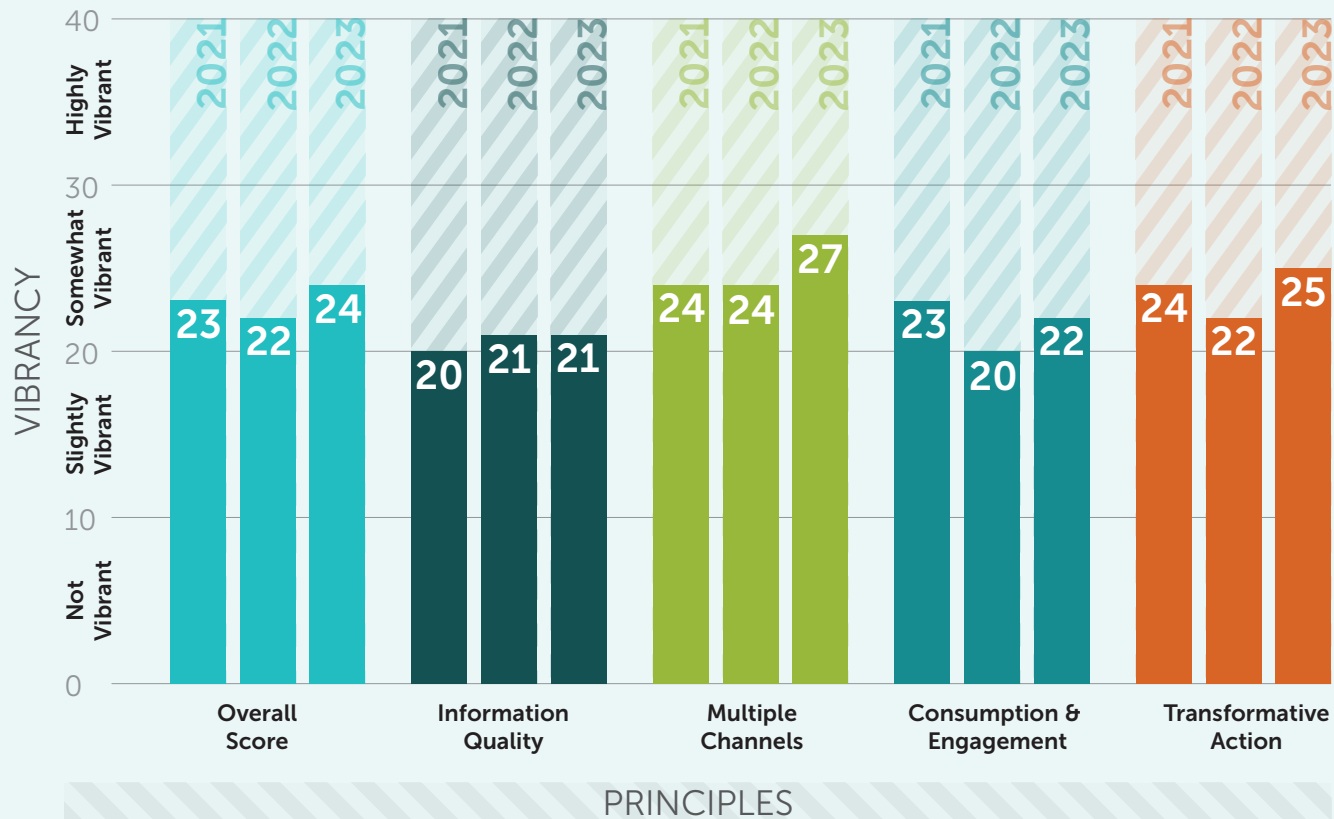


MOLDOVA

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

24

With ongoing economic problems, an energy crisis, high inflation, and an influx of refugees resulting from the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Moldova's social, political, and economic situation in Moldova became tense in 2022, and the media's resource-related issues worsened. Russia reduced gas supplies to Moldova by 30 percent in October 2022, then by 40 percent in November 2022, shortly before a barrage of Russian attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure knocked out electricity across Moldova.

These circumstances dominated the government's agenda, to the detriment of long-term development priorities, including those directed to the media sector. Since February 2022, the Moldovan parliament has banned rebroadcasts of Russian TV news and political shows. However, Moscow-backed opposition forces went to great lengths to further destabilize the sociopolitical situation through staged protests and partisan media, which exploited grievances over energy prices and the economic crisis.

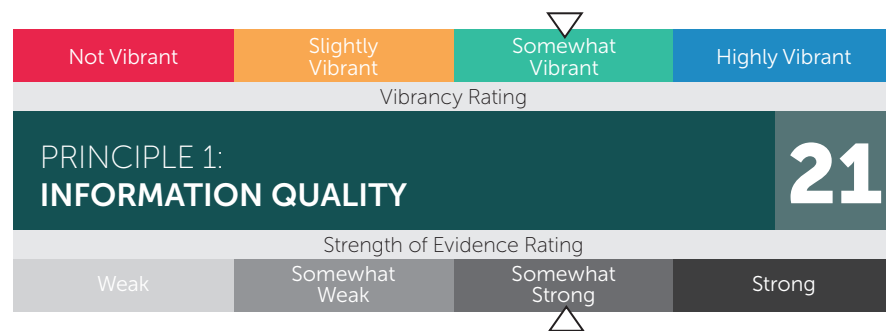
Nevertheless, 2022 also brought some opportunities. The European Union (EU) in June granted EU candidate status to the Republic of Moldova, along with Ukraine.

Moldova's overall country score of 24 is up by two points from the 2022 study. Principle 2, covering multiple channels and how information flows, is up three points from the previous year. Panelists attribute this increase to satisfactory infrastructure and positive laws guaranteeing

free speech. However, improper implementation of access to information laws remain a major gap. Rampant propaganda efforts and poor financial sustainability in independent media, and a reduced resilience of the population to misinformation, prevented panelists from giving high marks to the Principle 1 (information quality).

Although the score of 22 for Principle 3 covering information consumption and engagement improved slightly, panelists also observed poor media literacy among the general population, unhealthy debates on social media platforms, and a lack of awareness and knowledge of digital security.

The score for Principle 4 on transformative action increased by three points compared with last year. The government slightly improved its cooperation with Moldovan civil society, which is working to build healthy democratic processes. Panelists doubted, however, the consistency of government communications, and they observed that Moldovans did not base their decisions or actions on high-quality information. Additionally, the number of registered civil society organizations (CSOs) in Moldova rose during 2022. Almost 400 new CSOs were registered throughout the year, bringing the total number in the nation to 12,456.



