EUROPE & EURASIA

Vibrant Information Barometer

2023

USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

IREX

VIBRANT INFORMATION BAROMETER 2023

IREX

1275 K Street, NW, Suite 600

Washington, DC 20005

E-mail: info.vibe@irex.org

Phone: (202) 628-8188

www.irex.org

Contributors: Marija Arnautović, Ekaterine Basilaia, Rade Bojovic, Goran Cetinić, Agron Demi, Cristina Durnea, Dejan Georgievski, Gulnara Ibraeva, Nora Latifi Jashari, Nino Makhviladze, Diana Medvednikova, Artashes Parsadanyan, Sitora Saidzoda, Anida Sokol, Orkidea Xhaferaj, and five contributors whose names are redacted

Managing editor: Linda Trail

IREX project and editorial support: Sherilyn Harrington and Irma Kurtanidze

Editorial support: Diane Bernard, Rachel Cartwright, Alanna Dvorak, Barbara Frye, and Dayna Kerecman Myers

Copyeditors: Melissa Brown Levine, Brown Levine Productions; Carolyn Feola, Carolyn.Ink; Kelly Kramer; Patricia Trigueros

Translation support: Translated SRL

Graphic design: Anna Zvarych

Disclaimer: This publication is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, the United States Government, or IREX.

USAID leads international development and humanitarian efforts to save lives, reduce poverty, strengthen democratic governance and help people progress beyond assistance.

U.S. foreign assistance has always had the twofold purpose of furthering America's interests while improving lives in the developing world. USAID carries out U.S. foreign policy by promoting broad-scale human progress at the same time it expands stable, free societies, creates markets and trade partners for the United States, and fosters good will abroad.

USAID works in over 100 countries to:

- Promote Global Health
- Support Global Stability
- Provide Humanitarian Assistance
- Catalyze Innovation and Partnership
- Empower Women and Girls

IREX is a nonprofit organization that builds a more just, prosperous, and inclusive world by empowering youth, cultivating leaders, strengthening institutions, and extending access to quality education and information.

Founded in 1968, IREX delivers value to its beneficiaries, partners, and donors through its holistic, people-centered approach to development. We bring expertise and experience in fields such as education, civil society, gender, media, governance, access to information, and youth employment.

In 2021, IREX had an annual portfolio of more than $71 million and a global staff of more than 600. By the close of 2022, IREX is projecting an annual portfolio of $107 million and more than 700 staff worldwide.

IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS

IREX wishes to thank the following organizations that coordinated the fieldwork for and authored a number of the studies herein:

- Mediacentar Sarajevo (Bosnia & Herzegovina)
  https://www.media.ba/
- Institute for Advanced Studies GAP (Kosovo)
  https://www.institutigap.org/home
- Media Development Center (Macedonia)
  https://mdc.org.mk
- Independent Journalism Center (Moldova)
  http://ijc.md/eng/
- Media LTD (Montenegro)
  https://media.co.me/
- Legal Media Center (Kazakhstan)
  https://lmc.kz/kk

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

On behalf of IREX, I am pleased to introduce the 2023 edition of the Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) for Europe and Eurasia, which explores the media and information spheres in 18 countries throughout the region, including five countries in Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

While previous editions of VIBE captured the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the media and information sectors in Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia, this year's publication examines the impact of Russia's February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, including an increase in Kremlin propaganda throughout the region and freedom of speech in Ukraine and Russia.

Based on IREX's Vibrant Information Approach and developed in partnership with USAID, the VIBE methodology better captures and measures the way information is produced and utilized today. In a vibrant information system, quality information should be widely available, editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Content production should be sufficiently resourced, inclusive, and diverse. People should have the rights, means, and capacity to access multiple channels of information; they should detect and reject misinformation; and they should be able to make informed choices about their information consumption. People should use quality information to inform their actions, improve their communities, and contribute to public policy decisions. VIBE leverages the expert panel approach, incorporating perspectives from local sector professionals that IREX assembles in each country to serve as panelists.

The 2023 VIBE publication is accompanied by the Vibrant Information Barometer Explorer, which allows users to analyze VIBE data and track it over time--including similar elements from the Media Sustainability Index, which IREX published from 2001-2019--with funding from USAID.

IREX would like to thank the more than 200 media, civil society, legal, and other sector professionals from throughout Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia who took time to reflect on their own media sector and provide

thoughtful comments and insights. A cornerstone for this study is the discussion moderators and authors from each country who organize the VIBE discussion panels, write chapter narratives that contextualize the panelists' thoughts, and provide rich information about operating contexts that goes beyond simple scores.

Finally, without Sherilyn Harrington's and Irma Kurtanidze's dedicated management and logistical support, this year's VIBE would not have been possible to produce. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has been a consistent and enthusiastic supporter of VIBE, funding the project from its inception and ensuring its ongoing implementation.

We hope you will find this report useful, and we welcome any feedback.

Sincerely,

Linda Trail
Managing Editor

BACKGROUND

Transition from Media Sustainability to Vibrant Information

From 2001 – 2019, IREX and USAID produced the Media Sustainability Index (MSI)[1] to measure five key pillars and objectives related to media sustainability: free speech, professional journalism, plurality of news sources, business management, and supporting institutions.

Over the past two decades there have been dramatic changes to the way information is produced, spread, and utilized. However, the growth of digital and social media has dramatically changed how information flows, including:

- Expansion of the volume of information and speed of global transmission (including misinformation and information intended to harm)
- Blurred lines between media producers and media consumers
- Rise of non-professional content producers (such as social media users, bloggers, and influencers)
- New challenges and opportunities in resourcing media production
- Diminishing trust in many forms of content and content producers
- New threats to individual privacy and security
- Increased need for media and digital literacy across all segments of society,
- New forms of censorship as well as new and evolving ways to circumvent censorship, and
- New methods for individuals, civil society, the private sector and corporations, and governments to utilize information for both productive and destructive means.

In recognition of these changes – as well as the way anti-democratic forces are utilizing those changes to intentionally spread disinformation - IREX undertook a multiple-year review of its approach

to working with the information and media sectors, culminating in the Vibrant Information Approach[2]. This outlines new challenges, needs, and frameworks for thinking about information systems in the modern era. This new approach made clear that the MSI – while still effective in evaluating the structural underpinnings of the formal media sector – is limited in its ability to capture some of the more urgent, relevant, or timely aspects of how information is spread or utilized today.

Based on its Vibrant Information Approach, IREX built the **Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE)** - a new index to track the way information is produced, spread, consumed, and used in the modern era. VIBE was built to respond to lessons learned from many years of implementing the MSI, changes in the media and information spheres, and opportunities to lead the way in measuring and diagnosing the challenges and opportunities that modern media systems create. Through VIBE, IREX aims to capture a modern era when many people around the world are simultaneously producers, transmitters, consumers, and actors of the information that shapes their environments and their lives.

1 www.irex.org/msi

2 https://www.irex.org/resource/vibrant-information-just-prosperous-and-inclusive-societies

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2023 Europe and Eurasia Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) covers 18 countries throughout Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia. With VIBE, IREX strives to capture a modern and evolving media space where people are simultaneously producers, transmitters, consumers, and actors in the information that influences their lives and environments.

This year's edition focuses on the media and information space across the countries in the study during calendar year 2022, capturing the impact of the Kremlin's February full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

VIBE Score Overview

VIBE looks at *four principles* of information vibrancy:

- Principle 1: Information Quality
- Principle 2: Multiple Channels: How Information Flows
- Principle 3: Information Consumption and Engagement
- Principle 4: Transformative Action: How Information Drives Behavior

VIBE includes 20 indicators that capture the most important elements of these four principles, and it relies on information from country experts who complete a VIBE questionnaire, provide scores for sub-indicators that support each of the 20 main indicators along with evidence to justify their scores, and then contribute to a panel discussion led by a moderator.

Additionally, VIBE uses a 10-point scale (0-40) to represent country progression or regression in the country-, principle-, and indicator-level scores. Based on these numerical scores, IREX has also developed descriptive classification as follows: Not Vibrant/Failing Information System (0-10), Slightly Vibrant/Weak Information System (11-20), Somewhat Vibrant/Stable Information System (21-30), and Highly Vibrant/Thriving Information System (31-40). Full descriptive classifications are available in the methodology section.

In the 2023 study, of the four VIBE principles, Principle 2 had generally higher average scores, while Principles 1, 3 and 4 had slightly lower scores.

For countries in Europe and Eurasia (E&E) included in this year's publication, country-level scores were, again, mainly split into two VIBE classifications: Somewhat Vibrant (North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Armenia, Moldova, and Ukraine) and Slightly Vibrant (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Russia[1], and Serbia). Azerbaijan and Belarus held the lowest scores in E&E, putting them in the Not Vibrant classification.

In Central Asia, this year's study put Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in the Slightly Vibrant category. Turkmenistan's score of 1 put it in the Not Vibrant classification.

At the overall score level, some countries--including Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine, and Moldova—saw increases in their scores. Others such as Serbia, North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Montenegro received the same country-level scores as they did in the 2022 VIBE study. Finally, other countries—including Albania, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, and Russia—experienced a decline in their country-level scores.

Principle 1's (Information Quality) lowest scores tended to fall in the indicator examining insufficient resources for content production and harmful information. Rapidly evolving models for financing media, declining advertising in traditional print and broadcast media, international tech giants siphoning off advertising funds, and local and global inflationary pressures, have all contributed to a financing desert for media. Many media are reliant on political or business benefactors for livelihood, while others look to international funding agencies for their survival.

1 Russia's overall country score of 12 puts it in the lowest end of VIBE's Slightly Vibrant classification. The country chapter considers media operating within Russia, which is largely co-opted by the government, and Russian media that are exiled. The latter group keeps Russia's overall score out of the Not Vibrant category.

Mal-information, misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech continue to run rampant throughout countries in the region, which also negatively affected the overall Principle 1 score across the region. Conversely, indicators on availability of quality information and inclusive and diverse content tended to have higher scores, reflecting some improvements in the media infrastructure for print, broadcast, and digital media in many countries.

Principle 2 (Multiple Channels) scores tended to be higher than those in the other VIBE principles in this year's study. Better scores were seen in indicators examining adequate access to channels of information, reflecting strong or improved infrastructures throughout the region. Armenia, North Macedonia, and Montenegro received scores of 31 or above in this indicator, putting them in the "highly vibrant" category. Lower scores in Principle 2 were seen in the indicators examining independence of information channels, reflecting political or business interests interfering in editorial content.

Principle 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) scores generally saw a slight increase in this year's study. However, lower scores in this principle were seen in the indicators looking at media literacy; panels across the region noted weak media literacy skills in their countries. Armenia, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, and Ukraine all garnered the highest scores for this principle; however, these scores still put them at the lower end of VIBE's "somewhat vibrant" classification. Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Turkmenistan got single-digit scores in this principle, placing them solidly in the Not Vibrant category.

In Principle 4 (Transformative Action), panelists tended to give indicators examining civil society's use of information higher scores. However, lower scores were seen in the indicators looking at how individuals use quality information to inform their actions, government's use of quality information to make public policy decisions, and information supporting good governance and democratic rights.

Strength of Evidence (SOE) Ratings. As noted in earlier VIBE editions, IREX has incorporated SOE ratings into the VIBE methodology. These ratings are meant to identify areas that donors or researchers may want to consider for further research and to increase transparency about the potential subjectivity of some indicators—especially those indicators measuring newer concepts or sources of information.

As in previous years, the highest SOE ratings tended to be for VIBE indicators in Principles 1 and 2, which received mostly "strong" and "somewhat strong" average ratings; for the first time, SOE ratings in Principle 4 were mostly "strong" and "somewhat strong" as well. Indicators in Principles 3 largely received "somewhat strong" ratings.

This year, indicators examining the availability of quality information; fact-based information; rights to create, share, and consume information; adequate access to information channels, and civil society's use of quality information received the highest SOE rating, indicating a strong body of comprehensive evidence supporting the panelists' scoring of these indicators and a high degree of consensus among the panelist scores. The bulk of the remaining indicators received an SOE rating of "somewhat strong," indicating that panelists and available research provided some reliable evidence to support scores and that there was mostly consensus among scores.

The lowest panelist confidence or lack of available data was for the indicator examining community media in Principle 3, which continues to be a less-developed and less-understood element of the information and media ecosystems in the VIBE countries, when compared with other regions such as Africa and Asia.

What is inside the 2023 VIBE Country Chapters

VIBE country chapter narratives that use the word "Russia" and related terms in reference to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine that started in 2022--or when discussing propaganda, disinformation, mal-information, etc. efforts in the region--refer to actions of the Government of Russia, its proxies, and its cronies; it is not a specific reference to the citizens of Russia. Additionally, country chapter discussions about the war in Ukraine are specifically related to the expanded invasion launched in February 2022, unless indicated otherwise.

While earlier VIBE studies captured the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic on the media, the Government of Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine has had a seismic impact on the media and information systems throughout the VIBE countries.

On February 22, 2022, and under the pretext of protecting people in the Donbas region, President Vladimir Putin announced a "special military operation" that was tantamount to a full-scale invasion of Ukraine with missiles launched and troop attacking from the north, south, and east. This expanded invasion followed rounds of Russian military build-up on the Russian border with Ukraine (March – April 2021) and on Belarus's border with Ukraine (October 2021 – February 2022).

When the full-scale invasion began, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy announced martial law and ordered a general mobilization of Ukrainian males between the ages of 16 to 60 years old.

The human and economic impact of this expanded invasion has clearly had profound impact on all sectors of Ukraine's society including the media. Prior to the February invasion, Ukraine had a diversified and well-developed media infrastructure capable of delivering quality content. The expanded war brought occupation, damage, and disruptions, including widespread electricity cutoffs, interruptions in internet and mobile communications, and an economic crisis that caused more than 216 media outlets to suspend or relocate their operations. In formerly occupied regions, journalists returned to newsrooms and equipment damaged or looted by Russian soldiers. In the Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, and Kherson regions, broadcasting centers and towers were destroyed. The electricity supply was patchy, and artillery shelling was frequent.

