

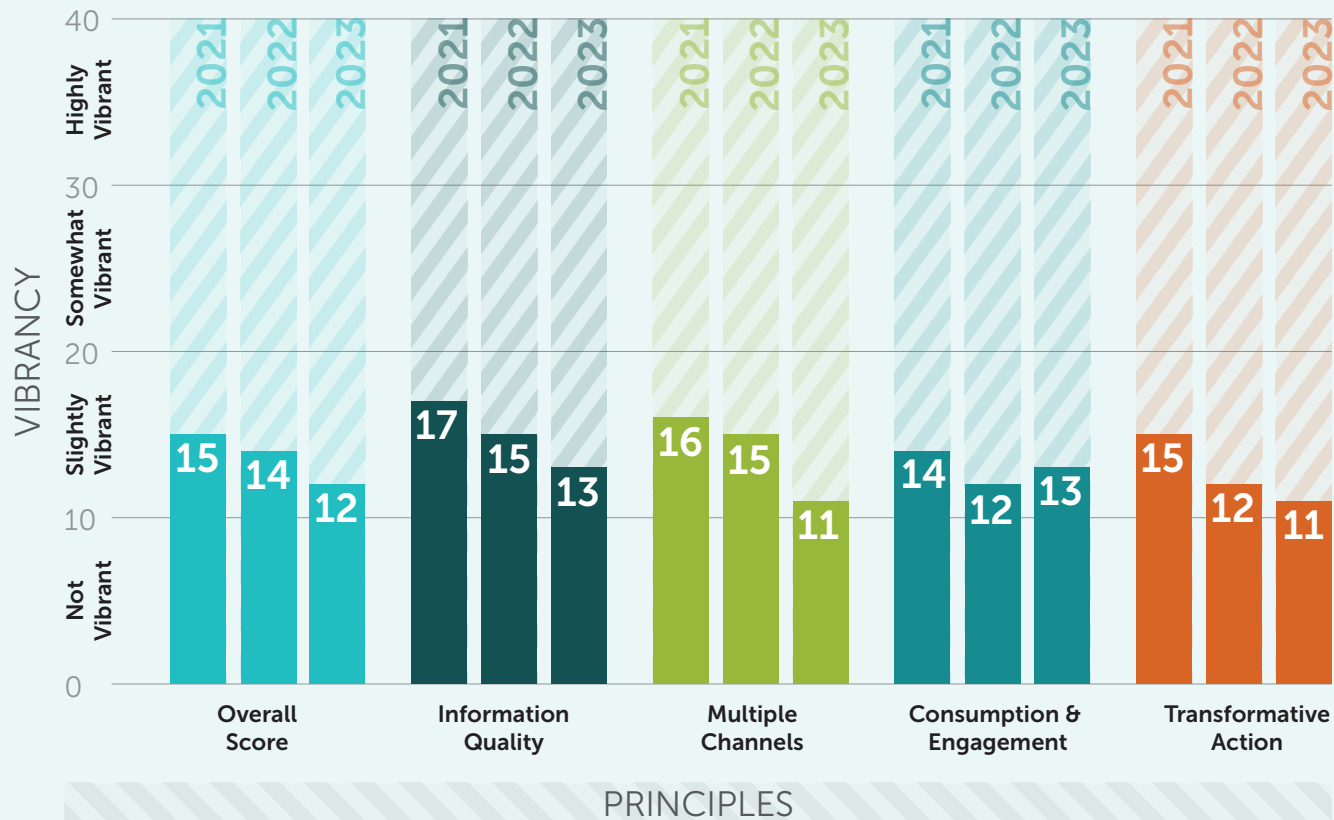
# RUSSIA



## 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

12

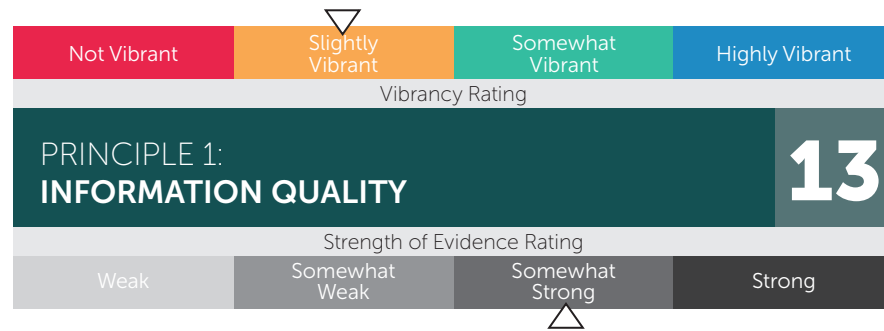
Russia’s invasion and war against Ukraine worsened freedom of speech and press freedom. According to 2021 Nobel Peace laureate and *Novaya Gazeta* editor in chief Dmitry Muratov, “Everything that’s not propaganda is being eliminated.” Authorities shut down both *Novaya Gazeta* and the radio station Echo Moskv, outlets that had operated in the country for nearly 30 years. *The New Times*, *Republic*, *Sobesednik*, *Mediazona*, and others have been blocked. Foreign media such as *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, *Deutsche Welle*, and *BBC* evacuated their staff from the country. *Colta.ru* and *Chastny Correspondent* suspended themselves since they were unable to conduct honest reporting under current conditions.