Information quality scored the lowest of all VIBE principles for Moldova. The fourth indicator, measuring diversity, received the highest score, while Indicator 5, examining financial sustainability, scored the lowest. Moldovan society is flooded with a variety of information streams, and while nonpartisan media try to provide reliable information, politically controlled television stations and many media operating on social networks and websites do not. Despite the government's efforts, pro-Kremlin propaganda as well as hate speech were widely spread to the population. Pro-Russian political forces fueled the spread of misinformation, mal-information and hate speech. The war in Ukraine, the ongoing economic crisis, and high inflation in Moldova perpetuated the media's numerous resource-related issues.

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

Overall, regional, national, and international news is available and accessible. However, consumers have difficulty finding national coverage for local news, observed panelist Evghenii Ceban, a journalist at online portal NewsMaker.

The panelists agreed two main media groups exist in Moldova: those that produce quality content in accordance with professional standards and, by far the larger group, those that produce an abundance of content in an unethical and irresponsible way. Poor quality information is produced and disseminated predominantly online by nonprofessional

content producers. Panelists noted that journalists are held responsible for unethical and unprofessional reporting via formal procedures and citizen complaints. Several pointed out that the state-run Audiovisual Council, which since the end of 2021 has had new management as part of government reforms, is now stricter about objectivity and balance in the media. For example, in December 2022, the government suspended the licenses of six TV channels over accusations of misinformation and inaccurate coverage of Russia's war in Ukraine, according to reporting by Euronews. The six outlets were previously sanctioned 74 times by the Audiovisual Council for violating an article of the Audiovisual Media Services Code: truthfulness of reporting. Panelist Natalia Porubin, journalist and member of the Press Council of Moldova, said the self-regulatory authority body always responds to complaints. But media outlets and journalists, including those who are among the 145 signatories of the nation's Journalist's Code of Ethics, do not always accept its recommendations.

The media tend to act as a watchdog for the government with no fear of facing economic or political pressure from those they criticize. The panelists agreed that many journalists who are critical of the government are often aligned with opposition circles, and their priorities do not include professional journalism practices. Panelist Ion Bunduchi, executive director of the Association of Electronic Press, added that some journalists prefer to avoid conflict with the authorities for their own comfort.

News and events are contextualized in Moldova's media, but in very different ways. Independent media puts news in context as a service to the audience to facilitate understanding, while politically affiliated media often use context to manipulate the audience.

Moldova's infrastructure allows for the production of varied media content, as evidenced by the large number of media outlets operating in Moldova. Nevertheless, quality content is relatively rare, and it reaches a relatively small audience. Print media issues, such as poor conditions of service and high costs of newsprint, remain unsolved. According to Bunduchi, the war in Ukraine has had a negative impact on print media's infrastructure. He referenced the [case](#) of the *Ziarul de Gardă* (Guardian

newspaper), which faced a 35 percent increase in the price of paper because newsprint could no longer be imported through Ukraine.

Training opportunities for journalists are available, primarily through non-governmental programs and public or private journalism departments, but the entire training system remains uncoordinated and largely concentrated in the capital. Editor-in-chief of Radio Chişinău, Vasile State, noted that the nation's university journalism education quality is not up to modern standards. "In some cases, the graduates lack basic professional skills, and this implies additional training efforts [are needed] from the newsrooms." The panelists agreed that NGOs are designing their training opportunities to meet the needs of journalists. Iurie Sanduța, manager of the investigative journalist project, RISE Moldova, noted that following security issues generated by the war in Ukraine, journalists could access training on physical and digital security during wartime or in "exceptional" situations. Access to training opportunities in the Transnistrian region, a separatist area between the Dniester River and the Ukrainian border that broke away from Moldova in 1990, diminished once Russian experts who previously conducted trainings for journalists there reduced their programs," said Journalist A, panelist from the aforementioned region who wished to remain anonymous.

Media content covers a range of topics, mostly on political and social issues and less so on specialized and thematic reporting, according to panelist Alina Andronache, journalist and blogger. However, online media now largely provide diverse and niche information to smaller audiences with different interests and needs. Sanduța explained that the limits to covering a diverse number of topics is due to limited newsroom human resources.

The September 2022 protests demanding the resignation of the country's pro-Western government and led by pro-Russian opposition leader, Ilan Shor, dominated the agenda of a large number of opposition media critical of government officials in 2022. The war in Ukraine was omnipresent in the public discourse, especially during the first half of

the year. However, some of media used so-called "ostrich tactics"¹ to mitigate risks during coverage, as illustrated in [a cartoon published by Media Azi](#) independent journalism platform. A November 2022 monitoring report by the Association of Electronic Press (APEL) showed that several television stations with pro-Russian sympathies did not broadcast any news regarding the Ukrainian conflict.

In the breakaway Transnistrian region, the main body of content includes information covering the news from the region itself and lacks sufficient national news. "The overall body of content in the Transnistrian rarely and superficially covers issues on human rights, and the spectrum of international news is narrowed to [occurrences] in Russia," said Journalist A.

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

The panelists considered strongly that recent events, such as the war in Ukraine and battles between the nation's political parties, fueled the spread of inaccurate information in the media. "The narratives about refugees threatening national security, NATO pursuing military training in Moldova, and Moldovans' recruitment were intensively covered on some online platforms, in particular on the Telegram [messaging app]," said State. Traditional media rarely published fake news, but they are prone to a politicized or distorted interpretation of obvious facts, he added.

"There are cases when independent media also publish misleading information, and this happens because they lack fact-checking resources," said Slava Perunov, the director of *SP* regional newspaper in Balti, while Ceban noted that "the pursuit of sensational news and the strive to publish it first," is another reason.

The Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia (ATUG), is a region of Moldova populated by the Gagauz people, who are primarily Orthodox Turkish-speaking. "Responsibility for abuses of the freedom of information lies primarily with the unregulated internet as oligarchic

¹ Deliberately omitting or downplaying coverage of the war to avoid appearing unfavorable to the pro-Russian parties they support.

media and their ‘toxic functions’ have moved online,” expressed Journalist B, from Gagauzia, who wished to remain anonymous. Telegram and TikTok are now key channels for Russian and oligarchic disinformation, especially by agents of the pro-Russian Shor party, spreading synchronized narratives. Slick, new pro-Russian platforms, such as Morari News and Morari Life on [Facebook](#) and [YouTube](#) also have emerged, set up by Natalia Morari, a former frontline pro-European journalist who switched camps in 2022.

