certain communities or groups of people—including women, people with disabilities, communities in certain geographic areas, or ethnic, racial, or religious minorities—face challenges accessing information due to social norms or other barriers. For example, members of communities who do not speak the dominant language and those with disabilities face accessibility or language barriers. In addition, Avramović said that media in Serb-dominated northern Kosovo that are not aligned with

“The government does not censor media, but officials retaliate against those they do not like by not taking part in television debates, not responding when asked for comments, and not calling on certain journalists during press conferences.”

the Srpska Lista, the political party which holds power in four municipalities in that region, have trouble with their broadcast signal there, while those under the direct control of the region’s dominant Srpska Lista do not face this issue. Kosovo’s public broadcaster, which has a program in the Serbian language, does not have a signal in the north, because none of the cable carriers that operate in that part of the territory include RTK.

Internet governance and regulation of the digital space in Kosovo provide open and equal access to users and content producers. People have access to various communications technologies, including television, phone, internet, and radio, so they are not blacked out by an outage in one particular device. The country has widespread coverage with 3G and 4G networks.

3 Law on the Protection of Journalism Sources, Article 5, <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=8864>

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

Kosovo has laws establishing people’s right to public information that are in line with international standards and norms. However, implementation is spotty, and responses are often slow and incomplete. While this lack of response applies to journalists, civil society organizations, businesses, and citizens seeking information, it particularly hinders the work of media outlets, which rely on accurate and timely information. The government operates in a culture of opacity, and some officials wage an ongoing effort to sideline the Information and Privacy Agency, which oversees the freedom of information law.

With the appointment of a commissioner for information, the agency has facilitated access to public information, and there has been progress in building access standards. But in the long run, these reforms could overwhelm the agency with cases. The government has not yet fully embraced the concept of open data, and some information continues to be inaccessible on the internet. For governmental communication, the Serbian-Albanian language barrier complicates the law’s implementation, particularly for institutions directed by one or the other language community. The public can freely access court decisions, public contracts, budget expenditures, and listings of politicians’ assets. Journalists, civil society activists, and experts use these open data platforms in their work, but there is not much information to indicate that they are used by the general public.

The public does not seem to fear seeking out government information, and no groups are systematically excluded from exercising their right to information, but Kosovo Serbs often avoid seeking information from the government out of a lack of trust.

Otherwise, panelists generally believe that government spokespeople are considered a reliable source. However, the capacity of institutions to communicate information is still not ideal and fraught with delays, and

“**The government does not pressure information and communications technology providers to censor media, although self-censorship is widespread.**”

panelists agreed that the government’s many spokespeople and press contacts do not communicate much with journalists or even answer their questions.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Kosovo lacks a law requiring the disclosure of media owners, and its prohibition on media consolidation lacks teeth. There is a need for transparency in media ownership, editorial boards, and finances. Even though the Independent Media Commission requires ownership disclosure, most media and cable carriers disclose only the names of contact persons or managing directors, not the owners. Media also must register as businesses at the Business Registration Agency, where they are obliged to disclose ownership and capital—but even there, true ownership details are easily obscured.

The Independent Media Commission has been drafting regulations for several years, but for now, media can be registered by one person or company but bankrolled by someone else. Moreover, as Abit Hoxha, a media researcher and consultant, observed, “Ownership exists on paper for most media, but web sites do not include their ownership information..” Current regulations that allow cable operators to enter into exclusive agreements with television companies have contributed to the dominance of a few cable companies. The Independent Media Commission has not granted new licenses for national broadcasting transmitters, which have exclusive rights to transmit analog signals across the whole territory, and current national license holders—some granted licenses more than two decades ago—are not subject to relicensing.