Additionally, the full-scale war accelerated the decline of Ukrainian print media due to shrinking audiences, scarce and expensive newsprint, disrupted distribution and delivery, and damaged printing houses.

The expanded invasion of Ukraine triggered shockwaves felt throughout

Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia, with heightened propaganda and disinformation campaigns engineered by the Kremlin discussed in most VIBE country chapters. While the bulk of the discussion below will focus on the increase in Kremlin propaganda throughout the region, it is worth looking at the impact of the expanded war on freedom of speech in Ukraine and Russia.

Freedom of Speech. When martial law was declared in Ukraine, it allowed the government to limit media's activities, including suspending operations and introducing wartime censorship. However, the Ukraine chapter noted that Russian occupiers committed most violations against free speech: 80 percent of 567 free speech violations documented by the Institute of Mass Information (IMI) were committed by Russian occupiers. Nonetheless, journalists acknowledge that they self-censor to avoid compromising Ukraine's defenses, and Ukrainian society has become less tolerant of reactive critics of the government.

In a poll of 229 journalists in December 2022 by IMI, 43.4 percent said freedom of speech had declined in Ukraine, 21 percent saw no change, and 5.3 percent said it had improved. They cited major issues as Government of Russia aggression and its consequences for the media and journalists (82.5 percent), problems with access to information and the shutdown of public registers (63.2 percent), problems with access to facilities and denials of accreditation (57.5 percent), restrictions on publishing certain content under martial law (48.2 percent), and such cybercrimes as DDoS attacks and phishing (38.6 percent).

In Russia, 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 more than eight years for an online stream about war atrocities in the Ukrainian town of Bucha. The Moscow City Duma deputy Alexey Gorinov received a sentence of almost seven years in a penal colony for talking about the expanded war at the City Duma meeting.

The Russian government also adopted several wartime censorship laws that included administrative and criminal charges for critics of the military and Russian authority. Since the expanded war began in Ukraine, Russia-based 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.

Propaganda and Disinformation Campaigns. The Russian government is no stranger to spreading propaganda, misinformation, and disinformation throughout the countries of the VIBE study, with panelists throughout the region raising this over a number of years. However, with the full-scale war in Ukraine VIBE experts consistently noted heightened efforts than can be directly traced to Kremlin-linked actors.

Panelists in Ukraine observed that Government of Russia propaganda efforts have been active in the occupied territories and on social networks. In a November 2022 report, the Ukraine-based data journalism organization Texty identified 120 Telegram channels created by Kremlin-linked information actors in the initial weeks of the full-scale invasion, claiming that at least half arose from a coordinated effort and were managed from the same location. These channels copied local news feeds to attract subscribers, with the primary goal of spreading Government of Russia rhetoric and simulate Ukrainian support for the occupying Russian forces. They also produced and spread mal-information to spark panic and strife among Ukrainians, along with doubt about the Ukrainian government. Further, as Russian forces retreated or slowed their advances, the proliferation of new channels also slowed, mirroring the changing priorities of the military effort. Since early summer 2022, active Telegram channels were running only in the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions. Additionally, Digital Security Lab reported that a number of new Facebook and Instagram pages initiated efforts targeted at Russian speakers in southern and eastern Ukraine, with fake stories on the brutality of the Ukrainian army.

The Ukraine chapter noted, however, that this onslaught of propaganda has helped heighten awareness of Kremlin propaganda narratives, since Ukrainian media covers it frequently. A journalist on that panel further noted that efforts to curb hate speech spread by the Government of

Russia have intensified, with many Ukrainians joining an informal effort to block or file complaints about Kremlin propaganda on social media.

Within Russia, propaganda about the full-scale war in Ukraine—or as Russian authorities mandate that it be called, a "special military operation"--permeates society through state, online, and social media. A quote from 2021 Nobel Peace laureate and editor-in-chief of *Novaya Gazeta*, Dmitry Muratov, in a March 2022 article in The New York Times, summed up the current Russian reality succinctly: "Everything that is not propaganda is being eliminated." Authorities shuttered long-standing media outlets *Novaya Gazeta* and Echo Moskvy radio station, while blocking a number of others such as The New Times, Republic, and Mediazona. Foreign media—including RFE/RL, Deutsche Welle, and the BBC—pulled their staff from the country.

Objective reporting about the expanded war in Ukraine can, and is, prohibited by the government, including Roskomnadzor, the federal agency responsible for control, censorship, and supervision of the media.

The only acceptable sources about the full-scale war are government officials or bodies. Additionally, most of the international coverage available in Russia is related to Ukraine or the United States and is hostile to those countries, people, and politics. The majority of the remaining Russian independent media had to leave the country in 2022 and produce their news in exile.

In neighboring Belarus, the increasingly repressive regime of President Aleksander Lukashenko is in lockstep with the Government of Russia. More and more Belarusian independent voices and media are being labelled "extremist" by the Belarusian government and either forced to liquidate their operations or leave the country. Creating and disseminating false and misleading information became even more widespread among state-owned media when the Kremlin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine started. State media's focus shifted from the migrant crisis that dominated the agenda in 2021 to promoting Government of Russian narratives about Ukrainians and Ukraine. An analysis of Sputnik Belarus (a Russian government-owned Belarusian outlet promoting Kremlin narratives) content by iSANS, tracked the main Kremlin-backed messages being disseminated in Belarus: questioning Ukrainian statehood, promoting Russia's alleged military successes in

Ukraine, and accusing the United States and NATO countries of using Ukraine as a proxy to fight Russia.

In Moldova, the panel collectively agreed that the Government of Russia is by far the foreign government that actively spreads misinformation. Political and religious rhetoric justified the expanded war in Ukraine, which was bolstered by fake news about Russian-speaking citizens of Moldova being oppressed. While the Moldovan government tried to ease tensions through debunking false information spread by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a sizeable portion of the media sector—including professional, partisan, and nonprofessional content producers—spreads pro-Kremlin narratives such as Russia's defense of orthodoxy and traditional values, while the West seeks to destroy them. One panelist cited a November 2022 Public Opinion Barometer survey which showed that 32 percent of Moldovans justified the Government of Russia's aggression in Ukraine.

While Georgia has long experienced Kremlin-motivated narratives, experts on the VIBE panel in the country expressed concern over a rise in mis- and disinformation after the Government of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, some panelists pointed to members of the ruling Georgian Dream political party planting pro-Kremlin narratives such as the allegation that the West and some Ukrainian officials wanted Georgia to open a second front in the expanded war with Russia, marking the first time Kremlin-linked disinformation was explicitly aired on pro-government media.

The Georgia chapter also explored that destructive impact of a far-right, Kremlin-affiliated national broadcaster, Alt-Info, which actively spread Government of Russia war propaganda and disinformation about the full-scale war. A Democracy Research Institute study about Alt-Info found that its coverage actively tried to portray the Ukrainian government as a puppet regime of the West, stoke anti-NATO skepticism as a tool to distance Georgia from the West, and exacerbate popular fears about the loss of Georgia's occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

In Kazakhstan, Kremlin-linked propaganda intensified with the start of the expanded war in Ukraine. In one example, a guest on the "Evening with Vladimir Solovyov" program on state-owned Russian television caused a stir by saying that "the next problem in Kazakhstan." In another, Russia's ambassador to Kazakhstan said in an interview with

the Russian state-owned Sputnik news agency that the Government of Russia would not hesitate if the president of Kazakhstan asked for help with "nationalism" in the country.

The panelists in Kyrgyzstan noted that many people echo pro-Kremlin propaganda that they see on Russian TV programs, including justifying President Vladimir Putin's aggressive policies about invading Ukraine. Compounding this situation, many Kyrgyzstani citizens have family members or friends who work in Russia and who actively distribute video and audio podcasts from Russian social media networks through instant messenger apps. This phenomenon actively puts in place a multi-layered system of Kremlin propaganda and helps explain how misinformation in Kyrgyzstan continues to proliferate.

In Uzbekistan, Ukraine's ambassador to Uzbekistan asked the government there to block Russian TV broadcasts, noting that "the information war waged by the Russian media is an integral part of the military campaign and is aimed at misinforming the global community." The Uzbekistan government refused but expanded foreign TV channels offerings, such as the BBC and CNN, in late 2022. Political analyst Kamoliddin Rabbimov said these additional channels counterbalance Kremlin propaganda, but he criticized the official media's lack of coverage and analysis of the full-scale war and government policy limiting the variety of opinions. Daniel Rosenblum, the former U.S. ambassador to Uzbekistan, noted in an interview with the Alter Ego project that "the loudness of the voices we are hearing from the Russian media drowns out other voices."

Raskrinkavanje (Disclosure), a Serbian fact-checking project that is produced by the nonprofit Crime and Corruption Reporting Network (KRIK), examined more than 4,000 texts regarding the expanded war in Ukraine that five national print dailies published from February through July 2022. KRIK found that while these media published neutral coverage, about 40 percent were biased, mostly supporting Russia and Putin, with daily outlet *Večernje Novosti* using heavy-handed misinformation. According to the International and Security Affairs Center (ISAC Fund) NGO, the most popular media sites in Serbia show pro-Kremlin narratives' penetration into public opinion.

Moreover, the Russian state-funded news website and radio station Sputnik still strongly influence public opinion in the Serbian media landscape. In November 2022, RT Balkan (Russia Today-Balkan) was launched. According to a regional analysis, Serbia has the largest number of media in the Balkan region spreading disinformation about the full-scale war in Ukraine. VIBE panelists said TV Happy has a daily debate program on Government of Russia aggression in Ukraine, which only discusses a pro-Kremlin point of view. Raskrinkavanje analyzed several pro-Kremlin tabloids and dailies in Serbia, including *Informer* and *Večernje Novosti*, which showed the outlets openly spread Kremlin propaganda.

Kosovo was among the first countries to condemn the Government of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it welcomed displaced Ukrainians, and the government hosted some journalists from the country, providing them with housing, money, and other assistance. The panel in Kosovo noted that the expanded conflict in Ukraine has led to an uptick in slanted and unverified news from the Kremlin and Serbia. This mal-information has had a significant impact, especially in the predominantly Serbian northern part of Kosovo. Additionally, it is also often translated into Albanian and makes its way into online media that is read by most people in Kosovo.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina (B&H), the panel noted that between general elections and the full-scale war in Ukraine, the country saw increased level of biased reporting, disinformation, and smear campaigns, particularly online--with conspiracy theories, inaccurate or unverified news, and disinformation thriving in the wake of the Government of Russia's expanded invasion of Ukraine. One panelist observed that media in B&H often copy and paste news about the expanded war in Ukraine from Serbia without verifying the information.

The B&H panelists also called the Russian Embassy a leader in spreading disinformation and propaganda on its social media pages, such as biolaboratories manufacturing weapons that target Russian DNA which was further spread by the media. The Kremlin's influence has also contributed to polarization in reporting on the full-scale war. Media in the Federation cover it as an invasion of a sovereign state, while those in

the Government of Russia-aligned Republika Srpska have adopted the Kremlin-preferred term "special military operation." Moreover, RTRS, Republika Srpska's public broadcaster, has aired almost daily reports that follow Kremlin propaganda from correspondents in the Donbas region of Ukraine or from the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic. The Russian state-owned news agency Sputnik has also been a source of disinformation in B&H, putting out claims such as Russia managing to prevent a third world war.

Recommendations

IREX asked panelists and chapter authors to provide specific recommendations on ways to improve the performance of their media and information sectors. Below are summaries of this year's recommendations that IREX has compiled, organized into the following recurring themes: 1) Working with big technology platforms to improve their policies and practices; 2) Combatting disinformation and other harmful content; 3) Supporting fact-checking; 4) Providing legal support to the media and information sector; and (5) Strengthening investigative journalism reporting.

IREX hopes these will be useful to VIBE readers.

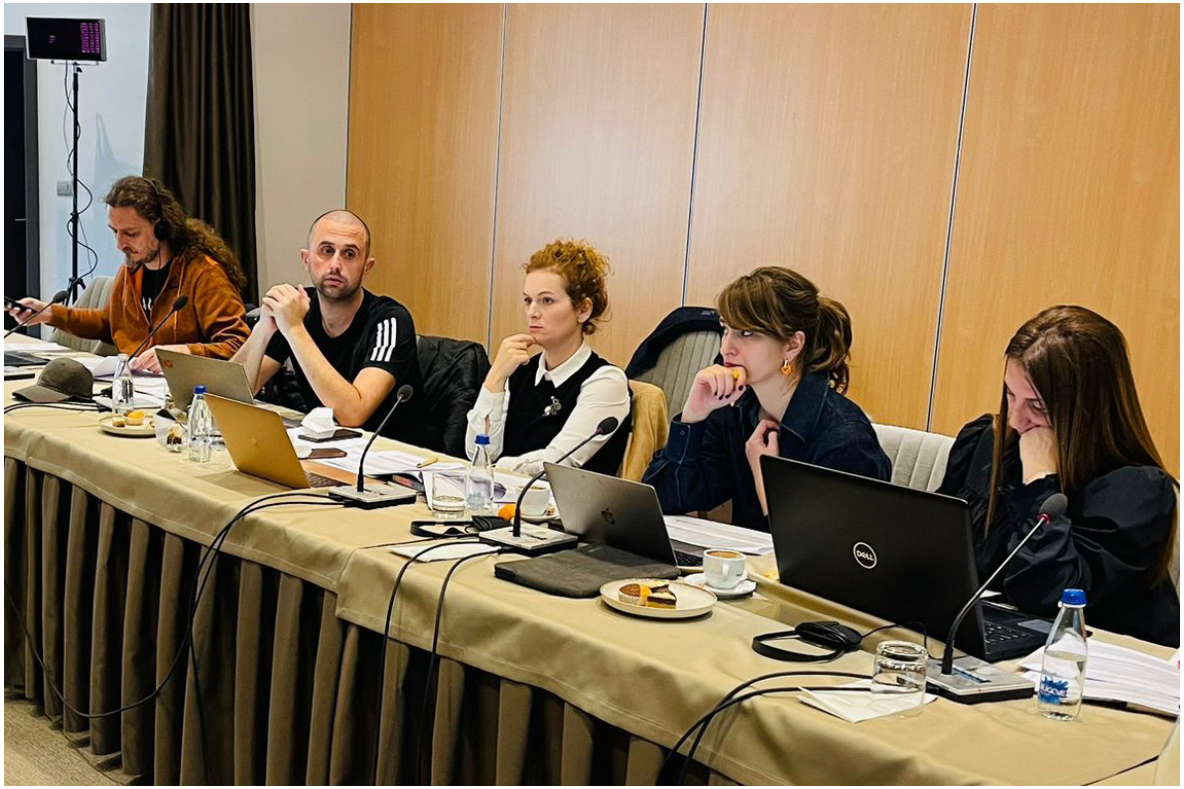
Big Tech:

Georgia: Working with large technology platforms—such as Facebook (Meta), Twitter (X), and others that serve as distribution platforms for media outlets—to minimize issues faced by media who use them, such as blocking legitimate content and accounts.