Moldovan authorities have made positive efforts to mitigate disinformation, the panelists emphasized. In February 2022, authorities of the Chişinău capital city government created a new information source on Telegram group, the [Prima Sursă \(First Source\) channel](#) which helps to minimize the impact of information that could create panic or incite hatred, according to Sanduța. In addition, the Security and Intelligence Service of Moldova (SIS), blocked several web sites that incite violence and hatred or promote war, such as sputnik.md and gagauznews.md. However, these efforts were not effective because some of the restricted portals created mirror websites under other domains, noted Porubin. In June 2022, the Moldovan parliament amended audiovisual legislation to probe news and analysis broadcasts from Russia, including after the expiration of a state of emergency declared after the start of the Ukraine war.

Moldovan politicians also spread false and misleading information, panelists stated. After the former president, Igor Dodon, posted fake information on Facebook about the government’s intention to implement a program promoting LGBTQ rights in schools, which supposedly would “destroy the family and faith,” many online media and television stations circulated this fake news, trying to make it seem as though the program was requested by the European Union. Vasile State referenced a monitoring report by APEL, showing that RTR Moldova covered this fake news topic three days in a row, between November 8-10, 2022, in the main newscast of the day. Journalist A from the Transnistria region said that local professional content producers

“” **The media tend to act as a watchdog for the government with no fear of facing economic or political pressure from those they criticize.**

are prone to spread disinformation because they are under the control of pro-Kremlin local authorities. For example, TCB television--owned by Sheriff LLC, a pro-Russia business conglomerate based in Tiraspol--informed its audience that a “new Moldovan law allows the prosecution of any Transnistrian,” and spreads egregious instances of fake news.

The panelists agreed that reliable fact-checking resources, such as StopFals.md and Mediacritica.md, exist but they are few and do not reach audiences well. “Media newsrooms lack the professional and financial capacities to fact-check to avoid circulating false and misleading information or to moderate the comments section,” said Sanduța. According to Perunov, some biased content producers hire people, so-called “trolls”, to write provocative or offensive comments to increase website traffic.

The Press Council of Moldova is the only self-regulatory body that deals with audience complaints on errant reporting, but its rulings are only opinions with no legal weight. Ruslan Mihalevschi, a member of Moldova’s Audiovisual Council, noted that those targeted by the Press Council for breaching journalistic standards rarely face a negative reaction from the audience.

Indicator 3: The norm for information is that content is not intended to harm.

Nearly all panelists agreed that the Moldovan government does not create or disseminate content that is intended to harm. Ceban noted that some politicians are prone to spread hatred and disinformation toward certain minority groups, but these are isolated, minor incidents that do not indicate the existence of a general policy of promoting inequality. Several panelists mentioned that participants at the protests organized in September 2022 mounted by the

Moscow-backed opposition forces and the political bloggers of the Shor party spread hate-speech content. Journalist B, from Gagauzia, claimed some of the local politicians, usually sharing pro-Russian leanings,

promoted false information about the war in Ukraine that incited hatred and sought to divide society.

The panelists unanimously agreed that Russia is the preeminent foreign government that actively promotes misinformation, especially through its high-ranking representatives: the Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, the Russian embassy, and the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, Mikhail Galuzin, who warned about the “reckless pumping of Moldova with Western weapons, and urged Chişinău not to “repeat the sad experience of Kiev,” referring to the Ukraine War.

Justification and promotion of the war took place through political and religious rhetoric, and also by using banned Russian army symbols, or new ones, and fake news about the oppression of Russian-speaking citizens in Moldova. Several panelists noted the Moldovan government’s efforts to ease tensions in the situation, including by debunking false information spread by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as mentioned in a news article reporting on how The Official Representative of the Moldovan Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, Daniel Voda, called his colleagues from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs not to “stage and perform false topics.”

In addition to hate speech and intolerant messages generated by foreign actors, the media environment included mal-information generated by local political and religious leaders. A good part of the media –including professional, partisan, and nonprofessional content producers–proliferated pro-Kremlin classic narratives, such as “Russia defends orthodoxy and true values and traditions and the West tramples them,” or “Russia fights Ukrainian fascists.” “The narratives hit fertile ground,” said Bunduchi, who referenced the Public Opinion Barometer survey of November 2022, which showed 32 percent of Moldovans justified Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. Perunov referenced the cases of the Russian newspapers, *Комсомольская Правда*/(Komsomol Truth) and *Аргументы и Факты*/(Arguments and Facts), which published materials

that incite hatred, and the false claims about the “oppression of Russian-speaking citizens in Moldova.”

The 2022 study by the Promo-LEX non-governmental organization, “Hate Speech and Incitement to Discrimination,” shows 83 cases of hate speech and other forms of intolerance in Moldova were identified during the first two months following the start of the war in Ukraine in February. Thirty-two percent of the total examples were identified in print and online media and 26 percent in mobile apps, with the rest divided between TV channels, social media, and public events. The most common categories of hate speech were nationality, professional activity, and ethnic origin. The report also found Moldova’s legislative framework was inadequate to stop the spread.

In the Transnistrian region, social networks abound with misinformation inciting hostility between the Moldovans living in the territory under the control of the legitimate authorities and those living in the breakaway region—as well as between the supporters of Ukraine and Russia. “This has not been seen to lead to any significant consequences for content producers,” said Journalist A.

While self-regulatory mechanisms to reduce hate speech exist on social media and websites, the “legal framework lacks mechanisms that allow the effective prevention and sanctioning of hate speech and mal-information,” noted Andronache. Since February 24, 2022, when the Moldovan Parliament declared a state of emergency at the start of the war in Ukraine, which has been repeatedly prolonged, the Commission for Emergency Situations (CES) became the body responsible for taking measures, including to prevent the spread of hate speech and war propaganda. The panelists agreed that CES’s February 2022 decision to forbid the retransmission of news programs originated in Russia, as well as the decision of the SIS to block several websites that incited to violence and hatred, helped to diminish the spread of misinformation. Buduchi said that no evidence exists showing that hate speech is a

“The panelists unanimously agreed that Russia is the preeminent foreign government that actively promotes misinformation, especially through its high-ranking representatives.”

coordinated effort by non-governmental entities. On the contrary, the evidence exposes Russian government actors.

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

Overall, people have access to content in the language they speak or prefer as Moldovan media offer news and information sources in Romanian and Russian, the second-most commonly used language. Several publications are available for linguistic minorities such as the Roma and Gagauz people. Ukrainian, the mother tongue of Moldova's largest ethnic minority, is not present except for the fragments broadcast by the Moldova 1 public media service provider. This is largely related to audience demand. "In particular, Gagauz and Ukrainians in Moldova consume content in Russian more often than in their native languages," explained Mihalevschi.