The public service media’s educational programming is inadequate and outdated. Public media has suffered a credibility loss throughout the years by giving more coverage and favoring political parties in power, even though 2021 brought some positive developments, with a new

governing board and general director. There is no evidence that internet service providers do not treat all communication channels equally.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

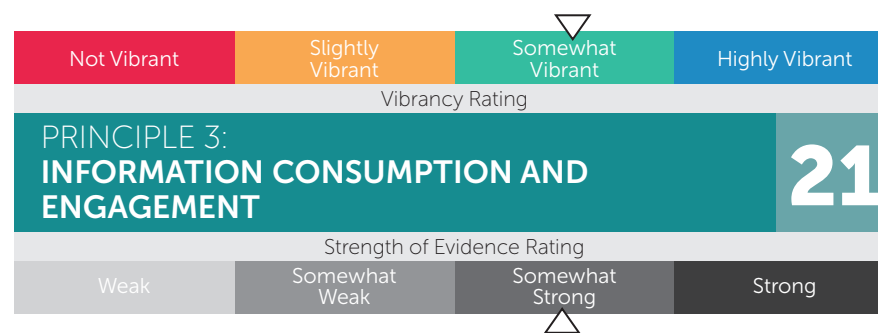
The country's information channels are not completely independent, as ownership and funding of media organizations play a significant role in shaping their editorial stances. There is a blurring of lines between newsroom and business operations, with some media's editorial stances dictated by their owners' political affiliations.

Still, a few media organizations uphold professional standards and aim to put the interests of the public over their own fortunes. Such is the case with Koha Group, which owns koha.net (news portal), KTV television, and *Koha Ditore* (a newspaper that is now published only digitally).

The government neither subsidizes nor advertises in private media. Private media see this as unfair treatment, as public media receive direct support from the budget but still compete with other media outlets for advertising placements from businesses.

There are also concerns about the independence of the Independent Media Commission, whose members are appointed by Parliament to allocate frequencies and licenses and to oversee telecommunications services. While efforts are being made to depoliticize this body, it is still perceived as politically influenced.

The independence of information channels in the country is a complex issue, shaped by a range of factors including ownership structure, funding sources, and political affiliations. The situation requires closer attention and efforts to ensure that the media can be a source of impartial and trustworthy information for the public.



Although Kosovo has legal protections for data privacy, there is a lack of a cybersecurity strategy, and journalists and other stakeholders have limited knowledge about digital security. The lowest scored indicator of all four principles was on media literacy, as the panelists noted weak media literacy education, with critical thinking not being emphasized in the country's education system. Freedom of expression and access to information are generally exercised without adverse consequences, with social media being the most preferred for free expression. Local media outlets report on community issues and serve as a source of information for larger media outlets, even though, they face resource constraints.

Indicator 11: People can safely use the internet due to adequate privacy protections and security tools.

Kosovo has legal protections for data privacy, but no cybersecurity strategy and little defense against cyberattacks. The country's journalists, policymakers, and citizens understand little about digital security. RTK, Kosovo's public broadcaster, has weathered occasional cyberattacks but has been able to respond quickly. The appointment of a commissioner for information and privacy has strengthened the implementation of the law on personal data protection, which, however, does not cover online activities or the internet in general.

Only some media outlets have taken steps to secure their websites, while most use digital tools to prevent and mitigate Distributed Denial-of-Service (DDoS) attacks. Media organizations' digital hygiene practices

are wanting, and they are just starting to become aware of the dangers of the digital world. Cyberattacks on media websites are not rare and can cause interruptions in their work. Law enforcement agencies have not had the institutional capacity to investigate cyberattacks against media outlets.

According to Avramović, although some digital security training has been organized for media professionals, journalists consider this to be more relevant for information technology professionals and do not take advantage of the opportunities. Younger and middle-aged people generally have the necessary skills to protect themselves digitally and are aware of the algorithms that drive what they see on social media, but this is not the case for older or less-educated people.

Indicator 12: People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate

The government encourages media literacy but mainly relies on civil society to foster it. Critical thinking is not emphasized in the education system, and this deficiency is reflected among some media workers too. Media and information literacy are not included in school curricula, although computer/digital literacy is. There are no information and media literacy programs aimed at developing critical thinking skills.

There is a lack of general knowledge in society about how social media uses user data and promotes certain content through algorithms. There is no national strategy for media education, although foreign donors support various programs. They are not necessarily coordinated, though, and can lack long-term goals. In recent years, two fact-checking tools and websites, kallxo.com and hibrid.info, have been established to help people debunk or expose disinformation. Hibrid.info is a project of the Action for Democratic Society nongovernmental organization, while kallxo.com, an anti-corruption reporting portal of Balkan Investigative and Reporting Network (BIRN), recently joined the International Fact-Checking Network, an international alliance of fact-checkers, and is part

Cyberattacks on media websites are not rare and can cause interruptions in their work.

of a Meta program to verify Facebook and Instagram posts.⁴

Individuals can usually distinguish between high-quality and poor-quality news, but there are a number of remaining challenges in media literacy education and news verification.