Ukraine: Working with tech giants to amend their policies on blocking Ukrainian content and social media accounts. Ukrainian journalists and public figures with large audiences on Meta have been blocked, and anyone who writes about Russian war crimes of which the world should be aware can be blocked. Ukrainian efforts to pressure tech giants were not enough to amend their policies on military content, while their content moderation of undisguised propaganda remains low.

Disinformation and other harmful content:

Albania: Training on how journalists can deal with disinformation, ensuring that such trainings are accessible to journalists operating outside of the capital. Capacity building on cyber security and cyber hygiene.



B&H: Educating and sensitizing journalists and editors to recognize harmful content, the use of sexism to discredit female candidates, and the use of conspiracy theories, disinformation, and hate speech.

Fact-checking:

Armenia: Supporting more reliable and reputable fact-checking platforms to withstand the never-ending volume of misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information both in-country and disseminates from foreign governments.

Kosovo: Strengthening fact-checking mechanisms, especially on digital platforms. This could involve developing partnerships with international fact-checking networks and creating local resources for fact-checking in the local language(s).

North Macedonia: Investing in more fact-checking sections in media, both for pre-publication and for debunking false narratives and disinformation.

Media and information literacy:

Albania: Supporting and extending media literacy programs, ensuring systematic and sustainable approaches.

B&H: Developing and adopting, at the state level, a media and information literacy strategy that will include guidelines and action plans for its introduction into the education system, including provisions on teaching materials and teacher retraining.

Kazakhstan: Promoting the development of critical thinking and media literacy among the population.

Kosovo: Investing to improve media literacy and critical thinking skills among the public to help combat the spread of mis- and dis-information.

Serbia: Introducing media literacy in school curriculums and increasing minority language programs on public service media.

Legal support:

Kyrgyzstan: Supporting the media, journalists, and bloggers with free legal advice and legal assistance in court.

Serbia: Providing training and materials for the judges and prosecutors to recognize and reject strategic lawsuit against public participation (SLAPP) lawsuits.

Tajikistan: Improving legal protections for journalists and ensuring journalists understand their rights under the law.

Investigative journalism:

Albania: More financing for independent investigative work, especially in local communities, on issues that are relevant to those people.

Armenia: Providing more funds for grants and competitions for investigative journalism.

Kyrgyzstan: Expanding investigative journalism by providing training and mentoring for experienced and beginners by providing different levels of in-depth training.

VIBE 2023: Overall Average Scores

0-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40
Turkmenistan 1	Azerbaijan 9 Belarus 10	Russia 12 Georgia 13 Serbia 15 Tajikistan 15	Kazakhstan 18 Kyrgyzstan 18 Uzbekistan 18 Albania 19 Bosnia & Herzegovina 19	Armenia 23 Kosovo 23 Montenegro 23 North Macedonia 23 Moldova 24 Ukraine 24			
Not Vibrant		Slightly Vibrant		Somewhat Vibrant		Highly Vibrant	

VIBE 2023: Information Quality

0-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40
Turkmenistan 1	Azerbaijan 10	Belarus 12 Georgia 13 Russia 13 Serbia 14	Tajikistan 16 Albania 17 Bosnia & Herzegovina 18 Kazakhstan 18 Kyrgyzstan 19 Uzbekistan 19 Armenia 20 Kosovo 20	Montenegro 21 Moldova 21 North Macedonia 21 Ukraine 21			
Not Vibrant		Slightly Vibrant		Somewhat Vibrant		Highly Vibrant	

VIBE 2023: Multiple Channels

0-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40
Turkmenistan 1	Azerbaijan 8 Belarus 9	Russia 11 Georgia 13 Tajikistan 15	Belarus 16 Kazakhstan 16 Serbia 16 Kyrgyzstan 18	Albania 21 Bosnia & Herzegovina 21 Uzbekistan 21	Kosovo 26 Montenegro 26 Armenia 27 Moldova 27 North Macedonia 27 Ukraine 27		
Not Vibrant		Slightly Vibrant		Somewhat Vibrant		Highly Vibrant	

VIBE 2023: Information Consumption and Engagement

0-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40
Turkmenistan 0	Azerbaijan 7 Belarus 9	Tajikistan 12 Russia 13 Georgia 14 Uzbekistan 14	Serbia 16 Albania 17 Kyrgyzstan 17 Bosnia & Herzegovina 19 Kazakhstan 20	Armenia 21 Kosovo 21 Moldova 22 Montenegro 22 North Macedonia 22 Ukraine 24			
Not Vibrant		Slightly Vibrant		Somewhat Vibrant		Highly Vibrant	

VIBE 2023: Transformative Action

0-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40
Turkmenistan 0	Belarus 10	Azerbaijan 11 Russia 11 Georgia 13 Serbia 15	Kyrgyzstan 17 Tajikistan 17 Bosnia & Herzegovina 18 Albania 19 Kazakhstan 20 Uzbekistan 20	Armenia 22 Montenegro 22 North Macedonia 23 Ukraine 23 Kosovo 25 Moldova 25			
Not Vibrant		Slightly Vibrant		Somewhat Vibrant		Highly Vibrant	

METHODOLOGY

The emergence of digital and social media has fundamentally disrupted the traditional media model. Today people are simultaneously producers, transmitters, consumers, and users of information. To capture a vastly changed and fluid media environment, IREX and USAID developed the **Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE)** to better describe and measure the way information is produced and utilized, thus assessing how vibrant countries' information systems are in the modern age.

In a vibrant information system, quality information is widely available, and the vast majority of information is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Sufficient resources for diverse and inclusive content production should exist. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; have the ability to recognize and reject misinformation; and can make informed choices on the types of information they consume. People use quality information to inform their actions, improve their communities, and weigh in on public policy decisions. Building off almost two decades of experience with the **Media Sustainability Index**, VIBE looks at **four principles** of information vibrancy:

1) Information Quality: How information is produced by both professional and nonprofessional producers. This includes content quality, content diversity, and economic resources.

2) Multiple Channels – How Information Flows: How information is transmitted or spread by both formal and informal information channels. This includes the legal framework for free speech, protection of journalists, and access to diverse channels and types of information.

3) Information Consumption and Engagement: How information is consumed by users. This includes looking at freedom of expression, media and information literacy, digital privacy and security, the relevance of information to consumers, and public trust in media and information.

4) Transformative Action - How Information Drives Behavior: How information is used and put into action. This includes how governments, the private sector, and civil society use information to inform decisions and actions; whether information is spread across ideological lines; and whether individuals or groups feel empowered to use information to enact change.

By helping implementers, donors, policymakers, and partner governments improve the resilience and integrity of information systems in developing countries, VIBE aims to ensure that citizens, civil society, and governments have the information they need to increase governments' capacity and commitment to meeting the economic, social, and democratic needs of their people. It is an ideal tool for tracking national and regional information trends over time and informing global understanding of the way information is produced, shared, consumed, and utilized in the digital age.

Local Panels for Expert Assessment

VIBE aims to describe entire countries' information systems by drawing together experts from the country's media outlets, NGOs, professional associations, polling firms, and academic institutions to participate in panel discussions. This may include editors, reporters, media managers or owners, advertising and marketing specialists, pollsters, lawyers, professors or teachers, or human rights observers. Prior to the panel discussion, Panelists will each complete a VIBE questionnaire made up of **20 indicators (5 per principle)** that capture the most important elements of the four VIBE principles (for more details see **Scoring System** below).

Each panel of up to 15 panelists per country will be conducted by a moderator who will themselves be experts in the media and information landscape of the country. VIBE moderators will be responsible for ensuring panels include representatives from various types of media, the capital city, and other geographic regions, and that they reflect gender, ethnic, and religious diversity as appropriate. In addition, IREX encourages moderators to select panelists with varying ideological backgrounds, to minimize the chance that only certain political or social views are captured. For consistency from year to year, at least half of the previous year's participants will be included on the following year's panel.

In some cases where conditions on the ground are such that panelists might suffer legal retribution or physical threats as a result of their participation, IREX will allow some or all of the panelists and the moderator to remain anonymous. In severe situations, IREX does not engage panelists as such; rather the study is conducted through research and interviews with those knowledgeable of the media situation in that country. Such cases are appropriately noted in relevant chapters.

VIBE questionnaires are written in a way that explicitly asks for evidence for each indicator. Panelists are encouraged to consider specific laws or policies, examples from media sources, recent events or developments, research data, personal experiences, or observations of the work of colleagues for each indicator. Based on this evidence and the level of consensus achieved in panel discussions, moderators will assign a **Strength of Evidence (SoE)** score to each indicator (see more details below).

To ensure consistency across country scores, IREX's managing editor reviews, analyzes, and finalizes scores for each country. If the managing editor has concerns about the validity or comparability of indicator scores, she or he may review the narrative chapters to see if evidence is provided to support the scores, modify the scores, or remove extreme outlier scores that vary significantly from the average score.

Scoring System

Each indicator is broken into clear sub-indicators, which panelists will score individually on the VIBE scale. Sub-indicators will be averaged to make the indicator score.

Sub-indicators will be scored using the following scale (0-40):

0 – Disagree

10 – Agree in a few cases but mostly disagree. For example, it may be true for only a minority of content, content-producers, or parts of the country.

20 – Agree in some cases but not others. For example, it may be the case this is true for most professional content but not true for most non-professional content. Or it may be true in some parts of the country but not others.

30 – Agree in most cases. This is the norm, although it may not be true for certain content, content-producers, or parts of the country.

40 – Agree.

N/A - Not Applicable. This will be used for any sub-indicator where a panelist feels the specific concept being assessed is not applicable or relevant to the country.

DK – Don't Know. I do not have sufficient information to answer this at this point. This should be used in cases where panelists do not feel they have adequate information or evidence to assign a score.

Panelists will be allowed to use increments of 5 if they feel the most accurate response is between two of the above options (i.e., scores of 5, 15, 25, or 35). Principle scores are calculated using a straight average of the five expert-opinion indicator scores. Country scores will be calculated as a straight average of the four principle-level Indicators. When a panelist replies N/A or DK on a sub-indicator, that sub-indicator is dropped from both the numerator and denominator for averaging.

The scores will be interpreted per the following categories:

	Principle 1: Information Quality	Principle 2: Multiple Channels	Principle 3: Consumption & Engagement	Principle 4: Transformative Action	Country
Highly Vibrant (31-40)	There is quality information on a variety of topics and geographies available. The norm for information is that it is based on facts and not intended to harm.	People have rights to information and adequate access to channels of information. There are diverse channels for information flow, and most information channels are independent.	People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools. They have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.	Information producers and distribution channels enable and encourage information sharing across ideological lines. Individuals use quality information to inform their actions. Information supports good governance and democratic rights.	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)	There is quality information on some topics and geographies available. Most information is based on facts and not intended to harm, although misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech do have some influence on public discourse.	Most people have rights to information and adequate access to channels of information, although some may be excluded due to economic means or social norms. There are diverse channels for information flow, and most information channels are independent.	Although there are privacy protections and security tools available, only some people actually use them. Some people have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate, whereas others do not.	Information producers and distribution channels enable information sharing across ideological lines but not actively encourage it. Individuals sometimes use quality information to inform their actions. Information sometimes supports good governance and democratic rights.	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.

	Principle 1: Information Quality	Principle 2: Multiple Channels	Principle 3: Consumption & Engagement	Principle 4: Transformative Action	Country
Slightly Vibrant (11-20)	There is quality information on a few topics and geographies available, but many topics or geographies are not covered. Some information is based on facts and not intended to harm, but misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech have significant influence on public discourse.	Many people have either limited rights to information or inadequate access to channels of information. Channels for government information are limited. There are only a few channels for information flow, and many of these channels are not editorially independent from their owners or funders.	Relatively few people are able to use privacy protections and security tools. Relatively few people have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate. Relatively few people engage productively with the information that is available to them.	Information producers and distribution channels do not enable information sharing across ideological lines but also do not actively prevent it. Government occasionally uses quality information to make public policy decisions. However, this is not the norm.	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, mal-information, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.
Not At All Vibrant (0-10)	There is limited information available and/or it only covers a few topics or geographies. Misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech are widespread and have a significant influence on public discourse. There are limited resources for content production, and only the views and experiences of the dominant few are shared through media.	People do not have rights to information and/or do not have adequate access to channels of information. There are few channels for any information, including government information. The channels of information that do exist are generally not independent.	People cannot safely use the internet due to surveillance. They do not have the necessary skills or tools needed to be media literate. Media and information producers rarely or never engage with their audience or work to build trust.	Information producers and distribution channels discourage information sharing across ideological lines. Individuals cannot or do not use quality information to inform their actions. Information does not support good governance and democratic rights.	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.

Strength of Evidence (SoE) Score

The **Strength of Evidence** rating is meant to identify areas where further research is needed and to increase transparency about the potential subjectivity of some indicators. For each indicator, moderators will assign a Strength of Evidence rating - Weak, Somewhat weak, Somewhat strong, or Strong - based on the quality of evidence informing each indicator, the confidence of panelists in their scores, the number of N/As or DKs among panelists' scores, and the level of consensus across the panel. A panelist's score that varies by more than 15 points above or below the average indicator score may be removed.