Print media generating content in Russian lacks independent professional news. "Except for *Komsomol Truth* and *Arguments and Facts* (Russian newspapers), there is not a single independent newspaper with nationwide distribution that would meet the needs of the Russian-speaking population, usually over the age of 60," said Perunov. In the Transnistrian breakaway region, people have access to information created mostly in Russian. "Moldovan" (Romanian) and Ukrainian, which are recognized as official languages by the separatist Transnistrian authorities, are extremely rare. Journalist B, from Gagauzia, said content producers there mostly use Russian as the primary language, although the main public broadcaster does provide information in Gagauz and Romanian.

Panelists agreed that people with hearing impairments have limited access to news content. According to Porubin, except for the public broadcaster, national television outlets do not provide any newscast subtitled or interpreted in sign language, as required by law.

In general, Moldova's information space contains a wide range of opinions and ideological views. Vice-director of Jurnal TV, Cristina Pohilenco, mentioned that her outlet has a separate program within its

news journals that focuses on covering minorities in Moldova. However, the 2022 report, "Evaluation of Mass Media from the Perspective of Diversity and Social Inclusion," by the NGO Association of Independent Press, shows that marginalized groups in Moldova are not sufficiently represented in the mainstream media, and content dedicated to minorities is rare. "On the other hand, the general public opinion is not progressive and does not create demand for such content," said Ceban. The groups whose viewpoints are excluded from mainstream media turn to social media or online platforms to express or defend themselves. In the Transnistrian region, opinions and ideological views other than those of the ruling elite are not welcome. Critical statements often result in negative consequences, said Journalist A, from the breakaway region.

The panel was divided on whether media is sufficiently gender-balanced. Some panelists believe female staff is underrepresented in managerial or top level positions, while other panelists said they saw no major problems in that respect. According to Sanduța, there is a growing tendency among media outlets to adopt internal regulations that ensures an equal representation of men and women among staff. Several panelists noted that after Moldovan authorities updated the official document classifying occupations in the nation, journalists began using more frequently the feminine forms for functions and professions while writing their materials.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Content producers have limited financial resources to operate and to produce high quality content. The war in Ukraine, the ongoing economic crisis, and high inflation in Moldova has worsened these resource-related issues. Mihalevschi said that four TV channels ceased their licensure in 2022 due to financial problems.

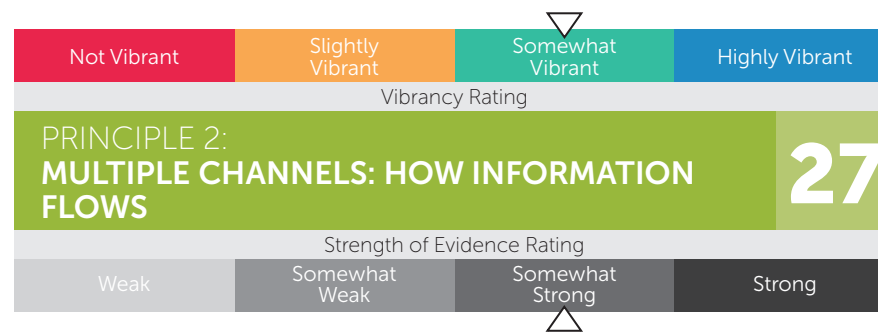
Panelists noted that media content producers have no options for apolitical public funding streams that would financially help them. Most independent media rely on international donor support. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, signs emerged that the old oligarchic media is declining due to money shortages, owners abroad, and the disappearance of older practices that pumped money from state

corporations, particularly through advertising.

The income level of independent journalists and other media professionals is generally low, with the lowest salaries among employees of state-owned media. Several independent media outlets have tried to diversify their funding sources through PayPal, Steady, and Patreon subscription services. Bunduchi pointed to the example of the Agora.md newsportal, which sells Quote T-shirts through its online store. “However, these uncommon practices proved to be unsuccessful, both because there is no tradition in Moldova to become media donors and because the country is the poorest in Europe,” Perunov claimed, “People here think more about their daily bread than about helping some media or NGOs.”

Panelists agreed that advertising placements remain politicized. “No regional television is included in the national system of measuring audience ratings, which reduces their contracting chances,” said State. Advertising revenues for all traditional media decreased significantly as advertisers shifted their focus to social networks. Government subsidies go only to public media service providers, who also participate in the advertising market on an equal footing with private media. Several panelists noted that this tends to distort the market. Moldova’s very modest advertising market is concentrated in the capital, Chişinău.

The majority of professional content producers in the Transnistrian region are financed from the public budget. “Private media financing is underdeveloped and insufficient, except for the media owned by the Sheriff holding company,” Journalist A said.



Moldova has good laws protecting speech and press freedoms, but access to information remains spotty. The regulations against media concentration are weak while access to information laws lack proper implementation. Panelists gave their highest marks to Indicator 7, for people’s adequate access to channels of information; they gave lowest marks to Indicator 10, on the independence of information channels. The state does not openly censor the media, although panelists noted several attempts of Gagauzian legislators to undermine the freedom of the press in that region.

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

Existing legislation guarantees freedom of expression and media freedom, and, overall, the laws conform to international standards. The government makes no active attempts to erode freedom of speech and freedom of the press through legal or extralegal means, but the aggressive speech and policy of some opposition circles is visible. Several panelists pointed to the opposition’s criticism of the CES’s decision to suspend six TV channels over spreading Ukraine war disinformation. However, the international community has not weighed in on the alleged abuses. “Public opinion is divided between strong supporters, critics, and those who believe that the decision was necessary, but lacks sufficient motivation,” said Mihalevschi, citing a December 20, 2022 statement by Moldova’s Independent Journalism Center, “Media NGOs urge authorities to provide extensive explanations for the factual and legal circumstances justifying the CES Decision.”

Most panelists referenced the multiple attempts of the People's Assembly of Gagauzia, the representative and legislative body of the autonomous region, to undermine freedom of the press. The legislature issued two decisions impacting press freedoms: On May 26, 2022, it prohibited the media from covering LGBTQ+ topics; and on December 8, 2022, it set up arbitrary and abusive mechanisms for "accreditation" of the press. Several deputies of the People's Assembly also insulted and physically forced a journalist to leave the authority's public meeting, as indicated in a statement publicized by The Independent Journalism Center (IJC), the first non-governmental media organization in the Republic of Moldova.

“ In the Transnistrian region, self-censorship is common among journalists.”