Indicator 13: People productively engage with the information that is available to them

In Kosovo, journalists and civil society activists exercise their freedom of expression and right to information without negative consequences. While there are some public debate platforms—such as television talk shows, or various roundtables—they are often dominated by the same circle of people, typically men. Social media is the public’s preferred platform for free expression and debate, although social networks are often riddled with hate speech and disinformation spread for political gain or because of differing ethnic, gender, and sexual views.

Kosovo’s constitution guarantees the right to express, distribute, and receive ideas and other messages without obstacles, but some people are not aware of their right to expression because of the limited public discussion forums.

Still, a majority of people watch and trust television stations, more than online news portals. Public opinion research shows that Kosovo’s citizens are not fully educated on identifying information disorders. As cited

in a 2022 NDI report on information integrity in Kosovo, “On a scale from 1 to 5, they evaluate that the education system has prepared them to do so at an average score of 2.9. They also find it somewhat difficult to distinguish false narratives from true information.”⁵

4 Vllahiu, Emirjeta. “Crypometer Will Verify the Facts of publications on Facebook and Instagram,” Internews Kosovo. July 5, 2022. <https://kallxo.com/gjate/krypometri-do-te-verifikoje-faktet-e-publikimeve-ne-facebook-dhe-instagram/>.

5 *Information Integrity in Kosovo*, NDI. July 2022. <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Information%20Integrity%20in%20Kosovo%20-%20Assessment%20of%20the%20Political%20Economy%20of%20Disinformation.pdf>.

Indicator 14: Media and information producers engage with their audiences needs

The media generally have an important role in informing, educating, and cultivating societal tastes, and there are examples of good collaboration between the media and the audience, especially when reporting on cases of injustice. However, Kosovo's media lack the digital tools to understand their audiences' needs. There is no independent, qualitative research aimed at understanding audiences and only limited quantitative research aimed at measuring engagement. Because of the lack of digitalization, there is also no quality audience measurement for television. Media Metri, a service offered by the private survey company UBO Consulting, conducts audience measurement for interested television stations. However, this is very limited since it measures data only for 400 families/receivers.

Some media outlets use tools such as Google Analytics or hire someone to do the analytics for them. This makes it difficult to assess how much media organizations consider their potential audiences' demands or interests. Still, a comparison of an annual survey about the issues people say are most important to them and what the media actually cover shows a disconnect. In the United Nations Development Program's Public Pulse report, people typically name their economic and social well-being as their top concerns, while the media focus on politics and politicians. The homogeneous coverage of media also ignores specific groups in society and their diverse needs and interests. Most of the media have removed comments section from their websites, and they do not filter or moderate comments on their official Facebook pages.

While there is transparency in media authorship, especially for media regulated by the Independent Media Commission, there is not much community engagement or consistent publishing of corrections.

Independent media and civil society organizations (CSOs) work well together and generally value each other's opinions and feedback, and there are positive examples of media outlets striving to cover the work of

CSOs adequately and publish CSO reactions on key issues; for example, media outlets published CSO concerns regarding the recruitment processes for the CEOs of key public utility companies.⁶

Indicator 15: Community media provides information relevant for community engagement

A few media outlets in Kosovo can be considered community media, with specific content for marginalized groups. These include media organizations that focus on women's rights and equal participation in society, such as QIKA (the Center for Information, Critique, and Action), Grazeta, and Dylberizmi, which advocates for the LGBTQ+ community. These organizations provide essential information targeted to their constituencies that is otherwise missing in mainstream media. They have been particularly active in reporting on gender-based violence and femicide, and their coverage has helped to build public pressure and raise awareness of these issues.