Strong: There is a great deal of evidence providing a strong case for scoring this indicator. Panelists are able to provide a great deal of timely, reliable, and comprehensive evidence to justify their scores (through their questionnaires or panel discussions), and there is a high degree of consensus on the score across panelists. There are no (or almost no) N/A or DK sub-indicators among panelists.

Somewhat strong: There is some evidence providing a somewhat strong case for scoring this indicator. Panelists are able to provide some timely and reliable evidence to justify their scores (through their questionnaires or panel discussions.) There is mostly consensus on the score across panelists for this indicator. There are a few N/A or DK sub-indicators among panelists.

Somewhat weak: Although there is some evidence providing a case for scoring this indicator, it is somewhat weak. Panelists are able to provide only limited timely and reliable evidence to justify their scores (through their questionnaires or panel discussions). There is limited consensus on the score across panelists. There are some N/A or DK sub-indicators among panelists.

Weak: Although there is some evidence providing a case for scoring this indicator, it is weak. Panelists are generally not able to provide timely and reliable evidence to justify their scores (through their questionnaires or panel discussions). There is little consensus on the score across panelists. There are many N/A or DK sub-indicators among panelists.

VIBE Indicators

Principle 1: Information Quality

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

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

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

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

Indicator 5: Content production is **sufficiently resourced**.

Principle 2: Multiple Channels: How Information Flows

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

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

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for **government information.**

Indicator 9: There are **diverse** channels for information flow.

Indicator 10: Information channels are **independent**.

Principle 3: Information Consumption and Engagement

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

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

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

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

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

Principle 4: Transformative Action

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

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

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

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

Indicator 20: Information supports **good governance and democratic rights.**

SOUTHEAST EUROPE

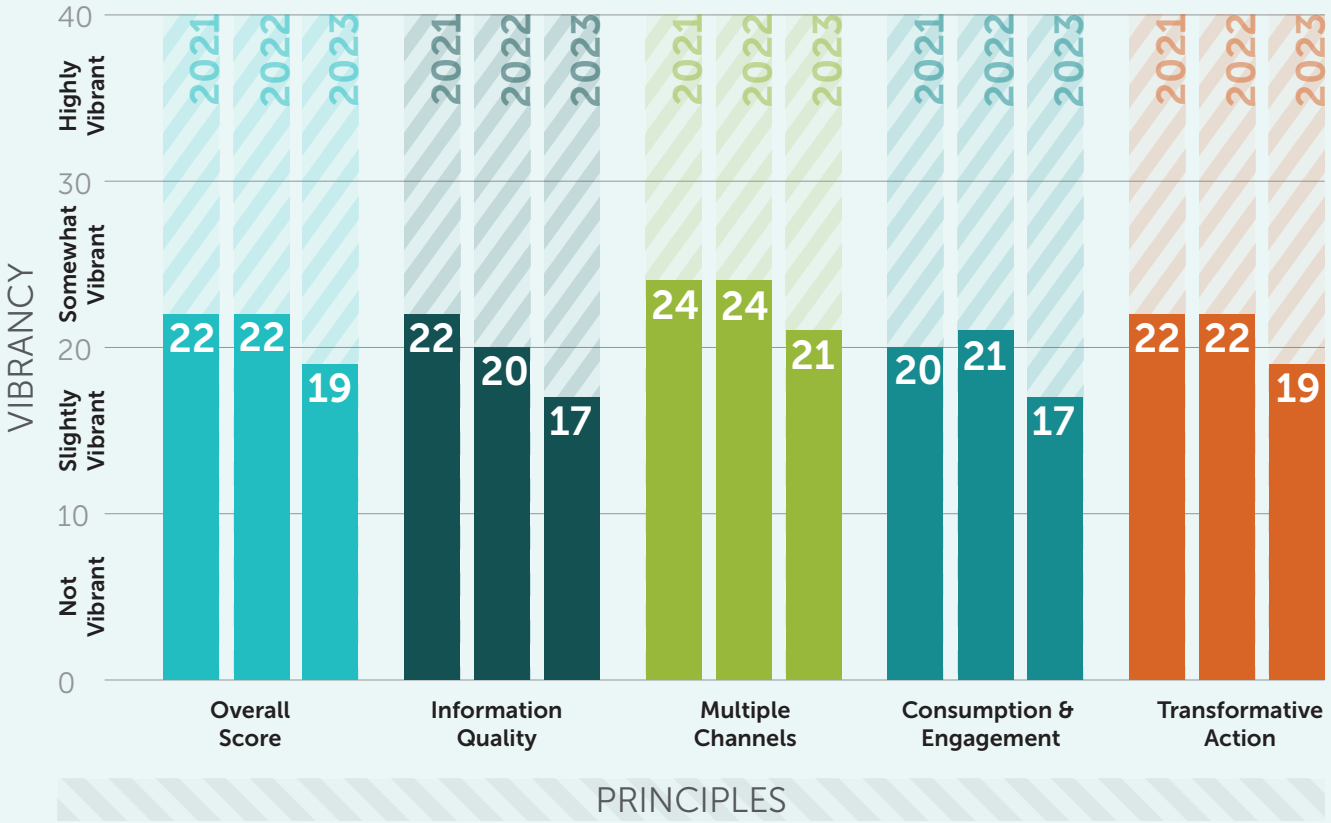
ALBANIA

Vibrant Information Barometer

2023

USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

IREX



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
19

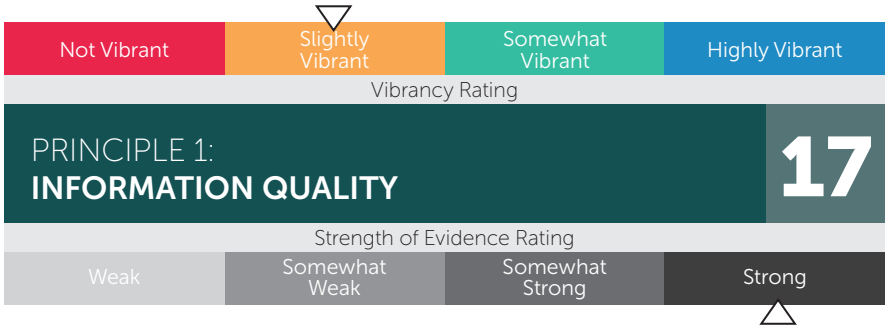
With a first intergovernmental conference in July which opened EU accession negotiations, 2022 marked an important moment in Albania's path towards EU integration. Structures are now in place to carry out accession negotiations and align national legislation with EU law.

Other major events followed. The country faced economic challenges due to the war in Ukraine, including rising inflation and prices. Additionally, the election of Major General Bajram Begaj as Albania's new president in June 2022 instigated infighting within the main opposition party throughout the year.

A series of cyberattacks shook Albania's public and private IT infrastructure in 2022, disrupting e-service provision, taking down government websites, and exposing personal and classified information including mailboxes of the prime minister, ministers, embassies, police, and the State Intelligence Service, as well as account numbers, amounts, and other personal data of private bank account holders. The government declared that the cyberattacks were orchestrated and sponsored by the Islamic Republic of Iran and proceeded to sever diplomatic relations with the country in September. Albania restored services following the cyberattack swiftly, but the toll of the massive data leakages remains unclear.

Albania's media ecosystem is characterized by a rising number of information and news sources--but an overall decline quality, contributing to a decline in the country score from 22 in the 2022 VIBE study to 19 in this year's study. There was a three-point decline in panelist scores for Principle 1 (Information Quality), driven by propaganda dominating content production, leaving less room for genuine news, while the political and economic interests of media owners and influence-buying skew the media landscape and undermine editorial independence. The VIBE panelists believed that the dim outlook for media financing is one of the most important hindrances to the country's media independence. They identified a strong need for financing independent investigative work, especially in local communities. Principle 2's scores (Multiple Channels) also saw a three-point decline compared with last year's study, with higher scores given to the indicator examining access to channels of information, but low scores for the indicator focused on the independence of information channels.

Principle 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) and 4 (Transformative Action) scores dropped four and three points, respectively. While audiences tend to seek out information that confirms their beliefs and thus remain within their information bubbles, including on social media, there is limited availability of nonpartisan news sources. However, on a positive note, the panelists acknowledged Albania's progress in integrating media and information literacy into basic education and the accreditation of media education courses for pre-university teachers. The panelists credited international and civil society organizations' (CSOs) support for these initiatives and claimed that more initiatives to foster collaboration between media and CSOs in a sustainable manner could be beneficial to Albania's media development.



The Albanian media market presents a dichotomy between growth in the sheer number of outlets and sinking quality. Biased reporting and unverified facts are prevalent, revealing lapses in ethics. Panelists agreed that propaganda, which reaches outlets in the form of readymade materials, dominates the content stream. Some media outlets spread disinformation intentionally for political or clickbait purposes. However, the emergence of non-governmental organization (NGO) media adhering to ethical standards and conducting fact-checking marks a positive trend. Harmful content dissemination by foreign governments is limited, but Albania's own government has a history of poor relations with critical media. Hate speech is also an issue, with a few cases landing on the Commissioner for the Protection against Discrimination's desk in 2022.

> **"It seems that ethics is the exception, not the rule, with efforts to twist the truth to serve ideological or business interests and a lack of transparency about editorial lines.**

Panelists awarded their highest scores to Indicator 4, on the inclusivity and diversity of the body of content — with the Albanian Radio and Television seen as the pinnacle of inclusive and diverse content production, catering to all audiences. Indicator 5, in contrast, scored the lowest in Principle 1, with panelists providing a gloomy outlook for the media's financial prospects—and noting that the lack of financial independence continues to hold back the development of media independence in the country. They saw NGO funding for independent journalism as a positive development, allowing journalists to write without following a specific editorial agenda.

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

It is possible to find quality information on some topics in Albania, and panelists agreed that the underpinning infrastructure is adequate, especially considering growth in the mainstream and online media ecosystem. Such growth, however, is predominantly translated in quantitative, rather than qualitative, terms. Lutfi Dervishi, a media consultant and journalism lecturer at the University of Tirana, noted that the current infrastructure lags in technological developments such as using mobile journalism or fact checking. The panelists identified the need of support for ongoing training programs for journalists with an emphasis on technology, and technology-enabled reporting.

The panelists made a distinction between the formal and informal training of journalists. Main universities offer journalism degrees, but degrees are increasingly being offered in journalism and public relations, further blurring the lines between the two fields and setting the stage for graduates to pursue more lucrative careers in public relations. Moreover, the curricula, as panelists noted, are outdated, failing to keep up with developments—especially on the technology front. Shortcomings in relation to laboratories and equipment, especially in universities, reflect a failure to take advantage of technology in the formal education of new generations of journalists.

The panelists noted there are increasing opportunities for training for working journalists, mainly sponsored by international organizations. However, such trainings are less available in settings outside of the capital, Tirana.

The panelists expressed concern about the lack of an observed industry-

wide code of ethics in content production, with biased reporting, a tendency to regurgitate politicians' press releases, and a failure to verify facts on display in most media outlets. The situation is worst in online media, where articles sometimes leave out authors' names and are not fact-based. It seems that ethics is the exception, not the rule, with efforts to twist the truth to serve ideological or business interests and a lack of transparency about editorial lines. Major outlets are seen "changing sides" within very short periods of time.

> **"The panelists agreed that information in Albania is generally not based on facts, and propaganda is widespread.**

However, the panelists highlighted the positive trend of an increasing number of media registered as NGOs, adhering to ethical standards, conducting fact-checking, and reporting on issues of public interest. The panelists also emphasized that journalists with the courage and skill to ask the right questions and hold government actors accountable do exist, but they are often pressured to self-censor and follow the editorial line by editors and owners.

In Albania, generally, there are no distinctions, or separation, between editorial policies or content and management. As a result, published content tends to follow owners' political and economic interests.

Local news is severely underreported. News pertaining to the central government and independent agencies in Tirana monopolizes about two-thirds of the media, with the rest following local developments.[1] Panelists agreed that politics dominates the news arena.

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

The panelists agreed that information in Albania is generally not based on facts, and propaganda is widespread. Propaganda-infused content – produced by central and local-level government officials and political parties – is served readymade to journalists. Outlets often broadcast and publish this material with little to no fact-checking. Some media intentionally spread disinformation to serve certain political agendas; others knowingly spread disinformation for click-bait. The panelists also noted credible reports documenting cases of senior media representatives blackmailing businesses by threatening unfavorable media coverage such as *"Country Reports on Human Rights Practices on Albania"* by the U.S. Department of State, from 2022.

As Kristina Voko, executive director of BIRN Albania, noted, a lot of false information is not fabricated internally by outlets, but the copy-paste culture of many Albanian newsrooms perpetuates the spread of propaganda and disinformation. Journalists do not suffer professional consequences for spreading fake news unless they speak against the government.

Panelists critiqued the government's reaction to the 2022 cyberattacks as well, agreeing that the government failed to communicate responsibly and clearly after news of the hacking circulated in the media.

Ornela Liperi, editor-in-chief of *Monitor* magazine which specializes in financial issues, noted that open data exists to facilitate fact-checking, such as treasury transactions. This pool of data has improved continuously, aided also by technological developments. Journalists encounter obstacles, however, when requesting unpublished information, which impedes fact-checking.

Content moderation remains an issue, especially considering the small size of the Albanian market. Apart from Facebook's effort to collaborate with Faktoje.al, the first fact-checking service in Albania, attempts to interrupt the flow false information on social media remain poor.

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

Dissemination of intentionally harmful content by foreign governments

1 *Local News Mapping Study,* Citizens Channel. November 16, 2022. https://citizens-channel.com/2022/11/16/citizens-channel-prezanton-studimin-hartezimi-i-lajmeve-lokale/

is not considered a major problem. Rather than focusing on mal-information, they tend to focus on propaganda, promotion of historical connections, or disinformation.