In Russia, the war against Ukraine cannot be called a war; it is a “special military operation.” The government harshly suppresses all protests. According to *OVD-Info*, an independent human rights media outlet, the government detained at least 19,586 anti-war protestors since February 24, 2022. Among them, prominent opposition leader Ilya Yashin was convicted and sentenced to eight years and six months for an online stream about war atrocities in the Ukrainian town of Bucha. The Moscow City Duma deputy Alexey Gorinov received a sentence of six years and 11 months in a penal colony for talking about the war at the City Duma meeting. LGBTQ+ activist Alexandra Skochilenko has been prosecuted for replacing price tags at the store with text about the war. Another prominent Kremlin critic Vladimir Kara-Murza, known for lobbying for personal sanctions against Vladimir Putin’s inner circle, was arrested in April 2022 for his anti-war speech at the Arizona House of Representatives and accused of spreading “false information” about the Russian army. Later, authorities added charges of high treason based on his public speeches

in Lisbon, Helsinki, and Washington, DC. Also, he was charged for participation in a public event on human rights by *the Free Russia Foundation*, an organization that is considered “undesirable” in Russia. In April 2023, Kara-Murza was sentenced to 25 years in jail.

In 2022, Russia adopted several war censorship laws that included administrative and criminal charges for critics of the military and Russian authority. After the implementation of the laws, according to a 2022 Levada-Center study most Russians (60 percent) did not notice any changes in the media they trusted. Among those who noticed the changes, 20 percent said media started to cover the war more, and only 5 percent said the media they trust became unavailable because of blocking. Since the war began in Ukraine, Russian internet providers started to block national and international media; *Twitter*, *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *SoundCloud*, and *Patreon*; and national and international human rights groups’ websites, including *Human Rights Watch*, *Amnesty International*, and *Moscow Helsinki Group*.

Most panelists agreed that the state puts tremendous pressure on media to make quality information unavailable, non-factual, harmful, not diverse or inclusive, but provides a lot of financing to content producers—and scores reflect that reality. While people still have some abilities to create, share and consume information, they can be prosecuted for content that the government sees as unfriendly. The state limits channels of information and communication, and undesirable information on the Internet is blocked in the country; print and broadcast are heavily controlled by the government. The level of media literacy is very low, and the Kremlin heavily controls the ideological line in the media, which tends to be pro-war and anti-democratic.



While most the mainstream media<sup>1</sup> are controlled by the state, independent media outlets try hard to provide Russians with quality information, even though the majority of the latter had to leave the country in 2022. They work hard to provide truthful and quality information, but to do their job, they have to go through legal restrictions, blocking, and other threats from the state. While Russia enjoys a highly developed physical media infrastructure (the related indicator received the highest score for Principle 1), the government uses modern technology and politically antique tools to fight against independent voices. The concept of objectivity is not present in the mainstream Russian media. The journalism ethics of the media remaining in the country is low, unlike those who had to leave. Much of the mainstream media produce state-controlled information to please the government, not the public, while non-professional content producers are even less responsive to the public than the state media.

Most of the experts on the panel agreed that all the content the mainstream media produce inside of Russia is intended to mislead the audience, to produce hate speech, and to bring harm. Hate speech is mostly controlled by the government, so only the government-controlled bodies can make it; others are punished severely for it. As a result, the related indicator received the lowest score for Principle 1. The body of

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, the term “mainstream media” refers to media operating within Russia that are state owned or state controlled. The term “independent media” refers to media that are not controlled by the state officially, through ownership, or unofficially. These media largely operate outside of Russia at this point.

content overall is not inclusive and diverse. State media outlets are well-financed, including from the Russian state budget, while independent media lack of variety of financial possibilities.

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

Panelists characterized Russia’s infrastructure as still adequate to produce a variety of content, and most of them gave very high scores for this indicator. In a technological sense, said one panelist, everything needed to produce content is available. But the state does control some of the technologies, like communication centers. “The infrastructure exists,” another participant stated, “But that’s not the point. The point is no one can get access to the broadcasting or printing house without the authority’s permission.” Even before the war, another expert added, glossy magazines were mostly published abroad because it was cheaper and more effective.

There are a lot of existing journalism schools in the country, as well as many courses organized by (mostly) Russian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with former journalists who had to leave the profession in recent years. Those who are willing to study to enter the industry have a lot of opportunities, participants agreed. Still, panelists were not satisfied with the education quality, nor the limitations caused by censorship in the country. “All of the educational structures are more or less controlled now,” said one panelist, “For example, one of my former colleagues—in a very progressive school—had to change her lectures to students because her original presentation had examples from *Meduza*, a publication Russian authorities consider undesirable. And now the professor can’t have such examples, even if her faculty administration is very liberal.” Other panel participants said the quality of the education in journalism schools has been questioned for a long time. “There are a lot of schools, but the question is what they teach,” one of the journalists said, “I studied at the school of journalism myself, and even when I studied [many years ago], I had a very bad professional education. As far as I know, nothing has changed since then. It is quite the opposite—it got worse.”

Journalism ethics has long been a struggle in Russia, even in more stable times for the profession. “Can I give minus one hundred to this indicator?” one panelist commented, “The indicator can include both *Channel One* and *Meduza* for the Russian content producers. So, some independent media have professional ethics like *Meduza*; they work hard to respect facts and produce truthful information while others, like *Channel One*, produce propaganda.”

One panelist expressed concern about opinion-based journalism, which has become more significant in recent years. “Even during the years of relative freedom, we had many ethical issues, and now it is even worse, even among journalists who do not belong to state media,” said the panelist, “Independent media is becoming increasingly biased, and journalism is becoming a profession of activism or part of political struggle. It is easy to understand and the reasons are clear, but we have had these experiences in the 1980s and 1990s already. I clearly understand the costs of such journalism.”

Most of the panelists gave low scores to ethical norms and accountability for content producers. One participant cited the case of the channel TV Rain. TV anchor Aleksey Korostelev was fired after using language that implied the TV station supported Russian troops in Ukraine and provided them with ammunition. Additionally, the channel lost its broadcasting license that was granted by the Latvian authorities. Meanwhile, “the punished journalists are not those who do not follow the ethical standards,” another person stated about the general situation in the country, “Quite the opposite, the punished journalists are those who try to build their agenda independently from the state.”