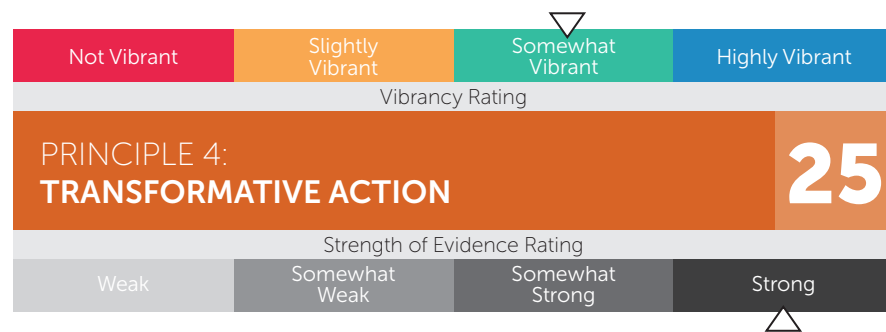
While community media is relatively easy to establish and register, it is generally not self-sustaining. These outlets often rely on funding from political, business, or development groups, which can undermine community trust.

Local media outlets, including websites and radio stations, mainly report on issues concerning local communities and often serve as a source of information for larger media outlets at that level. But they are short on funds, staff, and expertise, and as a result might put out little or subpar content. There are no community initiatives to support local and community media through financial aid or volunteer work in the country.

The public broadcaster RTK does cover ethnic communities in Kosovo, providing them with daily news and weekly programs on various topics.

“The government encourages media literacy but mainly relies on civil society to foster it.”

⁶ “Civil Society Reacts in Relation to the Recruitment Processes of the Chief Executive Officer in the Public Enterprises ‘Termokos’ Sh.A. and ‘Ibër Lepenc’ Sh.A.,” *Ekonomia Online*. January 13, 2023. <https://ekonomiaonline.com/shoqeria-civile-reagon-ne-lidhje-me-proceset-rekrutuese-te-kryeshfit-ekzekutiv-ne-ndermarjet-publike-termokos-sh-a-dhe-iber-lepenc-sh-a/>.



Mainstream nonpartisan news and information sources exist in Kosovo and citizens read and watch various media sources; however, the lack of media literacy and critical thinking skills contribute to the spread of misinformation and disinformation. The indicator on civil society’s use of quality information received a score higher than all other indicators in this year’s Kosovo study, highlighting the strong role of civil society organizations in producing credible information and fighting against misinformation. Media and CSOs play a crucial role in exposing corruption and human rights violations, prompting government action in some cases.

Indicator 16: Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.

Mainstream nonpartisan news and information sources exist in Kosovo, but they are not always appreciated by audiences that sometimes veer toward outlets that report the news first over those that prioritize careful, accurate reporting. Additionally, polarized, politically biased media have led to polarized audiences and heated exchanges on both traditional and digital platforms. Despite ideological differences, people in Kosovo read and watch various media sources and participate in exchanging information with those they disagree with.

“The public is active online through comments, but online freedom of speech is tested by verbal attacks from supporters of the ruling party against critics.”

Radio and online media elicit the most public feedback through call-ins and comments. Besa Luci, editor-in-chief of Kosovo 2.0, observed, “Discussions also often occur in social media around links for news articles but rarely amount to constructive and analytical debates. Instead, these platforms are often littered with insults, hate speech, and corrosive arguments.”

The public is active online through comments, but online freedom of speech is tested by verbal attacks from supporters of the ruling party against critics. Despite differing ideologies, audiences read and watch various types of media to understand the opinions of other parties on an issue. People participate in exchanging information through social media, where they are more likely to get an immediate response.

Avramovic stated, “For the Serb community, the exchange of opinions through digital platforms only works well if it is anonymous and is often defined by hate speech and the usage of vulgar terms.” Information censorship and control by media outlets are prevalent in the Serb community.

Indicator 17: Individuals use quality information to inform their actions.

Quality information, as opposed to mal-information or disinformation, plays a critical role in shaping people’s views on political or social issues. But the lack of media literacy and critical thinking skills can

contribute to the spread of misinformation and disinformation, discouraging citizen feedback, cooperation with media, and trust in media. Despite the low level of media literacy, and even in the face of biased reporting and misinformation, people made decisions based on quality information during the last national and

local elections. However, according to Zejnullahu, “There are cases where disinformation and misleading information promoted mainly by Serbian media targeting the Serb population in Kosovo have eroded democratic traditions.”