Jetmira Kaci, a freelance journalist based in Tirana, noted that the government, however, does not inform, but rather disseminates what it wants the public to know, mainly through pre-packaged videos. Press conferences are rare, and officials treat journalists disparagingly, addressing them with offensive and derogatory language – thus limiting space and opportunities for critical questions.

The misinterpretation of facts is an important issue, with panelists citing examples like the war in Ukraine and its impact on prices. Misinterpretation, rather than mal-information, dominates the government's narrative. Voko noted that in two cases the prime minister, when confronted with dissemination of disinformation, apologized[2].

Professional content producers and pundits seem to use hate speech, especially towards vulnerable groups, women, the Roma, and Egyptian communities, along with LGBTQ+ communities, according to the panelists. Yet reporting of hate speech remains low. In 2022, the Commissioner for the Protection against Discrimination reviewed only six cases (four complaints and two *ex officio* cases brought by the commissioner flagging the use of hate speech by television show guests – including one who is a public figure – against a woman and a member of the Roma minority). In the second case, the Commissioner found the television station responsible for hate speech as well, given the failure to take a critical stance against hate speech.[3]

Mal-information has been noted in cases that relate to issues protested by civil society, an area in which the government has been quite vested. Attacks against journalists and critical media continue. Voko also emphasized that many outlets that disseminate mal-information want to harm certain politicians—or create a positive image for others.

2 https://tiranapost.al/politike/rama-kerkon-ndjese-per-statusin-e-tij-ne-lidhje-me-manhattanin-e-zagreb-i520259

3 *Annual Report,* Commissioner for the Protection against Discrimination. 2022. https://www.kmd.al/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Raporti-KMD-2022_compressed.pdf

Most media outlets in Albania do not have a written code of ethics, or self-regulating mechanisms like a board of ethics. Still, there are no cases of serious professional consequences at the political and professional level of journalists or media who have been found at fault.

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

There was no agreement among panelists on the inclusivity and diversity of content. The national public service broadcaster, Albanian Radio and Television, is seen as providing inclusive and diverse content for all audiences, including minorities, with news editions in their languages as well as sign language. Other outlets fail to provide inclusive content, and mainstream media overlook minorities. Even in cases when there is content produced for these minority groups, it is superficial. Furthermore, the vast majority of private outlets do not include the use of sign language in news broadcasts, which is a legal obligation stemming from the law on audiovisual media. Geri Emiri, executive director of Amfora.al, said that online media and social networks are addressing this lack of representation, and communities are also creating their own online platforms to disseminate relevant information.

Ideologies and points of view are not inclusive and diverse, as politics, government affairs, criminal events, accidents, and entertainment content tend to dominate media space while social and cultural issues draw less coverage.

Media employees tend to be women, the panelists agreed; however, the higher one climbs the hierarchy ladder there are fewer women, with leadership positions predominantly occupied by men. Similarly, men dominate spaces as guests on television shows discussing politics, economics, and government, while women appear more in settings exploring social and cultural topics.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

The panelists gave Indicator 5 their lowest scores for Principle 1, sharing a pessimistic outlook for media financing and agreeing that low financial

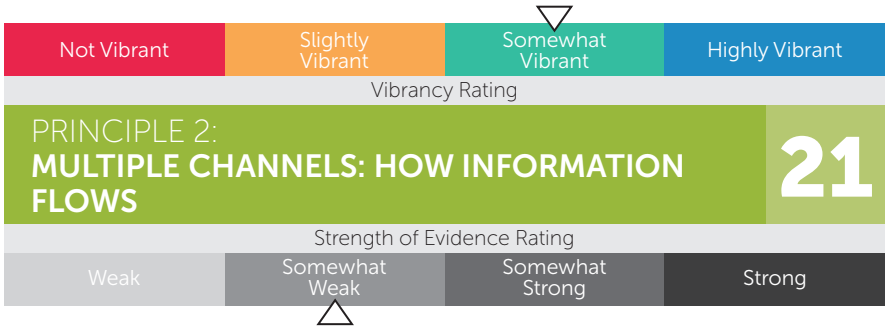
independence remains an important element holding back the growth of media independence in the country. Albania's media market does not operate under a recognizable business model, with a few outlets capturing almost 70 percent of the €50 million ($55.3 million) advertising market, Liperi emphasized. Government advertising contracts generally do not constitute meaningful amounts that lead to market distortions, the panelists generally agreed, and the government does not offer media subsidies. Nevertheless, most of the panelists mentioned a lack of transparency regarding government advertising contracts.

Online portals rely on advertising, Klevin Muka, journalist and moderator for Panorama TV, pointed out, and in many cases, these portals are obliged by advertisers not to publish certain information. Social media marketing has also contributed to a decrease in advertising revenue, since many businesses decide to reach their customers through international social media platforms such as Meta, Alphabet, and TikTok, rather than to employ mainstream media advertising.

Journalists working for mainstream media generally receive fair compensation, while those that work for online portals are poorly paid. Delays in salary payments continue to be an issue overall in the country, as is the level of informality surrounding labor contracts.

Local media outlets are heavily impacted by a lack of financial resources, operating in an environment of advertising scarcity and depending on local actors, while large companies take their advertising business to national media. Furthermore, local media outlets undergoing the digitalization process face high costs, which the government does not cover. Local journalists, for their part, must take different jobs to make a living. They face higher levels of uncertainty, especially regarding working conditions and contractual uncertainties. Often, only a small portion of an agreed-upon payment will be noted in a contract, with the remaining sum paid out informally.

A positive development in the media financing landscape, albeit not representative, is the financing of independent, high-quality articles by NGOs, which allows journalism grant recipients to write about the topics they want, without an obligation to follow editorial lines driven by an owner's vested interests.



Although Albania's legal framework ensures freedom of speech and access to information, implementation remains highly flawed. Governmental pressure on journalists, through legal means, remains at low levels, but overall the panelists saw increased hostility towards journalists.

For the most part, people in Albania have access to various information channels, although marginalized groups may face barriers in accessing online information.

The law regulates access to public information and transparency, but proactive transparency in institutions remains inadequate. Journalists and CSOs use mechanisms provided by the law, but there is no up-to-date evidence of public awareness of their rights nor data on citizens' access to government information.

Media ownership concentration persists, with transparency concerns related to online portals and audiovisual media. Editorial independence is lacking, with media outlets often aligned with owners' political and economic interests. Non-profit media, funded by international organizations, show more independence in their reporting.

Panelists gave their highest scores for Principle 2 to Indicator 7, on the adequacy of access to channels of information driven by technology. Indicator 10, regarding the lack of independence of information

channels, was scored the lowest due to owners' political and economic interests that push journalists to self-censorship. However, panelists noted an exception in non-profit media, which is financed by international organizations and which exhibit independence in the pursuit of stories and how they report.

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

Rights to create, share, and consume information exist on paper, however, enforcement is highly flawed. While Albania's constitution guarantees freedom of speech and freedom of the press, the implementation of these guarantees remains problematic, panelists noted.

Government pressure on journalists remains at low levels, although journalists are increasingly being sued for defamation, a trend confirmed by the Council of Europe.[4] No journalists, however, were unlawfully detained in 2022. Pressure on journalists also happens through extralegal means, such as harassing phone calls and hostile comments from public officials. In practice, cases taken to courts are prolonged — and when journalists report cases of harassment to the police and the prosecutor's office, they get dismissed, and there is a lack of capacity and willingness to address online safety issues.

> "Rights to create, share, and consume information exist on paper, however, enforcement is highly flawed.

The panelists agreed overall that self-censorship by journalists to stay within the bounds of the interests of owners and publishers, seriously inhibits the exercise of freedom of the press. Those who resist self-censorship risk ramifications from owners. The panelists have observed an increasing hostility against journalists in Albania, stirred by government officials publicly discrediting the media; some report that they've experienced such treatment themselves.

"From the studies we have conducted, other forms of indirect censorship, or pressure, have been identified. Although it is true that in Albania journalists are not killed or imprisoned, there is a lack of an enabling environment, and lack of safety, to exercise their profession freely," said Blerjana Bino, the Safe Journalists researcher for Albania.

In the aftermath of the cyberattacks on government IT infrastructure, a series of sensitive documents were leaked to the public. In September 2022, following an attack on IT infrastructure of the Ministry of Interior, and a subsequent leak of sensitive information, the Tirana Prosecutor's Office issued an order banning the release of the publication of any data published by the cyberattack authors — raising concerns among organizations working on media freedom, which called for Albanian authorities to proceed with caution and full consideration for journalistic freedoms protected under both domestic and international law.[5]

The Albanian government does not pressure ICT providers to censor media. Laws to protect the confidentiality of sources are in place and upheld, with the protection of sources considered a professional secret. However, journalists may be required to disclose their sources if a court decision deems it necessary.

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

People in Albania have adequate access to channels of information. The ICT infrastructure in place allows for adequate access of internet, with 99.9 percent of individuals accessing internet through mobile

4 Annual Report by the Partner Organisations to the Council of Europe Platform to Promote the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists, Council of Europe. 2023. https://rm.coe.int/prems-050623-gbr-2519-annual-report-partner-organisations-to-the-safet/1680aace4d

5 "Albania: Media must not face criminal prosecution for public interest reporting," Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia. September 23, 2022. https://safejournalists.net/albania-media-must-not-face-criminal-prosecution-for-public-interest-reporting/?fbclid=IwAR0yj78zvuOrGSvRFbRsg81eAKuOAKySvaQQB1CiclVZ355e2uN2UEiwslI

or smart phones.[6] Albania's ICT infrastructure extends throughout the country. However, some panelists emphasized that barriers to accessing information through ICT persist for certain populations, including marginalized groups and people living in extreme poverty.

The ongoing digitalization of broadcasting services has not impacted access to information in Albania, as there are mechanisms to subsidize digital decoders for marginalized groups. Television and radio signals are available countrywide, although Voko noted the low availability of newspapers outside of the capital. Overall, in 2022, the panelists did not identify any significant obstacles inhibiting Albanians' access to information channels.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

Albania has a law upholding the right to information; however, its lack of proper implementation is a major issue in the country. The law regulates two critical aspects, as Voko emphasized: access to public information and transparency, which includes information made public without a request, amounting to proactive transparency. Institutions, as mandated by law, have incorporated a transparency subpage into their official websites that lists the transparency program and a contact person, but information remains at a formulaic level, according to one of the panelists.

> "Government pressure on journalists remains at low levels, although journalists are increasingly being sued for defamation, a trend confirmed by the Council of Europe.

Journalists and CSOs use the mechanisms facilitated by the right to information law, but up-to-date evidence on the knowledge and access of the public to government information, as well as any complaints on the right to information towards the Commissioner on the Right to Information and Data Protection, are hard to find.

According to the panelists, the Media and Information Agency distorts transparency and devalues the role of spokespeople. While the agency's mission is to "ensure transparency in terms of all policies, projects, and activities of the Albanian Government",[7] panelists expressed concerns about this concentration and control of information--and ultimately media and information freedom--in the country.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Panelists agreed that media ownership concentration, in the form of family ownership, is a reality in the Albanian media landscape, especially the audiovisual sphere, and raised two key points on media transparency in the country. First, audiovisual media are legally obliged to be transparent about ownership, but the mushrooming online portals have no such obligations. Finding information on their ownership is impossible at times. The second element relates to the low quality of Albanian audiovisual media's transparency efforts. Panelists made a distinction between the availability of ownership information through government registers and outlets exercising proactive transparency. Although databases like the Commercial Register and the Beneficial Ownership Register can be used to find ownership information, and are used by journalists, outlets should proactively and transparently inform people of their ownership so that citizens can make informed judgments on the quality of information they receive and whether it is impacted by the owner's vested interests.

Online portals can be established freely. As of 2018, after a lengthy process, all digital licenses had been allocated; two were awarded to the public service broadcaster, and five to privately-owned media.

6 *Survey on Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) usage in Households and by Individuals in 2022,* Institute of Statistics. January 16, 2023. https://www.instat.gov.al/media/11169/ict-2022-english.pdf

7 "Purpose & Mission," Media and Information Agency, n.d., https://mia.gov.al/en/purpose-mission/.

The public service broadcaster caters to the needs of all Albanians, and overall, it covers a variety of topics — although some panelists detect partisanship in its editorial lines.

A novel element that emerged during the panel discussion involved the infringement of net neutrality principles by telecommunication companies which, to incentivize the use of certain social media platforms, allow users to navigate these platforms without charge. Although no data was available on this topic in 2022, one panelist is researching this issue.

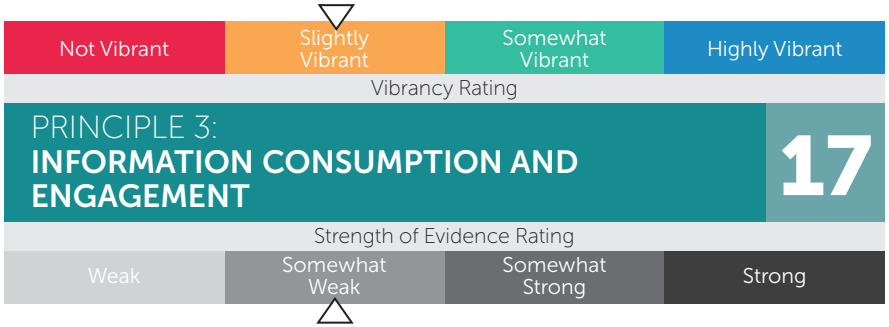
Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Information channels in Albania are not independent, driving the panel to give this indicator the lowest scores of Principle 2. The panelists were unanimous on the lack of editorial independence, noting that editorial policies are typically aligned with owners' political and economic interests, with some exceptions such as non-profit media.