Moldovan journalists were not arrested, imprisoned, or killed for doing their jobs in 2022. However, incidents involving physical assault and intimidation continue to be reported. In 2022, national media NGOs (including watchdog groups, professional associations, and free-speech advocates) were quick to issue public statements decrying these aggressions, as in the case of several journalists receiving murder threats from social network users. In addition, participants in a September rally organized by the pro-Russian Shor Party repeatedly assaulted at least two female journalists who were carrying out their mission to inform citizens about events of public interest. The employees of government institutions were also abusive. For example, on May 21, 2022, an employee of the Comrat City Hall threatened a journalist with reprisal, and on May 3, Press Freedom Day, an employee of Riscani Court violently blocked NordNews reporter Nicoleta Pinzaru's access to the building.

Several panelists noted that media professionals continued to be harassed through Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), which are brought by individuals and entities to dissuade their critics from continuing to produce negative publicity. Powerful individuals and companies contracting with the Moldovan government issue SLAPPs against investigative journalists. "Most of us cannot afford the luxury of having a permanent legal department, and a contracted lawyer involves a serious financial burden, in some cases – unbearable for the independent media," said Sanduța. He added that sometimes

media is reluctant to tackle topics about an individual who initiated lawsuits for being previously targeted in journalistic investigations. Panelists noted that self-censorship is more or less agreed upon and applied from the moment a journalist joins a media outlet that has certain political leanings.

In the Transnistrian region, self-censorship is common among journalists. "Media that does not depend on the government may practice self-censorship out of fear of reprisals. Covering sensitive topics can lead to "talks" between the KGB (Committee for State Security) and journalists lacking obedience," said Journalist A.

Laws protecting the confidentiality of sources are good and are applied fairly. Moldova has slander laws that make it a misdemeanor, which can be used to obstruct a journalist's freedom of speech. Pohilenco pointed to the July 26, 2022, case where Val Burner, managing director of Jurnal TV, was fined and banned from media employment for six months after a former employee of the Ministry of Interior targeted in an investigation filed a complaint with the police.

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

The information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure meets the information needs of most people. According to Moldovan digital researchers,² internet penetration is 76 percent. The panelists mentioned that higher internet penetration and usage correlates with the larger cities, younger ages, and higher levels of education and income. A 2022 report by the government's Circulation and Internet Audit Bureau shows Moldova has 1.8 million internet users, with almost equal representation of women and men. Age statistics shows that 29 percent of users are between 20 and 29 years old, 23 percent are between 30 and 39, and 22 percent are 50 or over. Also, 61 percent of users are found in

² Kemp, Simon. "Digital 2022: Moldova." DataReportal. February 16, 2022. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-moldova>.

urban areas and the remaining 39 percent in rural areas. The National Agency for Regulation in Electronic Communications and Information Technology data from 2022 shows that the share of Moldova subscribers using fixed high-speed internet services (through fiber optic connections) exceeded the 85 percent threshold.

The panelists said that in the event of a disruption to a telecommunications infrastructure, people have access to other information systems or devices. “When Moldova suffered an electricity blackout after Russian missile strikes on Ukraine, the citizens were able to access information through mobile internet,” Bunduchi explained. Moldova has no legal or social norms that preclude groups from access. As for affordability, several panelists commented that rural or poorer citizens of Moldova have far fewer options for access to ICT infrastructure. Perunov highlighted the problem in the regions bordering the Dniester River, where people can catch Russian, Ukrainian, or Transnistrian stations, but not programs broadcast from the capital, Chişinău. “Nevertheless, people with special needs struggle with accessibility,” said Andronache.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

As in previous years, the panelists reiterated that Moldova’s right-to-information laws are not sufficiently updated and lack proper implementation. Freedom House’s 2022 report, “Freedom of Information Index: Measuring Transparency of Public Institutions in Moldova,” shows a pessimistic situation in the country. Moldova’s legislation scored 22 points out of 40, while the categories “proactive transparency” and “access upon request” received 12 points out of 30.

The report also says that Moldovan legislation is generally compatible with the minimum standards of the Council of Europe’s Convention on Access to Official Documents, which entered into force only in late 2020. However, the panelists noted major shortcomings related to the regulation of fees for access to information, and weak standards

for proactive transparency. Bunduchi referenced the October 12, 2022, case of Bălţi Mayoralty, which hampered journalists’ work by illegally charging exaggeratedly high fees for access to public interest

“**The editorial policy of the state media in the Transnistrian region is a direct reflection of the authorities’ rhetoric,” said Journalist A from the region.**

information. Sanduța said in most cases, the authorities’ refusals to let journalists access information refer to personal data protection legislation. “RISE Moldova had to involve legal experts to draft repeated requests (two or three times) to the same authorities to provide legal arguments justifying the obligation to provide the

requested information,” he added. In 2022, Moldova’s National Center for the Protection of Personal Data published a new ruling targeting access to information and data protection. Porubin said that the document will worsen the situation.

Citizens have means to access governmental policy and decision making information through online platforms, either with relevant statistical information or with information about public consultations. The current government, for the first time, has a deputy prime minister for digitization, several panelists noted. The thousands of citizens who have completed online registration for gas compensation shows that the public knows how to gain access to government programs, according to Bunduchi. Citizens in the Balti municipality however, either do not know how or are afraid to seek information from the local authorities, said Perunov. “My *SP* newspaper receives an overwhelming number of requests from locals who ask us to submit their petitions to the authorities, thinking that a media institution may receive a response faster,” he added.

Moldovan government spokespeople have not yet gained the necessary authority and trust, according to Bunduchi. Several panelists said they have seen spokespersons refraining from sensitive questions from the press or even ignoring the inquiries. Sanduța noted that RISE Moldova has had positive experiences with the spokespersons of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Anticorruption Center, and the General Prosecutor’s Office.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

In general, media can be established freely in Moldova. The transparency or fairness of the TV license allocation process is no longer an issue due to the new Audiovisual Council that took office in 2021, said Pohilenco. There are laws regulating transparency in media ownership and anti-competitive practices, but they are applied unevenly, if at all. Although the law prohibits a single owner from holding more than two broadcast licenses, there are visible attempts to build a new media empire. “Major television stations, such as TV6, NTV Moldova, and Prime TV, are in the hands of political leaders. And two of the main pro-Russian television channels were allegedly transferred to an associate of the oligarch, Ilan Shor,” State pointed out.

Moldovan authorities’ efforts to prevent ownership concentration have been unsuccessful. Real owners circumvent the law through straw media shareholders, and the state has no compliance mechanisms. “In the case of other media institutions, like newspapers, magazines, and web portals owned by commercial companies or associations, we can identify the real beneficiaries at the Public Services Agency,” said Sanduta.