Still, several other panelists could not recall any professional ramifications for producing unethical content, noting, “If you produce propaganda, it is unethical, but no one pays any price for it. Open any media outlet loyal to the state, and you will find such examples immediately.” Even worse, he observed, the more publicity you have, the less responsible you are as a media professional.

In general, many media outlets produce content on various topics, including niche media. “There are many themes related to culture, entertainment, ecology, or animals,” said one of the panelists. But another argued, “...we do not have a variety of topics. Everything oppositional is censored.”

**“The word ‘accountability’ is not in journalists’ thought process, nor those in governmental bodies. They work for Putin,” said one of the experts.**

“The word ‘accountability’ is not in journalists’ thought process, nor those in governmental bodies. They work for Putin,” said one of the experts. “In the best-case scenario, in the majority of cases, it is just reporting on governmental meetings and decisions made, and this is the only coverage,” added another. Still, some of the

panelists argued that some journalists try to do their best to fairly report on the government and its words or actions.

Most panelists agreed that Russians have access to a variety of different news, including local and international, but the issue is how that news is produced. Most international coverage is related to Ukraine or the United States, and this coverage is always hostile to those countries, people, and policies. The exception is former U.S. President Donald Trump; he always receives favorable coverage, added one of the experts.

Independent editorial policies are rare in Russian media; the majority of the Russian independent media had to leave the country in 2022 and produce their news from outside the country. The news is often contextualized, the experts agreed, but in the mainstream media, such as state-controlled or state-owned media in the country, this context is highly politically motivated.

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

Fact-based, well-sourced, and objective information is rare in mainstream media, and state media does not even pretend to be objective. Objective information can be directly prohibited by government bodies, including Roskomnadzor, the federal agency

responsible for the control, censorship, and supervision of media. For example, the only acceptable sources about the Russian-Ukrainian war (“special military operation”) are government sources.

Government-supported media produce false and misleading information, but not because they lack capacity. In the mainstream media, it is essentially the editorial policy that stories be misleading and make false accusations. Mainstream media mainly functions as a propaganda tool, not to provide objective news and information.

“**Mainstream media mainly functions as a propaganda tool, not to provide objective news and information.**”

Nonprofessional content producers are also among those who create and disseminate false or misleading information, most of the experts on the panel agreed. They are not even obligated to check the information—a requirement for journalists according to media law.

The government is one of the sources of false information that subsequently leads to the dissemination of such information in state-controlled media. One expert sardonically noted that the only correct information the government publishes is working hours. “The Central Bank also provides the right currency exchange information,” added another expert sarcastically.

Professional ramifications for creating or spreading false information are very rare in the country; some of the experts could not even recall a case. This mis- and disinformation is often sanctioned by the government.

The majority of the panelists agreed that journalists hold the government accountable by identifying misinformation and informing the audience about it. Still, some experts noted that while such media exists, it is primarily based outside of Russia. Moreover, while there may be several professional projects that try to hold the government accountable, few people follow these projects. “Channel One produces fake news every day,” said one expert, “And has an audience that is incomparable to the audience of independent media projects. But technically, it’s possible to get independent information if you want it.”

There are few widely available and reliable fact-checking sources. Some panelists pointed out that though such resources exist, the government blocks them, so audiences have to know how to go around such blocks. Still, one panel familiar with U.S. fact-checking operations stated there are no such sources in Russia. “There are no popular places where people can find facts and their checks,” the expert observed. Instead, it is a story limited to some of the thematic topics in the few independent media outlets like Meduza or TV Rain.

In terms of the moderation of content that reduces misinformation, the panelists mostly discussed social media, such as Facebook. Most panelists agreed that Russian social media do not have mechanisms to moderate content on their pages, nor do traditional Russian media. But even if such mechanisms exist technically, they do not help to reduce misinformation practically since the majority of media in Russia produce misinformation.

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

Several panelists found it hard to tell if foreign governments have the ability to create or disseminate mal-information or hate speech in the country. However, the majority agreed that the Russian government creates and disseminates such content. When it happens, no one is responsible for it, and there are no consequences. Those in power do not lose elections as a result, since there are no free and fair elections in the country anymore.

Professional content producers create and disseminate content with mal-information or hate speech since the war in Ukraine, and most Russian outlets are government-controlled media. In the majority of cases, they do not experience professional ramifications.

Many nonprofessional content producers also use hate speech and mal-information, including “hundreds of Telegram channels,” as one of the panelists noted, and troll factories organized by Yevgeny Prigozhin, the

founder of the state-backed mercenary company Wagner. In addition, single content producers--including Igor Strelkov-Girkin, who has organized Russian militant groups in the Ukrainian Donbas region since 2014--also produce hate-speech content.<sup>2</sup> There are a minimal number of cases with ramifications for doing so.

Even if there are some mechanisms to moderate the content, most media outlets and platforms do not use them to reduce mal-information or hate speech since, as the panel pointed out many times, hate speech or mal-information is an intentional goal of mainstream Russian media producers.

Several panelists said extremist groups do not have the opportunity to create or disseminate information intended to harm.

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

It is possible to have media in different languages and formats in Russia. However, media offering different views and ideologies are not present.