The panel identified two main elements that affect and distort the media landscape and undermine editorial independence in the country: the political and economic interests of owners, mandating editorial policies to fit such interests; and influence buying, where the government influences businesses to take their advertising business to certain outlets in exchange for favorable coverage. The EC's report on Albania for 2022 reflects this reality too, stating, "High-profile business groups have increased their economic penetration in the media market during the reporting period. Media organizations and activists have continued to raise concerns about the use of media channels to promote owners' economic interests and political agendas."[8]

The public service broadcaster is not fully independent in its editorial policies. While its financing structure is mandated by law, including state budget, tariffs, fees, Dervishi pointed out that the public service broadcaster is not financed adequately. Overall, the panelists agreed that the public service broadcaster does not have sole access to certain information, apart from exclusivity rights to broadcast parliamentary sessions.

The panelists said that government regulatory bodies that oversee frequencies allocation and licenses are not independent and politically neutral, emphasizing that the head of the Audiovisual Media Authority is the former spokesperson of the head of the government. Although the selection of members of the Audiovisual Media Authority that took place in 2022 was a bipartisan process, that did not ensure political neutrality, according to the panelists and news reports such as "The Media Committee selected 6 candidates for AMA membership," published in *Reporter.al.*



Panelists agreed that Albanian citizens typically are unable to distinguish between good and low-quality news, and even less able to engage in fact-checking. They also made the point that anti-media rhetoric and its continuous delegitimization of journalism do not help strengthen the importance of improving media and information literacy and factchecking. Still, Albania has taken some positive steps towards mainstreaming media and information literacy in basic curricula, thanks to the support of international donors and CSOs. The accreditation of a media education course for pre-university teachers marks another positive development.

The highest-scored indicator for Principle 3 relates to community media, since Albanian legislation recognizes outlets set up for religious communities as community media. These four licensed radio community outlets in Albania cater to the needs of the Bektashi, Christian, Orthodox,

8 *Albania Report 2022,* European Commission. October 12, 2022. https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/albania-report-2022_en

and Muslim communities. Panelists agreed that technology has facilitated the setup of non-religious community media through online portals, which cater to the Roma community and youth. Indicators 11 and 12, regarding the safe usage of the internet and media literacy, tied for the lowest scores for Principle 3. Panelists noted that although there are laws and regulations in place to ensure data and digital security, implementation is faulty. Additionally, while there have been efforts to improve media literacy levels, the current level is low, especially.

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

The panel agreed that there are laws and regulations in place that aim to ensure data privacy and digital security, but, as with other areas, their implementation is highly flawed. In 2022, a new Law on Personal Data Protection aimed at harmonizing Albanian legislation with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation, was under consultation. Panelists noted that some courts tend to misuse the data protection law to limit the public's and media's access to information, providing anonymized decisions, for example, in cases of high public interest.

Media outlets demonstrate basic understanding and skills regarding security, but the panelists drew a distinction between larger, better-resourced outlets and smaller ones that lack a proper IT department, equipment, and understanding of digital security. Online portals remain very vulnerable to cybersecurity threats, as Erjon Curraj, a digital transformation specialist, confirmed, pointing to a low level of investment in cybersecurity issues paired with low awareness.

> "Online portals remain very vulnerable to cybersecurity threats, as Erjon Curraj, a digital transformation specialist, confirmed, pointing to a low level of investment in cybersecurity issues paired with low awareness.

Although disaggregated data on attacks on media outlets is hard to find, Albania's State Police reported 504 cybercrimes during 2022, as reported by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. To illustrate the cybersecurity situation in Albania, panelists mentioned the cyberattack on the National Agency for Information Society and other government IT infrastructure, which impacted government websites and online public service delivery. The attack was followed by leaks of enormous files of information of Albanian citizens' and institutions, including classified information.

Some organizations, such as the British Council-led Media for All, have offered digital security trainings; however, the number of trainings, in the panel's assessment, remains low.

Furthermore, the panelists felt that Albanian citizens have a low level of digital skills and digital literacy overall, as well as low awareness of the use algorithms to drive social media, although there is a dearth of updated data for 2022 to confirm that impression.

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

Albania has taken some positive steps to advance media and information literacy programs. Pre-university pupils receive an introduction to media and information literacy concepts; however, the panelists considered these efforts fairly basic. Nevertheless, the government is taking positive steps towards mainstreaming media and information literacy in basic curricula, thanks to the support of international organizations and CSOs. The accreditation of the media education course for pre-university teachers marks another positive development; a pilot of the curriculum – implemented by the Albania Media Institute with EU and UNESCO support – wrapped up in 2022, reaching 20 schools in all. With funding from the U.S. Embassy in Albania, IREX also has offered a series of media and information literacy aimed at pre-university teachers — an approach deemed important given the level of impact and reach teachers have in their classrooms.

Media literacy levels remain especially low among older generations, the panelists noted. Citizens show poor ability to distinguish between good and low-quality news, and they are even less equipped to fact-checking news and information they consume. The Bulgaria-based Open Society Institute Sofia's report *How It Started, How It is Going: Media Literacy Index 2022* placed Albania 37th out of the 41 European countries studied. Also, panelists made the point that the anti-media rhetoric and its continuous delegitimization of the press do not help the case of strengthening media and information literacy, as well as fact-checking. Furthermore, there is no evidence on how and to what extent citizens use fact-checking or debunking tools or websites.

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

Panelists believed that journalists and CSOs use their right to access public information, however, the response rate from institutions is low. Indeed, for 2022, the Commissioner on Data Protection and Freedom of Information reports 1032 complaints against public institutions, central and local, for failure to provide access to public information, 44 percent of which are from journalists, and 33 percent from citizens, according to the Commissioner on Data Protection and Freedom of Information *Annual Report* of that year.

> **"Citizens show poor ability to distinguish between good and low-quality news, and they are even less equipped to fact-checking news and information they consume.**

Panelists noted that journalists, apart from not receiving answers to their requests for information, often face repercussions in the form of harassment for requesting certain information. The leakage of information on requests submitted by journalists might also inhibit further requests for information. One panelist mentioned that many institutions take the decisions of the Commissioner on Data Protection and Freedom of Information to the courts; however, the courts are overwhelmed, and the process takes too long — and thus public interest wanes.

Mechanisms that foster public debate and discussion are in place, both in person and virtual. However, the outcome of these processes is irrelevant. Although there is no data on participation, and public debate platforms, panelists agree that they are typically perfunctory. Television debates are subject to a certain agenda in most cases. There is no data on the reporting disinformation, and reporting hate speech remains low.

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

The panelists generally agreed that media and content producers do not engage qualitatively in understanding audience needs and interests. There is an overall tendency to run after clicks among outlets, often sacrificing audience needs and content quality, as demonstrated by mass-produced reality shows and television debate programs.

There is no widely accepted audience measurement tool in the country for audiovisual media, whereas online portals can measure audience through metrics facilitated by technology. Curraj felt that there is a lack of knowledge on how to use technology-enabled tools to understand the needs of the audience, regarding programming timeframes, content, etc.

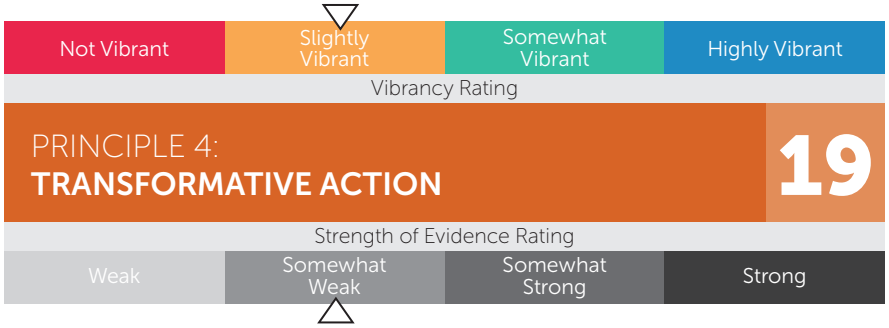
Collaboration between media and CSOs is not common, but when it has happened it has been successful — in the environmental field, for example. Although media and CSOs supposedly share goals, they are sometimes reluctant to collaborate.

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

Albanian law recognizes community media--more specifically audio transmissions for the community--as non-for-profit organizations, either public or private, that work toward the social development of the

community and serve their interests. Community media have access to no-cost licenses. Panelists made a distinction between the provisions of Albanian law and UNESCO's definition that the VIBE methodology uses. There are currently four licensed community radio outlets in Albania, catering the needs of Bektashi, Christian, Orthodox, and Muslim communities.

Outside of these religious community radio stations, the overall community media landscape in Albania remains rather bleak. Panelists agree there is a low number of community media in Albania, although they are highly important to the communities they represent. Technology, perhaps, presents an opportunity, as it has facilitated the setup of community media through online portals. Panelists agree that community media, such as those catering to the Roma community and youth, do not tend to spread disinformation or misinformation, and focus mostly on coverage of social, cultural, and local issues.



Panelists noted that nonpartisan news and information sources are in the minority and reach limited audiences, while people tend to seek out information that confirms their beliefs and remain within their information bubbles — making it difficult for people to shape their views and opinions based on quality information. The civil society sector, however, does use quality information, the panelists felt, and they awarded the highest scores to the related indicator. The panelists agreed that there is a mutually low level of trust between CSOs and the media, while recognizing the importance of such collaboration. Panelists mentioned that CSOs contribute to decision making processes, however, there is no evidence of the impact of these contributions.

The low scores for Indicator 19, in contrast, reflect the government's poor use of quality information to make public policy decisions. Instead, a culture of propaganda and intolerance for critical voices prevails.

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

Nonpartisan news and information sources do exist; however, they are in the minority and do not have extensive audiences; in fact, those that produce quality journalism have a small audience, according to one panelist. The panel provided empirical evidence, due to the lack of research-based data, highlighting that people in Albania tend to seek out information sources that confirm their beliefs — preferring to stay cocooned in their information bubbles, whether on social media or other platforms.

"On social media interaction, in TV debates, and in other media spaces, there is a lot of unethical language, lack of tolerance for different opinions and polarization," Bino noted, adding that there does not seem to be a well-organized or systematic effort, or a culture of knowledge and information based on facts.

There is no evidence that opinions and perspectives are shaped by fact-based information, and primary sources of information are low quality sources. Such opinions are shaped also by panelists' observations of social media interactions.

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

Given the lack of editorial independence in the current media environment, it is difficult for people to shape views and opinions based on quality reporting. Furthermore, people tend to be pushed towards certain opinions by family members, and in local settings in particular, people sometimes confront local officials with information they have

collected themselves, one of the panelists commented. Panelists emphasize that many people cannot distinguish between propaganda, which at times acts as disinformation, and news. However, it should be noted that these claims are based on empirical evidence.

People also fall victim to misinformation regarding health decisions, such as supplements or cure-all medicines that are heavily advertised in the media. Although in some cases these supplements do not have direct health effects – helpful or harmful – they cost people financially and could undermine trust in media.

> "The lack of trust between CSOs and the media keeps collaborative work at a low level.

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

The majority of CSOs rely on quality information when setting their mission, objectives, and programs, but the panelists had no evidence of efforts by CSOs to reduce misinformation or mal-information. However, they said that CSOs rely on international organizations' reports, state audit reports, and other evidence-based information. It can be argued that, while they do not disseminate mis- and mal-information, their evidence-based example might contribute to reducing its spread. CSOs contribute to decision-making processes, however, there is no evidence of the impact of such contributions. As one of the panelists mentioned, decision-making is arbitrary, and laws are prepared by institutions, leaving little to no space for actual contributions from other non-institutional actors.

> "The government engages in disinformation to bury critical media investigations, and there is a lack of reaction to cases of corruption.

Similarly, the 2022 EC Country Report 2022 on Albania emphasized that cooperation between civil society and the government needs to be strengthened to ensure meaningful participation of CSOs in decision-making processes, including EU accession negotiations.

The panelists acknowledged the importance of collaboration between media and civil society. Additionally, CSOs approach media for collaboration, according to one panelist, and media outlets sometimes offer space to well-established organizations on topics they find of interest. The panelists agreed that while such partnerships are important but reinforced that the lack of trust between CSOs and the media keeps collaborative work at a low level.

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

The panelists strongly disagreed that the government uses quality information to make public policy decisions; accordingly, they gave this indicator the lowest score in Principle 4. Mechanisms to engage and foster dialogue between the government and CSOs and the media are outdated, and when used, they tend to spread propaganda, the panelists believed. Press conferences serve as platforms for officials to read statements, and feedback or interaction with journalists is limited. Government officials employ their own channels of communication, and media outlets are presented with ready-made and government-produced content to be disseminated. The national consultation platform used by the government to seek opinions of citizens across a series of topics seems to be used instead as tool to justify their decisions.

The government engages in disinformation to bury critical media investigations, and there is a lack of reaction to cases of corruption.

The panelists were unanimous about the state of public discourse, which they feel is not based on evidence and facts, but rather on propaganda, and clouded by officials attacking critical voices among CSOs and the media. "Misinformation from political parties and public officials continuously affects public discourse," says Besar Likmeta, editor-in-chief of Reporter.al.

There seems to be a lack of due diligence on the part of officials when quoting or disseminating problematic articles that justify their narratives. However, panelists mentioned that government officials do quote, at times, articles from quality media outlets, but that seems to happen only to attack political rivals.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

The panelists agreed overall that the government reaction to reporting of corruption is inadequate. They emphasized that in cases where reporting exposes corruption, typically a few scapegoats are held accountable, rather than the main perpetrators. One panelist noted that in some cases suspensions and disciplinary measures do occur, mainly for low-ranking officials, but reaction in general is weak. Some panelists also lamented the lack of motivation and reaction from justice institutions. Dervishi pointed out that even in cases buttressed by high-quality evidence of wrongdoing, officials attempt to construct a different narrative.

One of the panelists said that in certain cases, such as elder abuse, public sensitivity might help stir a swift reaction — unlike cases of abuse towards other vulnerable groups, such as the Roma and Egyptian communities, or members of the LGBTQ+ community. Another panelist corroborated this by pointing out numerous cases involving low-level officials mistreating marginalized groups with little to no consequences. Public institutions seem to respond more to public emotion than to the severity of issues.

Although 2022 was not an election year, the panelists noted that during elections there is no major impact since most information stems from public election offices, rather than reports by journalists.