Nearly all panelists agreed that the national public service provider, which is still in the reformation process, provides sufficiently objective and impartial news, but lacks enough truly educational, new, or unique content. Sanduta noticed that Radio Moldova’s news office reached the finals of the National Journalistic Ethics and Deontology Award’s, 2022 edition. However, a December 20, 2022, report by the Center for Independent Journalism shows the public television channel, Moldova 1, tends to slightly favor the ruling party.

The laws enacted by the separatist authorities in the Transnistrian region lack regulations on media ownership and all influential media are under the control of Sheriff LLC, Journalist A said.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

The VIBE indicator measuring independence of information channels scored the lowest in this principle. The panelists were unanimous about

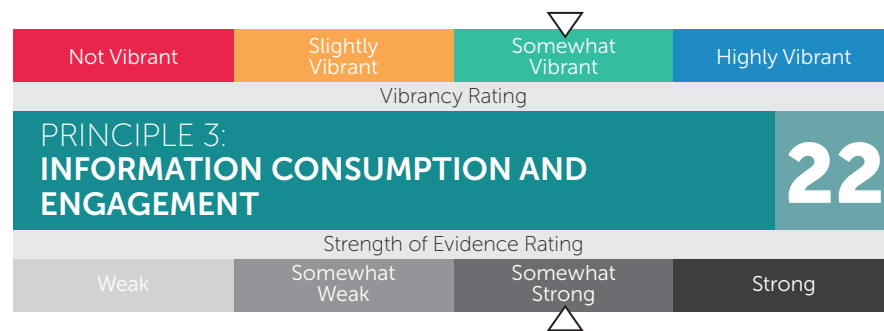
the lack of media independence, as media owner’s and advertiser’s political influences are obvious. They are also regularly engaged in the daily operations of their media outlets. “It is enough to watch a television newscast to realize who is behind the outlet,” said Journalist B from Gagauzia. “The editorial policy of the state media in the Transnistrian region is a direct reflection of the authorities’ rhetoric,” said Journalist A from the region.

As a rule, small media outlets cannot ensure a clear distinction between newsroom operations and business operations. “The reason is simple—lack of resources for sufficient staff,” said Bunduchi. It is common for one person to hold the positions of both general manager and editor-in-chief in online media and some national broadcasts, several panelists observed. State said there are few audiovisual content producers who are aware and understand the need to draw the line between editorial and commercial activity. “At a public consultation on a new audiovisual regulation, representatives of the top 10 television stations expressed their disagreement with the provision prohibiting news presenters’ involvement in advertising spots,” he added.

Moldova’s public broadcasting service historically has been underfunded. The national public media is apolitically funded as the law indicates exactly the budget it should have. However, the regional public broadcaster, Gagauziya Radio Televizionu (GRT) has a different financing mechanism, which exposes its political influence from the People’s Assembly of Gagauzia, the regional parliament. So far, no particular political interference has been observed by the panelists in the contents of the public service media. “However, the temptation of the politicians in power to intervene is great; in any case, that’s how it’s always been in Moldova,” said State.

The panelists noted that new members of the Audiovisual Council resuscitated the activity of the regulatory body. Panelists shared the general perception that since 2021, when the new board took office, the authority has seemed to be independent and politically neutral. Several panelists voiced their concerns about the changes to the Audiovisual Media Services legislation in 2021, providing the parliament more control over the Audiovisual Council. Since the dismissal of new

members depends on political actors, it undermines its independence, said Journalist B. State media does not have sole access to certain information, such as statistical policy data or government sources.



Overall, the panelists agreed that media and information literacy skills among Moldova’s citizens have not improved, giving the VIBE indicator examining media literacy the lowest score in this principle. Civil society continued to implement programs on media literacy while the state does not approach this issue systematically and on a nationwide scale. The general population lacks proper information on digital security and has a poor understanding of its importance. Although media tries to engage with the population’s needs, precarious financial sustainability reduces the chances of the independent newsrooms to research their audiences. Solid laws guard personal data protection in Moldova, but sometimes they are used as an excuse to deny requests for information. Cooperation between content producers and civil society is positive, although government officials seem to want no part of that relationship. Community media remain underdeveloped.

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

Panelists agreed that Moldova’s legislation ensures adequate personal data protection, but Perunov said authorities frequently do not comply with the law when examining access to information requests. “In the Balti municipality, the election commission provided us with information about the election results with anonymized names of the candidates,”

he noted. “After RISE Moldova published a journalistic investigation targeting politicians and drug trafficking organizations, an investigative officer illegally accessed my personal information data about my relatives and banking, and passed it on to a third party,” said Sanduta, adding that he filed a complaint with the National Center for Personal Data Protection.

Legal protections for digital security are insufficient. Moldova’s deputy prime minister in charge of digitalization said the country has been subjected to an “unprecedented” number of cyber-attacks since Russia’s invasion of neighboring Ukraine in late February, and that these attacks were not the work of “ordinary hackers.” State referred to the November 2022 case when the Telegram accounts of Moldovan President Maia Sandu and Deputy Prime Minister Andrei Spinu were hacked resulting in a potentially damaging leak of conversations. In addition to some official government websites, there were also attacks targeting media—a point confirmed by Sanduța, who reported several hackers’ attacks on RISE Moldova’s social network accounts.

There was common agreement among panelists that Moldovans lack basic digital security and data literacy skills. Media outlets have access to digital security training and tools, such as STEP IT Academy, NobleProg or Networking CISCO Academy, but Bunduchi commented that media with precarious budgets have limited access to these courses. “However, free courses are also organized at the expense of some NGOs,” he added.

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

Media literacy is at a very low level among ordinary citizens. The lack of critical thinking among adults remains one of the biggest problems concerning media in society, and the government showed no intention to address the situation through nationwide programs. “Overall, the youth can handle and be more resilient to misinformation,” observed State.

Panelists agreed that tools and websites for fact-checking or exposing disinformation are available, but they were unsure if people sufficiently

use them. “The increasing number of subscribers to *Ziadul de Garda*, the independent weekly newspaper, during a crisis represents proof that people prefer sources debunking and exposing disinformation,” said Bunduchi. However, Perunov commented that “survey data showing that a third of Moldovans are still zombified by pro-Russian propaganda is proof that most people do not use fact-checking tools.”

“The government leadership promotes media literacy only when it is ‘pressed’ by civil society,” said Bunduchi. He pointed to the December 8, 2022, case when the Independent Journalism Center, helped Moldova’s Ministry of Education and Research implement a [media literacy program in schools](#). However, information literacy classes are not mandatory. Authorities of the Gagauzia and Transnistrian regions do not promote media literacy. “The schools’ curriculum lacks media education or information literacy,” said Journalist A from Transnistrian.