There are just a few examples of media that devote efforts to discussing gender issues. Russian law directly prohibits sharing even neutral information about LGBTQ+ people and discussing sexual orientation publicly. The law was adopted in 2013 to “protect children” from “gay propaganda” but had even more restrictions added in 2022. For example, Putin signed a new law in 2022 which made it illegal for anyone to promote same-sex relationships or suggest that non-heterosexual orientations are “normal.” According to Human Rights Watch, “In 2018, the UN Human Rights Committee [found](#) the 2013 law to be “ambiguous, disproportionate and discriminatory” and denounced “a blanket restriction on legitimate expressions of sexual orientation.” The European Court of Human Rights [reiterated](#) similar conclusions, in particular that “differences based solely on considerations of sexual orientation are unacceptable under the [European Convention on Human Rights]” and that Russian legislation stating the inferiority of

same-sex relationships was not justifiable.”<sup>3</sup> As a result, Russian law effectively prohibits journalists from discussing sex- and gender-related issues. Well-known Russian journalist Karèn Shainyan creates LGBTQ+-related news content on his YouTube channel *Straight Talk with Gay People* (launched in January 2020), but he was among a few journalists creating this type of content before the Russian war against Ukraine. After publicly speaking out against the invasion, he was forced to leave the country, and in April 2022, he was designated a foreign agent by the government.

The same restrictions apply to many other sensitive issues related to the dominance of the Russian Orthodox Church. For example, Jehovah’s Witnesses are prohibited in Russia. Since 2017, their activity has been considered extremist by the Russian state, and at least 91 people have been arrested for being members of this religion. In June 2022, the European Court of Human Rights, in the case of *Taganrog LRO and Others v. Russia*, ruled the state violated freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; freedom of expression; and freedom of assembly and association of the European Convention on Human Rights, as well as the rights to liberty and security and protection of property guaranteed by European Convention. It also stated that “the definition of ‘extremism’ was overly broad in Russian law and had been misused for the prosecution of believers or religious ministers based on the content of their beliefs alone.”<sup>4</sup> However, since the organization is prohibited in Russia, Russian media cannot openly discuss the issues of such “extremist” groups or freely talk about the beliefs of different people.

It is nearly impossible for the Russian media sector to freely and openly discuss the life and experiences of minority communities. Still, the members of such communities do find ways to discuss their issues on social media. “Such possibilities still exist since you can still use social media,” said one of the experts, “But there is always a danger that

<sup>2</sup> Girkin was arrested on charges of making calls for extremist activities on July 21, 2023. He faces up to 5 years in prison.

<sup>3</sup> Human Rights Watch. “Russia: Expanded ‘Gay Propaganda’ Ban Progresses Toward Law,” November 25, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/25/russia-expanded-gay-propaganda-ban-progresses-toward-law>.

<sup>4</sup> European Court of Human Rights. “Multiple Violations in Case Brought by Jewish Witnesses in Russia (press release), July 6, 2022, [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng-press#%7B%22item\\_id%22:%5B%22003-7352983-10042703%22%7D](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng-press#%7B%22item_id%22:%5B%22003-7352983-10042703%22%7D)].

people can be found, tried, bullied, or sanctioned somehow.”

Some panelists thought the idea of gender balance among professional and nonprofessional content producers is not applicable in the country in comparison to the West. There are a lot of famous women in Russia who are either editors-in-chief, or the founders of the media outlets, such as Galina Timchenko at Meduza, Elizavetta Osetinskaya and Irina Malkova at The Bell, Natalia Sindeeva at TV Rain, and others. As a result, the panelists thought the issue of gender balance in the media is less critical than it is in the West. Others pointed out that there are still people of different genders working in media.

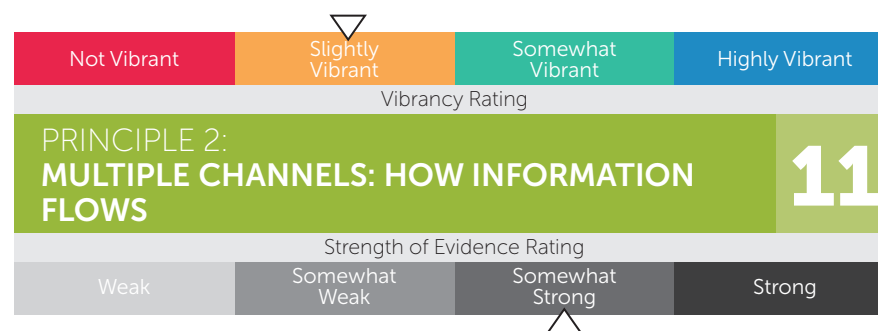
### Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced

Financial stability is not the primary issue in Russian media. State media are financed directly from the Russian budget, have advertisements, and all other financial resources to sustain themselves. Unlike state outlets, independent media have many financial issues. Since implementing the laws on foreign agents, independent media is likely to lose what advertising contracts they have. Some of these outlets are even considered by the Russian Ministry of Justice undesirable organizations and are unable to stay in the country; they must close all their operations, including firing their staff. Any remaining contracts with these organizations are now criminalized, and any legal connection to undesirable organizations can lead to criminal charges.

State or state-controlled corporations can exert a high level of control over Russian media, because they control significant financial resources. As a result, there are very limited financial streams available for media outlets that try to remain independent. Moreover, supporting independent media outlets can be a danger for corporations based inside the country. “Investing in the media sphere means investing not only finances but freedom, safety, and security. As a result, there are no such investors,” said one expert. Still, another expert, a well-known blogger who had to leave Russia, said there was enough financing to produce certain online content even from abroad.

Overall, independent media have donations from different sponsors, including institutional sponsors or subscribers, grants from variety of sources, including foreign help, and advertisements. However, state-supported media are not as dependent on new forms of monetization. Support for local media is also conditional. If the content of such media is in the political mainstream and in support of local authorities, these authorities may even have partnership contracts: news about the authorities in exchange for the local budget’s subsidies. Less available are the market relations between the media and financial actors in the regions.