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

Besar Likmeta, editor-in-chief, Reporter.al, Tirana

Blerjana Bino, media researcher, SCiDEV & Safe Journalists, Tirana

Edlira Martiri, infoSec professor, Faculty of Economy, University of Tirana, Tirana

Erjon Curraj, digital transformation specialist, Tirana

Geri Emiri, founder, *Amfora.al*, Durres

Jetmira Kaci, freelance journalist, Tirana

Klevin Muka, journalist and moderator, Panorama TV, Tirana

Kristina Voko, executive director, *BIRN Albania*, Tirana

Lutfi Dervishi, media specialist and journalism lecturer at the department of journalism and communication, Faculty of History and Philology, University of Tirana,

Ornela Liperi, editor-in-chief, *Monitor.al,* Tirana

Valbona Sulçe Kolgeci, media researcher and freelance journalist, Tirana

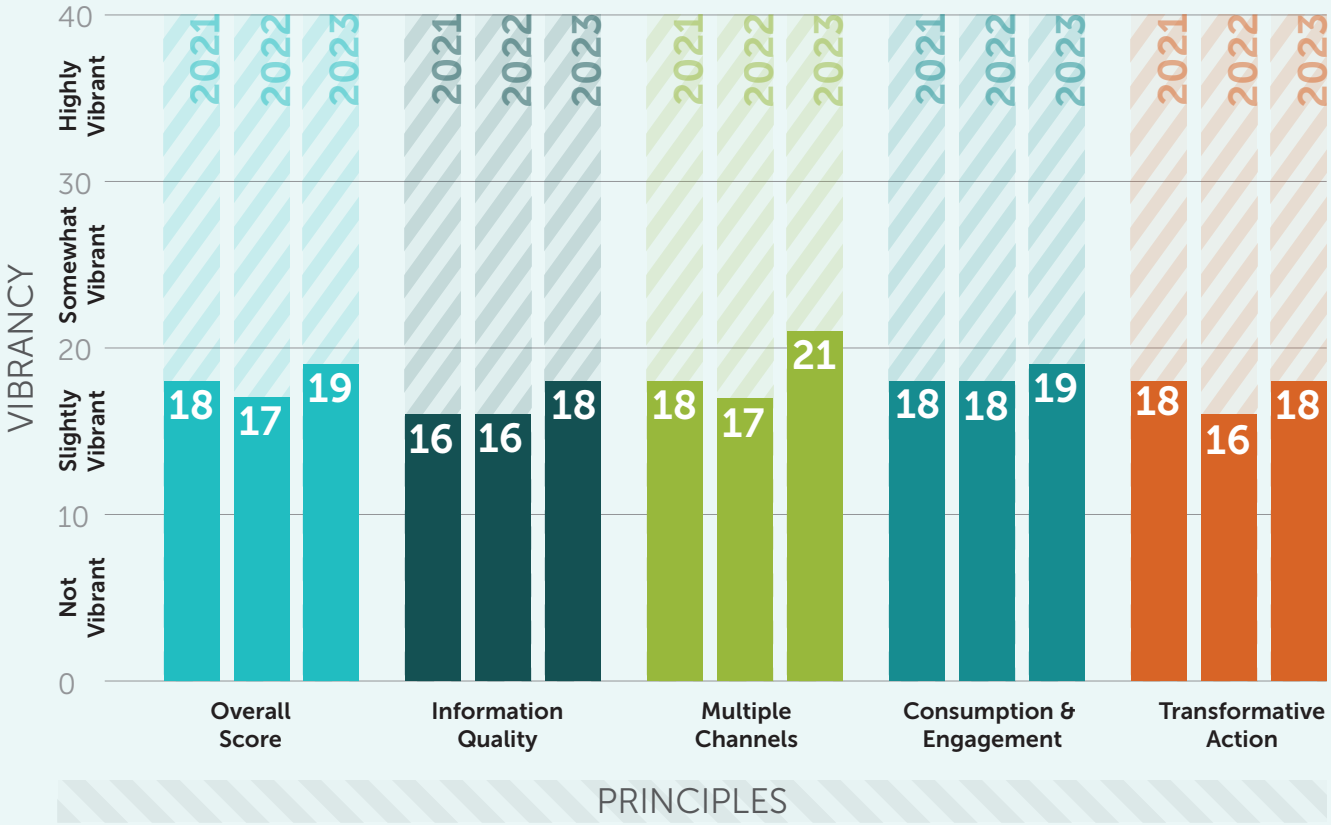
BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Vibrant Information Barometer

2023

USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

IREX



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

19

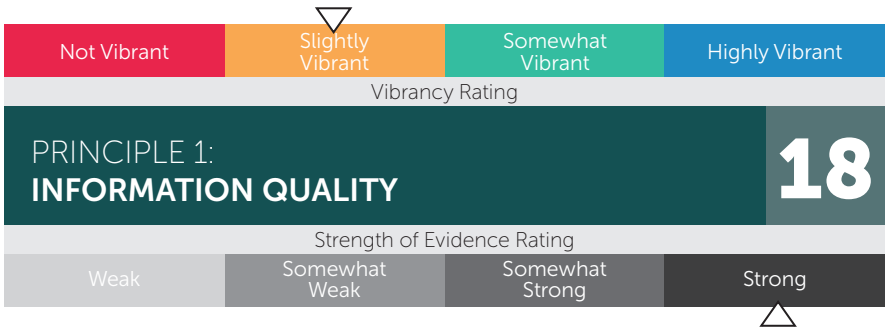
Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) became a candidate for membership in the European Union in December 2022, despite a lack of improvement in terms of freedom of expression and the media, which were among the priorities the European Commission set for the country in 2019.

General elections were held in October 2022 amid local, regional, and global crises, changes in the election law, and accusations of election fraud. Opposition parties in the Republika Srpska (RS), the Serb-dominated part of Bosnia, contested the preliminary results and accused the leading Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) of fraud. A recount for the positions of president and vice presidents of the RS confirmed the victory of the SNSD candidate, Milorad Dodik.

The international community's overseer, High Representative Christian Schmidt, imposed amendments to the election law, to restore the integrity of the electoral process and to prevent parties from blocking the formation of a government in B&H's largely Bosniak and Croat entity, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FB&H). His interventions, unpopular with Bosniak and Serb politicians, did not stop a plethora of election irregularities. As a result, the process of forming a government at the federation level has been very slow. The election results confirmed the dominance of ethno-national parties, while highlighting all the shortcomings of the electoral process. What came out of the elections is the relegation of the leading Bosniak party, Party of Democratic Action (SDA), to the opposition at the national level. Although the SDA candidate lost a bid for the presidency, the Croatian Democratic Union of B&H and the Serb-led SNSD retain a strong grip on power.

The media in 2022 was riddled with biased reporting. Mainstream outlets and anonymous online portals served as mouthpieces for political parties, discrediting political opponents over the course of the elections. The year was marred by physical and verbal attacks on journalists, outdated legal proposals to set back media freedoms, and political pressures on the media--noticeable even in the actions of the Communications Regulatory Agency (CRA). A contact person for journalists was established in the local prosecutor's office in Sarajevo, and the Sarajevo canton government adopted a strategy to make media and information literacy part of formal education.

The overall score for the media and information sector is higher than in last year's VIBE report, thanks in part to the gradual stabilization of the media market from the consequences of the pandemic, and some improvements in media and information literacy. However, in 2022 there was no improvement in media freedoms and freedom of expression. Opaque, arbitrary media financing and ownership remain the biggest issues.



The media and information environment in 2022 in B&H suffered from polarized reporting on the war in Ukraine and biased content that promoted or denigrated parties and candidates in the general elections. Anonymous websites, waging campaigns to discredit certain political candidates, were specifically problematic. However, disinformation also came from government sources, mainstream media, and the Russian Embassy. Professional consequences for spreading disinformation and harmful content are minimal, and the media still work under substantial political influence. The media market has slightly recovered from the COVID-19 pandemic, but content producers still lack enough money to do quality work. Panelists gave resources for content production their lowest mark (13) while both the quality of information and inclusive content indicators fared better, with scores of 21 each.

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

Though infrastructure for the production of diverse content has been improving, panelists said it had still not resulted in more professional and diverse media content in B&H. Television is still the most important source of information for the general audience, but its popularity has been declining. Digital platforms are attracting larger audiences, especially among young people, and panelists agree that producers should adapt their content for digital platforms. Production infrastructure is insufficiently used, and the lack of adequate training of content producers is visible in the quality of media content, including in television. Journalists and other producers often do not take advantage of opportunities to learn new digital tools and trends to create more modern, high-quality content to attract younger audiences.

The election process and the war in Ukraine spurred even more biased reporting, disinformation, and smear campaigns in the media, especially online. Azra Maslo, programs standards coordinator at the CRA, said the regulator did not register major breaches of the election law in television and radio stations' campaign reporting.

Monitoring by Mediacentar Sarajevo of harmful online content, however, reported biased reporting and detected the strong influence of the leading political parties on the media, during the election period. Its monitoring also found instances of journalists copying and pasting politicians' incendiary speeches for propaganda or financial purposes, heedless of the impact such inflammatory language can have on a divided, post-conflict society.[1] According to Semir Hambo, editor-in-chief of the Klix.ba news website, anonymous portals that disseminate content that flouts professional journalistic standards have been especially problematic. Easy to launch, they avoid accountability by publishing no names of their editorial staff or contact information. One study found that of Bosnia and Herzegovina's 600-plus online news media, only 27 percent post full information about the names and surnames of their editorial team[2] The propaganda and disinformation that many published during the campaign suggests they are not independent. Even though some journalists hold government actors accountable by fairly reporting on their words and actions, many just publish their words and information on their actions without any critique.

In the past three years, radio and televisions stations have repeatedly violated rules guaranteeing the right to reply by someone who has been the subject of incomplete or inaccurate reporting, according to

1 Buljubašić, Belma and Sokol, Anida. "Širenje mržnje i ratnohuškačka retorika pred Opće izbore", Media.ba. (2022). https://media.ba/bs/magazin-novinarstvo/sirenje-mrznje-i-ratnohuskacka-retorika-pred-opc-izbore-2022

2 CPCD. (2021). *Mapiranje medijskih web portala u B&H.* https://civilnodrustvo.ba/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Istrazivanje_Mapiranje-medijskih-web-portala-u-B&H-1_compressed.pdf

the CRA. Other violations in 2022 concerned the protection of minors from potentially harmful and inappropriate content. Some political candidates used children in their campaign ads, prompting the CRA to remind broadcasters that using minors for political promotion is prohibited, after which these parts were removed. Maida Bahto Kestendžić, project coordinator at the Press and Online Media Council B&H, said that despite numerous difficulties and challenges, both abroad, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and at home, such as the financial crisis, general elections, and the country's unstable politics, media in B&H still produce decent content.

> **"The election process and the war in Ukraine spurred even more biased reporting, disinformation, and smear campaigns in the media, especially online.**

Content creators try to cover many important topics, but they often have limited funds, ethno-national and political divisions, and a dearth of quality interlocutors and data. Reporting, especially in online media, often lacks diverse sources and information to explain complex topics to the audience. The overall body of content includes local, national, regional, and international news, but often lacks context and explanation, especially in relation to international news.

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

Although a code of conduct by the BH Journalists Association obliges journalists to check information, inaccurate and unverified news, conspiracy theories, and disinformation have flourished during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Tijana Cvjetićanin, editor of the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje, said domestic media often copy and paste news about the war in Ukraine from Serbia, without additional checks. Media also published misleading content during the campaign for the general elections, mainly to promote or discredit certain parties and candidates.

Leading figures of the SNSD in the Republika Srpska aimed to paint the opposition candidate for president there, Jelena Trivić, as a "foreign agent" by pushing disinformation that she had received $10 million for her campaign from the United States. Accompanied by a falsified document, the claim was first published by an anonymous online outlet and later was copy-pasted by mainstream media, including the public service broadcaster of the Republika Srpska, RTRS. It was denied by the U.S. Embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Trivić lost the election to SNSD leader Milorad Dodik. Journalists rarely point out disinformation when it is disseminated by government officials but mostly just publish it unquestioningly.

Berislav Jurič, editor-in-chief of the Bljesak.info website in Mostar, said that city's government has repeatedly spread disinformation. For example, in 2022 the mayor announced the start of construction on an Olympic-size swimming pool, but months later work still had not begun. The project was a promise from city officials after a 16-year-old from Mostar won gold and bronze medals at the European Aquatics Championships, even though her city had no Olympic-size swimming pool. Panelists agreed that media and government officials who spread disinformation face few consequences, as demonstrated by the election results. The Press and Online Media Council can publish decisions regarding breaches of the press and online media code, but it cannot levy fines. The CRA, on the other hand, can fine broadcasters for violating its rules, but rarely does so. Reports have shown that the regulator has failed repeatedly to sanction biased reporting and disinformation, particularly by public-service broadcaster RTRS.[3] The agency's director, Draško Milinović, is a former director of RTRS, which is close to the SNSD political party.

There are also no professional sanctions that would lead to a decrease in credibility or readership. Content creators lack established procedures, tools, and employees for fact-checking. When the fact-checking organization Raskrinkavanje designates online content as disinformation, Facebook makes it significantly less visible, and therefore it is less lucrative for the online media that post it. Cvjetićanin,

3 Bubonjić, Mladen. "Otkako je bivši direktor RTRS na poziciji direktora RAK, nema objavljenih kazni za RTRS", Media.ba. 2022. https://www.media.ba/bs/magazin-novinarstvo/otkako-je-bivsi-direktor-rtrs-na-mjestu-direktora-rak-nema-objavljenih-kazni-za

the Raskrinkavanje editor, claimed media organizations have started correcting mistakes, if only to better monetize their content rather than to preserve their credibility or serve the public interest. With search engines favoring sensationalism over professionally produced content, it can be difficult for online media to adhere to professional standards. "One way forward", Cvjetićanin said, "is to pressure social media platforms and search engines into giving priority to professional media reporting". She predicted that a new code of conduct on disinformation, developed by media, information, and civil society organizations across the EU, would be expanded to include the western Balkans.