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

Journalists and civil society activists make full use of their freedom of speech and rights to information without fear of reprisal. However, as discussed, the results of using the right to information remains uneven. The general population speaks freely, especially on social media. According to a 2022 [survey](#) by the Institute for Public Policy, more than 24 percent of the population feels to a great extent free to say what they want about the country’s leadership, while almost 17 percent do not feel free at all. The same report shows 55 percent of the population usually gets information from Moldovan television and radio; for the majority of respondents, the three main TV channels they watch for news and information are Jurnal TV, Moldova 1 and Pro TV, which are objective and fact-based, according to Bunduchi.

Moldova has different digital platforms for public discussion. “For example, between 2018 and 2022, IPN press agency held more than 270 debates on the most diverse topics of public interest,” said Perunov. State noted, however, that some mainstream media lack diversity in

terms of substance, topics and guests. “Sometimes, we see the same faces of the ‘permanent experts,’ announcing known news and talking about already discussed topics,” State noted.

The top three social networks where Moldovans prefer to get information are Facebook (61 percent), Instagram (24 percent), and Telegram (26 percent). These digital platforms, which were widely used especially during the first two months of the war in Ukraine, facilitated quick information flow, but they were also rife with misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech. “Consumers often prefer platforms characterized by poor quality information due to their own prejudices, low levels of media literacy, greater emotional impact of manipulative content,” said Mihalevschi.

Regular citizens rarely turn to the Press Council, Audiovisual Council, the Council for Prevention and Elimination of Discrimination and Ensuring Equality, and ombudsmen when they come across misinformation, mal-information, or hate speech. “There are no statistics, but if you were to gather the public data on citizens’ petitions to authorities, you would gather just several dozen in a year,” said Bunduchi. Several panelists pointed to a national NGO that assists citizens to report anonymously malicious content through its platform [T\(V\)E Privește](#).

Town hall meetings are relatively rare in Moldova, and authorities are prone to imposing restrictions on media or civil activities, such as abusive mechanisms for press accreditation, or decisions banning recordings and live transmissions.

Journalists and civil society activists from the Transnistrian region enjoy freedom of speech to a small extent. “For security reasons, they prefer to remain silent on certain sensitive topics, such as human rights or corruption,” said Journalist A. In September 2022, the first case appeared concerning a [conviction in Tiraspol for open criticism](#) of the Ukraine war. A civic activist from the Transnistrian region was sentenced to three years and two months in jail under allegations of “incitement to extremism.”

Media literacy is at a very low level among ordinary citizens.

Indicator 14: Media and information producers engage with their audience's needs.

Most media organizations do not study their audiences' needs or interests. "The situation is better with new, digital media, like websites, pages on social networks, and instant messaging, where there are free and effective tools for analyzing the audience," said Perunov. Panelists dispute the reliability of AGB Nielsen Media Research (AGB), one of the main companies measuring television ratings. "Some media professionals believe that the data they provide may be subject to manipulation in favor of individual players in the audiovisual market," said Mihalevschi. State noted that radio broadcasters rarely conduct audience surveys, while studies on audience needs and interests are nonexistent. In some [cases](#), television stations use [surveys](#) to compare their audience to [their] competitor, noticed Sanduta. The situation with audience rating measurements in Moldova remains problematic. Most television-, radio- and print media cannot economically bear the expensive costs.

Almost all news portals have open processes for audiences to provide feedback through online comments sections on their social network pages.

Transparency in authorship, corrections, and apologies are inherent to credible media only. Sanduța referenced several media that publish their financial reports, including TV8, NordNews portal, Cu Sens Portal and [RISE Moldova](#).

Cooperation and communication between media and civil society organizations (CSOs) with government institutions has always been a major problem in Moldova, and it continued in 2022, according to panelists. Cooperation is also difficult between journalistic entities. Bunduchi explained that Romanian-speaking and Russian-speaking media share different interests, as do public and private media or the media which is politically engaged or independent. State mentioned, however, the development of several draft laws targeting the media

sector as an example of an important effort to bring together different stakeholders.

Indicator 15: Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.

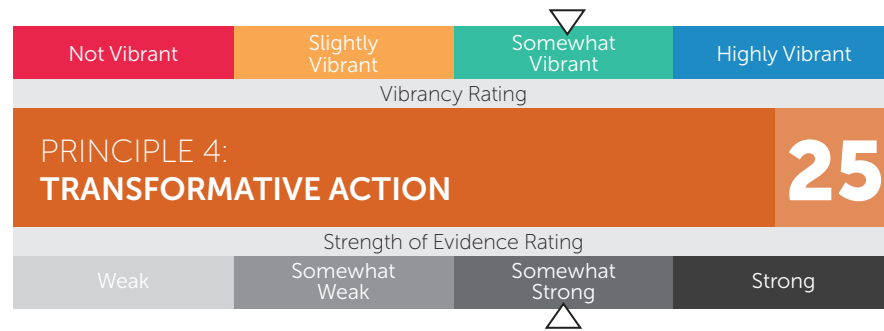
As in previous years, several panelists questioned the existence of community media in Moldova. "The national law defines the concept of community broadcasters, but formally there are no entities established as such," said State. "Nevertheless, there are regional and local television channels, radio, newspapers, and websites that [provide similar services] as community media. They produce content for minority ethnic groups or for certain marginalized communities," several panelists argued. Other panelists said that classic community media is financed by the

community, while the examples provided by their colleagues imply financing mechanisms specific to private media.

Bunduchi referenced the case of a [website](#) and a [Facebook page](#) from Ialoveni that hosts 24,000 members and provides information relevant to locals. Mihalevschi provided the example of Patrino Radio, a local station that broadcasts Roma-oriented content and gives voice to

the ethnic local community. Overall, those outlets perceived by the panelists as community media do not publish misinformation or mal-information. "Because they are closest to the community, they have very little chance of disseminating harmful content since the reaction of the audience immediately follows," said Journalist B from Gagauzia. The panelists agreed that Moldovans have no habit of supporting community independent media through donations or volunteering.

“Survey data showing that a third of Moldovans are still zombified by pro-Russian propaganda is proof that most people do not use fact-checking tools,” commented Slava Perunov, executive director of SP newspaper.