There is no transparency in distributing government subsidies or advertising contracts, and the distributions distort the market, according to the panel. Most panelists found it difficult to judge whether journalists are paid sufficiently, since it depends on too many factors. Advertising placement is highly politicized.



Russia’s government heavily controls information within the country. Moreover, it does not make much effort to provide information to its citizens about its actions through various channels, and there is less diversity in information than in previous years. Many journalists are prosecuted in the country for doing their jobs, and as a result panelists gave the related indicator their lowest scores for Principle 2, while access to channels of information scored highest in this principle—reflecting Russia’s robust information and communications infrastructure.



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

Panelists gave this indicator the lowest score in this year’s Russia study. While there are some legal protections for freedom of speech and freedom of the press that exist in Russian laws, they do not work, and they are not enforced impartially and uniformly. Moreover, the government is actively attempting to erode freedom of speech and freedom of the press through legal and extralegal means. Several media outlets with independent editorial policies and/or investigative approaches—such as Riddle, Proekt Media, Novaya Gazeta-Europe, The Insider, and Meduza—are currently considered undesirable organizations.

While the Russian Constitution and media law directly prohibit censorship, there are many cases of intimidating journalists, closing media outlets, blocking websites, making threats, and other pressures that put journalists in danger or force them to leave the country.

At least 15 journalists, including Russian Oksana Baulina, were killed after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, as reported by the Committee to Protect Journalists.<sup>5</sup> At least 19 were imprisoned in Russia.<sup>6</sup>

The government has prosecuted many journalists because of news produced about the war. For example, Mikhail Afanasev from the Hakassia region of Russia has been in a pretrial detention center since April 14, 2022, for his report about the Special Police Units from his region that refused to go to war in Ukraine.<sup>7</sup> He faces ten years in prison based on allegations of spreading “fakes about the war.” The Memorial Human Rights Center—a Russia-based organization that was “liquidated” by the government in April 2022—considers him a political prisoner since “the goal of his prosecution is the intimidation of journalists who have different [from the authorities] views on this war.”

5 Committee to Protect Journalists. “15 Journalist Killed in Ukraine,” n.d., [https://cpj.org/data/killed/2022/?status=Killed&motiveConfirmed%5B%5D=Confirmed&type%5B%5D=Journalist&cc\\_fips%5B%5D=UP&start\\_year=2022&end\\_year=2023&group\\_by=location](https://cpj.org/data/killed/2022/?status=Killed&motiveConfirmed%5B%5D=Confirmed&type%5B%5D=Journalist&cc_fips%5B%5D=UP&start_year=2022&end_year=2023&group_by=location).

6 Committee to Protect Journalists. “Attacks on the Press in 2022,” n.d., <https://cpj.org/2022/12/attacks-on-the-press-in-2022/>.

7 Telegram Channel: <https://t.me/pchikov/5364>.

Journalists are harassed for doing their jobs, either by fines, imprisonment or threat of imprisonment, legal sanctions (such as criminal libel law), or other sorts of intimidation. “There are dozens of journalists who are under trial or are wanted,” said a freedom of speech defender on the panel. All the panelists believed the government censors media both overtly and covertly.

The government also pressures information and communication technology (ICT) providers to censor media. These providers are obligated to block the media outlets that government bodies such as *Roskomnadzor* and others deem unacceptable. Additionally, under the government’s pressure and potential fines, providers are also obligated to disclose information about the users, subscribers, and journalists.

“There is a huge fear of retribution, and a lot of journalists self-censor,” said one of the panelists who works for the protection of journalists, “They always ask us what they can or cannot write, according to our experience.” The editor-in-chief of one such media outlet said, “Even the independent media who left the country practice self-censorship... When our colleagues are designated as undesirable organizations, there is always a question if you can hyperlink their materials—by doing so, you put your own staff and employees under the threat of prosecution.”

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

Russia’s ICT infrastructure does not meet the information needs of most people since many independent resources are prohibited or blocked in Russia, including domestic outlets along with established and respected foreign media outlets, including BBC and Radio Liberty, which have worked in Russia legally since the end of the Cold War. Many Russians upload virtual private networks (VPNs) to bypass blocks, but this requires knowledge of such technologies and the basics of media literacy that allows for comparing different sources. The government blocked some VPNs but there are still a lot of others which people use. There is not sufficient infrastructure for people with disabilities or who are illiterate, and the dominant language of media is Russian.

Television remains the dominant source of news in Russia. There are ten federal TV channels, which are defined in the law as channels that are available in more than five regions. About 65 percent of Russians can freely get them on their TV sets. The penetration of TV is enormous. For example, according to Channel One's own information, its signal covers 98.8 percent of the population.<sup>8</sup>

Forty-two percent of Russians say they trust state TV, while 25 percent say they trust social networks and 20 percent say they trust state news agencies. Still, 65 percent of Russians do not fully trust the state media news coverage of the conflict in Ukraine, though 31 percent trust this coverage fully.<sup>9</sup>

Radio has long-standing tradition in the country; about 80 percent of Russians still listen to the radio every week; about 90 percent have a radio set.<sup>10</sup> Since radio and television are free in Russia, most of the population has access to the media. Moreover, as pointed out earlier, 84 percent of Russians are internet users.

There are no norms that preclude communities or groups of people from using the media. But the regulation of the internet and digital spaces does not allow for open and equal access for users and content producers. Still, in the event of a disruption to the telecommunications infrastructure, Russians would still have access to the information system.