During the COVID-19 pandemic, misinformation and disinformation helped shape people's behavior. While some people follow fact-based health and safety recommendations, others are susceptible to conspiracy theories. According to a USAID-supported poll published in April 2021, one-third of Kosovars believe in false COVID-19-related narratives.⁷ But despite this, Kosovo has the highest vaccination rate in the region,⁸ demonstrating that media, government, and civil society consistently made an effort to spread accurate health information and to combat misinformation.

Government agencies hold few press conferences, and officials rarely have any back-and-forth with civil society and the press.

Indicator 18: Civil society uses quality information to improve their communities.

CSOs are a strong pillar of Kosovan society, producing credible information that is trusted by the public. These groups also play an important role in fighting against misinformation and disinformation. Their work, however, is often covered only superficially by mainstream media, and their experts are not sufficiently represented in television debates. Independent media, in contrast, tend to follow the work and research of CSOs closely. Citizen participation in the decision-making processes is mainly facilitated through CSOs; there is little direct involvement of citizens in public consultations.

Indicator 19: Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions.

Government agencies hold few press conferences, and officials rarely have any back-and-forth with civil society and the press, although the government has an online platform, launched in 2018, to take comments and other feedback from the public and civil society groups. When the government does release information, it is generally accurate. Partly as a

result of this information vacuum, media and political debates are full of speculation instead of facts.

Public discourse is heavily influenced by fake news and misinformation, and politicians often rely on inaccurate information, citing online portals.

The panelists said some government officials cite reputable news media or information from civil society when explaining their decisions if it suits their interests. However, these sources are sometimes used incorrectly or in bad faith.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic norms.

In Kosovo's plodding fight against corruption, the government and justice system do not always act on media or civil society revelations of wrongdoing—although when police, prosecutors, and courts do take action, it is usually only after journalists report on an issue.

Watchdogs in the media have made the government and public officials more circumspect. According to Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, Kosovo has made progress in fighting corruption, getting its best score since 2012.⁹

Media and CSOs' work on corruption, especially by monitoring and publishing documents that expose corrupt affairs, has steadily reduced opportunities for malfeasance. For example, reports on corruption in the Health Insurance Fund led to the suspension of the fund's director and, shortly afterward, the resignation of the health minister. Starting in May 2022, journalist Saranda Ramaj from the Koha Group, wrote extensively about how the funds were misused.

Panelists agreed that quality information, particularly from media and CSOs, has prompted government action to address human rights

7 *Kosovo Public Opinion Poll*, USAID and NDI. April 2021. <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Kosovo%20Public%20Opinion%20Poll%20-%20April%202021.pdf>.

8 *Balkan Barometer*, RCC. 2022. <https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/results/2/public>.

9 Isufi, Antigonë. "Kosovo's Rise in Transparency's Corruption Index Welcomed," Prishtina Insight. January 25, 2022. <https://prishtinainsight.com/kosovos-rise-in-transparencys-corruption-index-welcomed/>.

violations. For example, after an 11-year-old girl was sexually assaulted by a group of men in a Prishtina park, media reports and pressure from activists led to the ouster of the Kosovo police chief and pushed the government to propose tougher consequences for those committing sexual assault. However, it seems that more needs to be done to fully address human rights violations by the national and local-level governments. The European Commission’s yearly evaluation report for Kosovo states that “the government’s capacity to streamline and oversee fundamental rights policies and legislation requires improvement, including in coordinating the mechanisms to protect human rights, gender equality and non-majority communities, at both central and local levels.”¹⁰

Continuous public pressure on the media to provide quality information has elevated the quality of elections and decision-making, contributing to ensuring free and fair elections at the national and local levels. GAP Institute’s platform for monitoring mayors’ promises and reporting on the fulfillment of those pledges provides an example: There were approximately 22,000 visits to the site during 2022, while during the 2021 election season there were around 21,000 visitors in September and October alone.¹¹

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10 *Kosovo 2022 Report*, European Commission. October 12, 2022. <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/Kosovo%20Report%202022.pdf>.

11 “Promises of Mayors of Municipalities given during the 2021 local election campaign,” GAP Institute, 2022. <https://www.komunat.institutigap.org/Premtimet>.

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