Moldova’s nonpartisan news and information sources can hardly compete with the politically controlled media and their large audiences. However, CSOs contribute to positive developments among different communities, and the VIBE indicator looking at civil society’s use of quality information received the highest scores within Principle 4. The Moldovan audience is polarized along ethno-national, linguistic and political party lines—and recently along opposing attitudes toward the war in Ukraine. People have enough platforms to exchange opposing viewpoints. Populism and demagoguery usually shape people’s views on political or social issues instead of quality information. While there were some positive events in 2023, a tie for the lowest score in this Principle was seen for the indicators looking at government use of quality information and information supporting good governance and democratic rights.

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

The media sector in the Republic of Moldova is divided between politically engaged media and independent media institutions producing high quality content—some of them with extensive audiences. New media have been established to provide quality journalism online. “The group of independents tends to lose competition to the group

of political affiliates, since the latter has more financial resources and showmanship; thus, fake news is more popular among the public than real news,” said State. Perunov added that the partisan media also allows “trolls” to flood the debate on social media, diverting the discussion from the real agenda of the people.

People engage with others with whom they disagree, mostly through digital forums such as social media platforms or comment sections. However, there are cases when commenters prefer anonymity, and critical messages are usually voiced behind nicknames. The Moldovan community has an undeveloped culture of debate, and the discussions are often toxic.

The data from Moldova’s Institute of Public Policy’s 2022 Public Opinion Survey showing citizens’ preferences regarding television, “reveal they consume nonpartisan news and information from the national broadcaster and several independent media, as well as information produced by politically affiliated TVs, such as NTV Moldova or TV6,” said Bunduchi.

“The Moldovan community has an undeveloped culture of debate, and the discussions are often toxic.”

The public consumes information from media in line with their ideological leanings, although some people seek out opposing views. Some panelists were worried about the six TV channels that were suspended in 2022 by the Commission for

Emergency Situations. “Although the suspensions over disinformation concern politically biased media, the question arises: To what extent [will] the voice of the opposition be heard now?” commented Mihalevschi. Under these conditions, leading national broadcasters, especially the public ones, play a key role in ensuring representation of all sides of the political spectrum.

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

The panelists referenced a series of alarming data, showing that Moldovans’ views are shaped by misinformation and propaganda

rather than by quality information. According to the 2022 [survey](#) by the Institute for Public Policy, the pro-Russian Socialist Party and Shor Party are among the top four parties enjoying the population's confidence; 45 percent blame President Sandu for higher energy and gas prices; almost 40 percent would vote for joining the Eurasian Economic Union, and almost 20 percent trust Russia's president among foreign political figures.

State said that populism and demagoguery have reached fertile ground. "Otherwise, it is impossible to explain how the former president, Igor Dodon, prosecuted for corruption and abuse of services, and the fugitive oligarch, Ilan Shor, [sentenced](#) by the first court to imprisonment for his role in a large-scale bank fraud, are on second and third places in the list of trust in politicians," he added.

Overall, people follow fact-based health and safety recommendations, but the pandemic showed how susceptible people are to conspiracy theories. In some cases, misinformation pushed people to act in a way that is detrimental to the public good. Several panelists referenced the protests organized by the Shor party and supported by the Socialist Party, but also the [reaction of the Gagauz people](#) to the banning of the St. George ribbon and to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

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

Panelists praised CSOs, as opposed to Moldova's many politically affiliated NGOs, considered "phony" organizations and religious associations, which are usually used by politicians as tax shells and useful tools in gaining political capital.

There was common agreement among panelists that CSOs share quality information with the public and rely on quality news, analysis, or research when explaining their missions and positions on public policies. "Civil society communities, in particular media NGOs, are actively countering mal-information and misinformation," said Sanduta.

Quality information may reduce the occurrence of human rights violations, but it is not the case in the Transnistrian region.

He also shared an observation that politically affiliated NGOs--such as the charity foundation, Din Suflet, led by the wife of former president, Igor Dodon, and the Miron Shor foundation led by the fugitive oligarch, Ilan Shor--disseminate biased information and engage in biased election campaigns. Journalist B, from Gagauzia, also mentioned the [case](#) of a journalist from that region who was intimidated by a pro-Russian organization from Chirsova, the "Brotherhood of the Cross."

Media outlets engage with CSOs to cover socially important issues. State said the cooperation between decision makers and CSOs has improved significantly with the pro-European government. "Let's not forget that many government agencies and departments have former representatives of CSOs among their members," he added. On the other hand, other panelists said the situation could use improvement. According to a 2022 [report](#) by the Promo-Lex organization, Moldova's parliament breached the procedures ensuring decision-making transparency in the case of 13 drafts out of the 16 debated in a single plenary session.

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

In meeting their legal requirement to be transparent in decision making, government officials engage with civil society and media through press briefings, official websites, and officials' social media pages. When there are sensitive topics on the agenda, politicians and officials [use briefings](#) instead of press conferences to avoid questions from journalists. The mechanisms for communication exist, but are used unevenly. "Many authorities, such as the Ministry of Education, rarely interact with society, if at all," said Bunduchi.

Some panelists commented that, overall, the political discourse of the government includes references to evidence and facts. "In any case, they follow their own agenda and do not necessarily pursue the interests of the general public," said State. According to Perunov, the

political discourse of the representatives of leftist pro-Russian parties often includes speculations and references to fake news spread on the internet.

In most cases, Moldovan government actors refer to facts and evidence in explaining their decisions, but communication needs to be improved. In a recent [case](#), media NGOs urged authorities to provide extensive explanations for the factual and legal circumstances justifying the decision to suspend six television stations.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

Because Moldovan authorities' reactions to media reports revealing corruption and other violations improved, the scores of this indicator increased by five points compared with last year's study. The panelists referenced several examples, such as the positive [reaction](#) of the General Police Inspectorate to an investigation by TV8 revealing the impressive real estate properties owned by the head of the Rîșcani Police Inspectorate. After RISE Moldova published information about the fraudulent allocation of several plots of land in the city, government [prosecutors](#) and the National Investigative Inspectorate carried out searches. Also, the National Integrity Authority initiated an [investigation](#) following the ZdG news report about a judge's luxury apartment up for sale. Bunduchi noted the government's response lacks promptness and sometimes ignored violations that occurred.

There is no evidence that the existence of quality information prevents or lowers the incidence or severity of corruption in national or local governments. Several panelists said that Moldova's corrupt judicial system reduces the chances that investigations will result in court sentences.

Quality information may reduce the occurrence of human rights violations, but it is not the case in the Transnistrian region. "The legitimate authorities of Moldova react anemically because they do not have control over the area," said Journalist A from the breakaway region. No data is available to confirm that quality of information contributes

to free and fair elections. "However, when it comes to local elections, it is more difficult to influence the population through manipulative information as people know more about the competitors," said Bunduchi.

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