**“ Journalists are harassed for doing their jobs, either by fines, imprisonment or threat of imprisonment, legal sanctions (such as criminal libel law), or other sorts of intimidation.**

## Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information

The issue of right to information brought different opinions. Several experts noted that this right is guaranteed by law, including in the constitution. Others stated such laws do not work. “If right-to-information laws exist but do not work, it means this right does not exist,” said one panelist. Also, some of the laws about processes to access information do not work in reality. “If information is collected in databases, it may be easy to get it,” one of the experts who works in journalism said, “But when it comes to the information inquiry or request, it may take ages to get such information, or you may never get it.” Another expert said, “Even though there is a flood of information in many sources, in reality, such information does not provide an understanding of how the state bodies really work.”

On one hand, internet sites like zakupki-gov-ru.com, where information about government procurements is available, are still active in the country and are updated regularly. On the other hand, telecasts from the State Duma hearings are not available to the public anymore.<sup>11</sup> Only journalists with accreditation in Duma and physical access to it can watch the telecasts inside the building, on TV screens in the Press Center. To explain the decision to restrict media coverage of the Duma's work, one official stated that a lot of the Duma agenda should stay in a secret, since it is connected to support of the Russian troops in Ukraine and the legal aspects of such support. In February 2023, State Duma allowed the government to close any statistical information sensitive to geopolitical issues.<sup>12</sup>

8 “Channel One Broadcast Zones,” February 19, 2016, <https://www.1tv.ru/about/broadcast-area>.

9 Goncharov, Stepan. “Perception of News Information among Russians,” August 16, 2022, <https://www.levada.ru/2022/08/16/vospriyatie-novostnoj-informatsii-sredi-rossiyan-otnoshenie-k-presledovaniyu-v-internete/>.

10 Media Scope. “Radio Audience,” n.d., [http://www.brand-radio.ru/serv\\_idP\\_52\\_idP1\\_108\\_idP2\\_2437.html](http://www.brand-radio.ru/serv_idP_52_idP1_108_idP2_2437.html).

11 Batyrov, Timur. “The State Duma Decided to Stop Broadcasting Its Meetings Online,” October 18, 2022, <https://www.forbes.ru/society/479969-gosduma-resila-otkazat-sa-ot-translacij-svoih-zasedanij-onlajn>.

12 Zlobin, Andrey. “The State Duma Allowed the Government to Close Any Official Statistics,” February 22, 2023, <https://www.forbes.ru/biznes/485291-gosduma-razresila-pravitel-stvu-zakryt-lubuu-oficial-nuu-statistiku>.

Some people know about the mechanisms of getting information, including journalists, but others do not, and it seems the majority do not know their rights. Eight out of the 10 panelists disagreed that no groups are systematically excluded from exercising their right to information. “If you are a member of the opposition, you will get nothing,” said one expert.

While many governmental bodies have spokespeople or information offices, they do not effectively provide information to the press. “[Putin’s Press Secretary] Dmitry Peskov is the best example of it,” said one of the panelists, noting that Peskov rarely provides truthful information.

Still, most Russians trust political institutions, according to Levada-Center studies. The trust in the president grew from 53 percent in 2021 to 80 percent in 2022; trust in both chambers of the parliament increased from 25 percent to 40 percent.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, trust in the press (41 percent) is lower than trust in the army (77 percent), secret services (61 percent), or the church (51 percent). Trust in the police is about the same as trust in the media.

### Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow

Some laws regulate domestic and foreign ownership concentration in media. Since 2016, a foreign owner, person, or company cannot own any individual Russian media outlet of more than 20 percent shares of an individual outlet, including print or websites. But when you are in Russia, “no laws are regularly and equitably enforced,” said one expert. Additionally, no laws require transparency in media ownership for all media, only for some companies. For example, a company must provide information about the ownership if it is joint-stock company. Some other forms of the companies--such as limited liability companies or closed joint-stock companies--are not obliged to make the information about their owners public.

<sup>13</sup> ANO Lavada-Center. “Trust in Public Institutions,” September 20, 2022, <https://www.levada.ru/2022/09/20/doverie-obshhestvennym-institutam-2/>.

“Filtration of content is one of the regulation mechanisms in the country, and providers are obligated to block the information or users,” one of the experts said.

One of the major media owners in Russia is businessman Yuri Kovalchuk, a close friend of Vladimir Putin since the 1990s, who also came to Moscow from Saint Petersburg. Another major owner is the state itself. Most panelists saw it as monopolization or the domination of several conglomerates. The process of getting broadcasting frequencies is not fair and transparent.

Panelists had differing opinions about the ability of people to freely establish media. One panelist offered that people can freely develop the media and get into trouble as a result. Others disagreed with that statement, pointing out that it is difficult to develop media, especially when it comes to broadcasting. All licensing procedures are not transparent and fair, the experts noted.

Several panelists remarked that the concept of public service media is not applicable in Russia. Others thought that companies like *Obshchestvennoe Televidenie Rossii (OTR, or Public Television of Russia)*, which has existed since 2013, provide informative and educational news, but there are not any outlets that serve all members of the public and are nonpartisan. Internet service providers do not treat all communications equally, and they do discriminate based on content or destination addresses. “Filtration of content is one of the regulation mechanisms in the country, and providers are obligated to block the information or users,” one of the experts said.

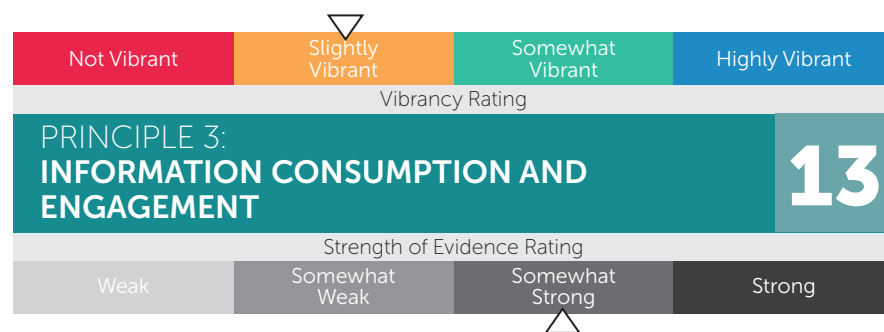
### Indicator 10: Information channels are independent

Many examples prove that media organizations are influenced by their ownership, but independent media which left the country primarily work on a professional basis. The media which are exiled are mostly dependent on funding sources, including advertising contracts and owner investments, while those who remain in the country have many governmental subsidies. A clear distinction between newsroom and business operations was not common in the past, but now it is even worse.

As noted above, some panelists did not believe the concept of true public service media as defined internationally is applicable in Russia. Those who thought such media exist say their funding is driven by the political priorities of the Russian government and that the state's influence in content is significant.

State media are treated differently and have fewer barriers than privately owned outlets. They also receive preferential treatment for things like subsidies, tax breaks, access to equipment, etc. Additionally, they also have more access to certain information. For example, they can be accredited to attend governmental briefings, unlike those media designated as “foreign agents” or “undesirable organizations.” So-called undesirable organizations are prohibited from operating in the country at all, so they cannot participate in press conferences or briefings. Most governmental bodies would not even respond to requests for information submitted by independent media. The media outlets or journalists who are designated foreign agents face many restrictions and cannot have free access to some information. Additionally, there is a big challenge to report about current situation in the country being abroad.

The state bodies that regulate and oversee Russia's media space are, by nature, politicized. “They all are in an information war,” explained one panelist.



Privacy is not protected in Russia due to many leaks from the national government bodies. For example, in 2022, 230,000 emails of the Ministry of Culture leaked to the internet; there were also leaks from

the administration of Blagoveshchensk city and from the governor of Tverskaya oblast's office.<sup>14</sup>

Overall media literacy skills are also weak, giving the indicator studying media literacy the lowest score for Principle 3. It is hard to find diverse and inclusive platforms for public debates. Even when the information becomes available to the public, it is still hard to make the government accountable. Community media is a foreign concept for the Russian media ecosystem.

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

While legal protections for data privacy and digital security exist on paper, in reality, there are many leaks. “Christo Grozev's work is a great example of it,” said one panelist, citing an investigator from the outlet *Bellingcat* who claims to be working on the databases of the Russian governmental bodies that can be easily found on a black market.

Those legal protections, if they exist, are designed not to defend personal freedoms but to prevent the release of publicly important information. For example, in 2002 Putin lifted the requirement for government officials to release their tax returns during the war with Ukraine.<sup>15</sup> “Government bodies often use the protection of personal information as a pretext not to release information,” one of the panelists stated. While media may have access to digital security training, distributed denial of service attacks on the websites of independent media--such as *TV Rain*, *the New Times*, or *Novaya Gazeta*--are common. The websites are not digitally secure enough and may stop working when under attack.

The population is not fully aware of privacy and security issues, and the majority do not have basic digital and data literacy skills, nor do they understand how social media algorithms or targeted advertising works.

14 Tadviser.ru. “Utechki dannyh v gossectore Rossii”. [https://www.tadviser.ru/index.php/Статья:Утечки\\_данных\\_в\\_госсекторе\\_России#2022](https://www.tadviser.ru/index.php/Статья:Утечки_данных_в_госсекторе_России#2022):

15 The Moscow Times, “Putin Waives Peacetime Requirement for Officials to Release Tax Returns” December 30, 2022. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/12/30/putin-waives-peacetime-requirement-for-officials-to-release-tax-returns-a79848>

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

Government leadership does not promote media literacy at all levels. School systems include civics but not media and information literacy in the curricula. Even with the increase in media literacy courses and training in recent years, many stopped because of the war. Since education is also becoming highly politicized in the country--and many critically thinking educators either left academia or the country--media and information literacy cannot be truly free and independent.

Few people in the country have the tools or knowledge to fact-check the information they get. Since most Russians rely on television for information and mostly trust it, it may signal that they are having difficulties with discerning high-quality news and information from poor-quality news. "It depends on the level of general education," said one panelist, "Though even having a formal education does not necessarily translate to being media literate."

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

Journalists and civil society activists still working in Russia do their best to use their freedom of speech and right to information, but the country does not really afford them such freedoms. Paradoxically, the large number of cases of harassment for speech, posts on social media, and journalism mean many people are trying to exercise their freedoms. But the consequences of these attempts are mostly negative. Most of the population is not aware of existing objective and fact-based information, though access to information may require some technical know-how because of the blocking of internet pages. A minority of Russians continue to rely on independent media using VPNs.

YouTube still works in Russia, and an investigative production created by

**Government leadership does not promote media literacy at all levels.**

FBK, Aleksey Navalny's fund, went viral. His YouTube account alone has 6.37 million subscribers. His videos can reach several million viewers, such as the video about his own poisoning (27 million views) and an investigation into the wealth of Vladimir Putin's ex-wife (9.4 million views). The investigation on Putin's mansion was created two years ago and released after Navalny's return to Russia and, following his arrest, reached 126 million views.

There are no widely known platforms for public debates, half of the panelists said.

Another said such platforms exist pro forma, though such platforms are not diverse and inclusive. Open digital communications are generally characterized by misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech. People are more than willing to inform on others so they can report misinformation, mal-information, or hate speech to public councils, ombudsmen, or platform moderators. But the reaction to those complaints is not fair or balanced.

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

Generally speaking, it is uncommon for content producers to analyze their audience's needs through qualitative research. Television companies mostly rely on quantitative methods, such as ratings, or the number of views; most TV channels also use quantitative methods. Other types of media rarely find funds to pay for the audience research, and lack of financing limits the ability of independent media to analyze their audiences.

**A minority of Russians continue to rely on independent media using VPNs.**

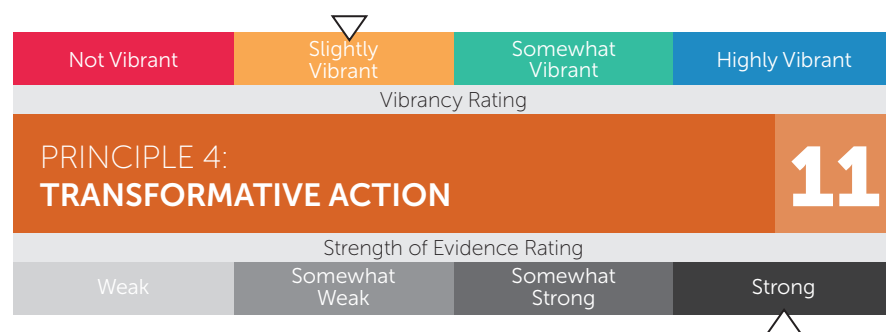
Some media still have avenues for feedback, but this feedback is generally pre-moderated, so those methods are not fair and open. A limited number of media engage with their audiences through

community events or are transparent about their reporting methods. Publishing corrections is a rare practice in the media. Stakeholders do not accept or consider feedback from one another.

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

Some panelists did not believe that community media exist in the country, and as such, this is not an applicable concept in Russia. Others said that local media are created by the local authorities and cannot become community media, while other experts said this is an unknown area for them.

The remaining panelists said that local media can provide local populations with information relevant to various localities that is not available in national media, and they may respond to the issues that are important to the local public. However, they do not give a voice to marginalized populations.



Nonpartisan news sources are scarce and have limited audiences, given the government’s stranglehold on the media and information space in the country. State media rarely allow opinions opposing the government, and in this hostile environment quality information is hard to find. Given the prevalence of state-sanctioned misinformation directed toward Russian citizens through state media, the panel identified misinformation as the primary influencer of political and social opinions.

The remaining civil society organizations operating in Russia which try

**“There are no free and fair elections in the country, so there is no information, quality information, or misinformation that influences the elections.”**

to have some positive impact tend to use quality information—panelists gave this indicator the highest score in Principle 4--while the indicators examining government use of quality information and information supporting good governance and democratic rights received the lowest scores in this principle.

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

Nonpartisan news and information sources are rare in the country and do not have extensive audiences. “This is not applicable to our country,” one panelist said, “And no media presents themselves this way.”

There is not a lot of evidence that people read or view multiple types of media with different ideologies, and there are almost no examples of town hall meetings or call-in shows with different points of view. All the existing talk shows on TV are designed so that most speakers attack scapegoats for the “wrong” views. Digital platforms provide some possibilities for people with different views to convene; however, these platforms are overrun with trolls, and it is sometimes hard to understand which comments are real and which are from paid agitators. There is no evidence that individuals are engaged in open and constructive discussions informed by quality news and information.

There is also no evidence that fact-based coverage helps inform opinions. By contrast, mainstream Russian media is highly opinionated, politicized, and spreads a lot of conspiracy theories. “Everyone lives in his/her bubble,” one editor said.

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

Most of the panelists thought that people’s views on political and social issues are shaped primarily by misinformation. “It is mostly an exception if citizens use quality information to engage with their elected officials,” said one panelist.

information to engage with their elected officials,” said one panelist.

There are no free and fair elections in the country, so there is no information, quality information, or misinformation that influences the elections. The elections are done by fraudulence, manipulation, and administrative pressure. The COVID pandemic underscored that people do not follow fact-based health and safety recommendations. People are not aware of democratic traditions, so they cannot separate which information about democracies is wrong and which is not.

### Indicator 18: Civil society uses quality information to improve communities

There are many civil society organizations (CSOs) in Russia that rely on quality news and information when explaining their mission or objectives, such as the *Podari Zhizn* fund or other charity organizations. At the same time, there are many government-organized NGOs, such as *Znanie*, that were founded by presidential decree in 2015 and are not really open to the public.

As a result, it was hard for panelists to arrive at cohesive conclusions about the sector. Some CSOs share quality information with the public, and some do not. Some of them disseminate misinformation, and some do not. Some CSOs actively work to reduce the spread of misinformation; some do not. The panelists noted that in Russia nowadays, it is impossible to call for policy changes or corporate reforms. One panelist observed, “It does not make sense, and it is very dangerous to call for changing the laws.” They suggested that civic participation in key decisions is not evident.

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

Press conferences exist in the country, but they are designed so that they cannot be considered a robust way for government actors to engage with civil society and media. Political discourse and debates do not include

references to evidence and facts. “The government never does it,” said one of the participants.

Misinformation influences political discourse and debate. Government actors do not refer to quality news media or information from civil society when explaining their decisions. They also do not refer to facts and use misinformation in explaining their decisions.

### Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights

The government does not respond appropriately when information sources reveal corruption. “It is an exception when the government responds to media reports about corruption,” one of the experts said. There is no evidence that quality information prevents or lowers the incidence or severity of corruption.

The government rarely responds appropriately to human rights violations reported by the media. “No one does anything, no one responds to such reports,” one of the panelists explained. There is almost no correlation between quality information on human rights violations and their prevention or reduction. It is almost impossible to put pressure on the government regarding violations of rights and liberty. Quality information does not contribute to free and fair elections, as there are no free and fair elections in the country.

“People are not aware of democratic traditions, so they cannot separate which information about democracies is wrong and which is not.”

## LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

Due to laws restricting NGO activity and contacts with U.S.-based NGOs, the participants in the Russia study will remain anonymous. This chapter was developed by a Russian journalist after a series of structured interviews with colleagues in the media and information sector.

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