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

B&H has frameworks for countering harmful content such as hate speech, denials of war crimes and glorification of war criminals, and threats, attacks, and smear campaigns against individuals. However, they are scattered among different laws, regulations, and self-policing mechanisms, are not entirely aligned with international standards, and are implemented inconsistently, particularly for online media.[4]

> **"Reporting, especially in online media, often lacks diverse sources and information to explain complex topics to the audience.**

During the campaign season, political parties, anonymous portals, and sometimes mainstream media associated with political parties put out content intended to hobble the election process, candidates, or even state institutions. Mediacentar Sarajevo's monitoring witnessed many campaigns to discredit candidates and even the Central Election Commission.[5] For example, female candidates faced gender-based attacks, including references to their hairstyles or alleged sexual affairs with their colleagues, while the work of the Central Election Commission was often questioned without evidence. Candidates were accused of being foreign agents, working with foreign states and international organizations. In addition, campaigns and speeches pushed one-sided interpretations of wartime events, used victims to sway voters, incited their followers against other ethno-national groups, denied war crimes, and glorified war criminals. A report by the Srebrenica Memorial Center counted 693 instances of genocide denial from May 2021 through April 2022 in media in B&H and neighboring countries. Virtually all of the 176 counted in B&H happened in the Republika Srpska.[6]

Milanka Kovačević, editor of the Direkt portal, said most foreign embassies do not spread harmful content. A notable exception is the Russian Embassy, which posts disinformation and propaganda on its social media pages. "Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, its announcements from Russian government agencies, and its reactions to B&H's political process, have been full of disinformation and misleading assertions", Cvjetićanin said, "such as that biolaboratories were turning out weapons to target Russian DNA, a canard later spread by the media."

Russia's influence in the country is also evident in the polarization of reporting on the war in Ukraine. While media in the Federation cover it as an invasion of a sovereign state, media in the Russia-aligned Republika Srpska use the Kremlin's preferred formulation, special military operation. RTRS has aired almost daily reports in line with Russian propaganda from correspondents from the Donbass region or from the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic. The Russian news agency Sputnik also has been a source of disinformation, claiming, for example, that Russia managed to prevent a third world war.[7]

Bahto Kestendžić, of the Press and Online Media Council, said her

4 Sokol, Anida; Ćalović, Maja. *Regulation of Harmful Content Online: Between Freedom of Expression and Harms to Democracy*. 2022. Mediacentar Sarajevo. https://media.ba/sites/default/files/eng_regulacija_stetnog_sadrzaja_na_internetu_-_web_pages_1.pdf

5 Ljevak, Kristina."Rodni stereotipi u službi paterijarhata". Media.ba. (2022). https://media.ba/bs/magazin-novinarstvo/rodni-stereotipi-o-kandidatkinjama-anonimni-portali-u-sluzbi-patrijarhata

6 Izvještaj negiranja genocida u Srebrenici. (2022). Srebrenica Memorial Center. https://srebrenicamemorial.org/assets/photos/editor/_mcs_izvjestaj_BOS_2022_FINAL_ko.71.pdf

7 Sijah, Dalio."Ruski uticaj na medije: Osvrt na dezinformacije iz Rusije", Media.ba. (2023). https://media.ba/bs/magazin-novinarstvo/ruski-uticaj-na-medije-u-bih-osvrt-na-dezinformacije-iz-ukrajine

group's pre-election monitoring found that only 7 percent of user-generated content contained elements of hate speech, a decline from previous studies, which the council attributed to better comment moderation by online media.

Still, the representative of the CRA said the online sphere needs tighter regulation, especially of the most harmful content, including discriminatory and hate speech, and content that endangers public order and peace or threatens the well-being of minors. In 2022, the Council of Europe mapped regulatory approaches across Europe to countering harmful online content to come up with a list of recommendations. The CRA representative said co-regulation seems the only possible solution to harmful online content. In addition to RTRS, other public media, such as the Srpska Republika News Agency, disseminate problematic content with no professional consequences.

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

The media in B&H report on marginalized groups occasionally, without context and consistency, mainly to mark certain anniversaries or special events. Kovačević, of the Direkt portal, said reporting on marginalized groups is often part of donor-supported projects. Only specialized media report on minority groups, even though panelists agreed that the main responsibility for such coverage rests with public service broadcasters. Specifically, the CRA requires them to broadcast programs intended for members of national minorities for at least one hour per week and, according to its representative, their compliance will be monitored.

There are also no programs that use the languages of national minorities or aim to promote their cultures. The Roma, as the largest national minority, for example, do not have a program in their own language, and issues that affect them are covered only by specialized portals that publish some content in Romani, such as the Newipe internet portal. Public service broadcasters adapted some content for hearing-impaired people during the pandemic. Tamara Ćuruvija, an editor at RTRS, said the broadcaster is trying to produce more such content, as the country tries to align its requirements with EU regulations.

During 2022, the media produced lurid coverage of cases of femicide in B&H, describing them as crimes of passion or incidents. They avoided the term "femicide" and ignored the victims while focusing on the perpetrators, their pasts, or even their military decorations. The panelists said there is no exchange of opinions about certain topics, especially ethno-national ideologies or interpretations of wartime events.

Women still hold fewer managerial positions than men in the media, but there has been a 5 percent increase in the number of female directors of radio and television stations. According to the CRA, 31 percent of directors and 41 percent of editors of radio and television stations in B&H are women. There are no data on the gender balance among nonprofessional content producers, but anecdotal information suggests that, depending on the topic, many online influencers are women. Minority groups, however, are also largely excluded from nonprofessional content production.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced

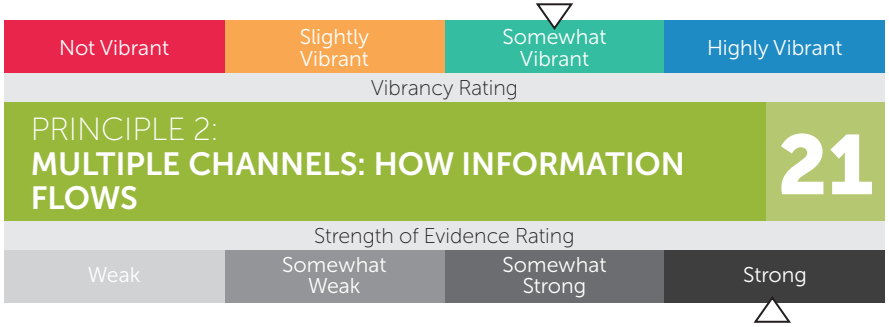
Professional content producers in B&H lack the funds to create quality content or sometimes even to function. In an October 2022 report on B&H's progress toward eventual EU candidacy, the European Commission warned that the state public broadcaster was in serious danger of closing. Years of being denied stable funding had left Radiotelevision of B&H (BHRT) unable to pay salaries and suppliers, and with an overdue tax bill of €9 million ($9.76 million), for which the tax office blocked its accounts in March and April 2022. Most content producers, especially public service broadcasters, cannot afford to use international news agencies, to have correspondents abroad, or to send teams to certain conflict zones, nor can they afford subscriptions for news services, with access to quality photo and video content; according to Mediacentar director Boro Kontić. Even so, most media have not tried to develop alternative methods of finance, such as crowdfunding campaigns.

Media funding from public budgets at all levels of government is still opaque and often serves as a mechanism for political influence. There are no relevant recent studies of how much public money is allocated

to the media in B&H. According to Transparency International, political parties, whose revenues come mainly from public budgets, spent almost €6 million ($6.5 million) for promotional campaigns that included social networks and the media in the run-up to the elections. The largest political parties, such as the Serbs' SNSD and the Bosniaks' SDA, spent the most on political promotion, according to research published in Transparento.ba

The Fabrika advertising agency estimated that B&H's advertising market was worth about €40 million ($43.36 million) in 2022, showing an increase from the previous year. However, marketing experts attribute it to inflation rather than a market recovery. Media in B&H operate in an oversaturated market where they also compete with regional television stations, especially from Serbia and Croatia, social networks, and online on-demand platforms. Even though research on social media companies' share of the digital market has not been conducted in B&H, data from neighboring countries suggest that it could be substantial. Senad Zaimović, director of the Fabrika agency, said companies sometimes find it more efficient and cheaper to advertise on these platforms than to buy space in local media. Only a few commercial media are sustained by advertising revenue, while others have to find other sources, such as public budgets or grants.

According to the progress report of the European Commission, journalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina is an insecure and precarious profession. Especially in local media, the salaries of journalists are lower than the average salary in the country. Borka Rudić, the general secretary of the BH Journalists Association, claimed some media have downgraded some editorial positions and reduced their salaries. Mladen Bubonjić, the editor of Gerila.info and a journalism professor, said journalists have to take multiple jobs to make a living, which impacts the quality of media content.



Attempts in the Republika Srpska to pass laws that would prevent disinformation, criminalize defamation, and widen the definition of criminal offenses against the constitutional order could further curb media freedoms and freedom of expression, panelists warned. The country's Freedom of Information Act is still not fully implemented, and journalists struggle to get information. Many media outlets are under political influence, and the political dependence of the CRA remains one of the most problematic issues in the media industry. Panelists gave their lowest score to the independence of information channels but gave higher scores to other indicators, such as access to information.

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

Freedom of expression is guaranteed by the constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the constitutions of Federation and the Republika Srpska. The national constitution also requires the state and both entities to ensure the highest level of internationally recognized human rights. B&H is a signatory of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, which takes precedence over other laws. The government does not pressure providers of information and communications technology to censor media, but threats to the freedom of expression, including self-censorship are widespread. In 2022, there were attempts to introduce harsher measures against disinformation and hate speech that could further limit the free exchange of opinions.

In October 2022, the president of the Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, asked the Ministry of Justice of the RS to prepare new laws for preventing disinformation and hate speech, criminalizing defamation, and expanding the range of criminal offenses against the constitutional order in RS. Dodik claimed he was acting in line with European standards, even though, for example, the European Court of Human Rights has repeatedly ruled that prison sentences are not appropriate in cases of defamation, while the UN's point person on free speech has argued that the prohibition of disinformation is not a legitimate goal in itself. Journalists' associations and civil society organizations protested that the proposals represent an unacceptable limitation of media freedoms and freedom of expression. In addition, several national ministries have been working to draft a law against online hate speech, that civil society activists warned could restrict freedom of expression if done badly.

> "Defamation was decriminalized more than 20 years ago in B&H, but defamation lawsuits are widely used to intimidate journalists.

Defamation was decriminalized more than 20 years ago in B&H, but defamation lawsuits are widely used to intimidate journalists. The Free Media Helpline of the BH Journalists Association counted 289 active defamation suits against journalists in July 2020. An analysis by the OSCE mission in B&H of around 1,000 defamation lawsuits against journalists from 2016 to 2019 found that 70 percent were filed by politicians or government officials over content of public interest, such as stories on nepotism, corruption, or their involvement in war crimes.[8] There are laws that protect confidentiality of sources, but they are not applied fairly.

In deciding which broadcasters to sanction, the CRA seems to act in the interest of Dodik's SNSD party. In October 2022, Milinović, the agency director, said the CRA would levy a stiff fine against the FACE TV channel, before any investigation or proceedings by the CRA, after he said FACE TV owner and editor Senad Hadžifejzović had tried to incite violence by asking a guest if Dodik should be killed. In response, Hadžifejzović released video of the interview at issue, in which he said he asked the guest if Dodik should be pacified, not killed. The CRA launched an abortive investigation after Milinović announced the fine, but the video was inconclusive. Still, in February 2023, the CRA punished FACE TV for violating generally accepted standards of decency. The BH Journalists Association accused Milinović, who formerly ran the Republika Srpska's public broadcaster, of politicizing the case and abusing his position.

In 2022, journalists in B&H suffered 79 attacks and other violations, including one physical assault, seven death threats, and 12 verbal threats, according to the journalists association. Zoran Čegar was suspended as chief of the uniformed police in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina after threatening to rip out the throat of a reporter from the Center for Investigative Journalism as he was leaving a court in Dubrovnik, where he was on trial for fraud.[9] The center had reported on his illegal property acquisitions.

Besides legal ramifications, there are other types of retribution for speaking or writing about controversial or sensitive topics. Panelists noted increasingly frequent requests from individuals or their lawyers to delete articles, even with no legal basis. Pressure on the media from certain politicians also comes through social networks, according to Klix.ba editor Hambo. Politicians opt not to send denials to the media but rather to target editors and journalists by name on social networks, calling them liars. In addition, Jasmin Mulahusić, affiliated with the leading Bosniak political party, has used his Facebook page to attack journalists. At the close of 2022, he had been under criminal investigation for more than a year on suspicion of inciting national, racial, and religious hatred, discord, and intolerance.

8 UN Report. The Safety of Journalists and Access to Information in Bosnia and Herzegovina. https://bosniaherzegovina.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/Report%20-%20Safety%20of%20journalists%20and%20access%20to%20information%20in%20Bosnia%20and%20Herzegovina%20-%20ENG.pdf

9 Center for Investigative Reporting, "The Double Life of Officer Čegar," October 24, 2022. https://cin.ba/en/the-double-life-of-officer-cegar/

The appointment of a contact person for journalists in the prosecutor's office of the Sarajevo canton in 2022 was the first concrete step toward more effective protection against, and response to, attacks and threats towards journalists there. In mid-2022, the lower house of the Bosnian legislature voted to treat attacks on journalists as a distinct criminal offense, but the country's government has yet to take up the measure by the end of the year.

Indicator 7: People have adequate access to channels of information

Most people in B&H have access to information channels, including radio, television, newspapers or magazines, and digital or social media, but the technological infrastructure is not adapted to the needs of people with disabilities. No social norms preclude any groups from accessing information, and the government does not arbitrarily cut off access to information and communications technologies to certain content producers or users. Panelists said access to communication channels is hampered by poor infrastructure and poverty. Some people in rural areas lack access to traditional communication channels because they cannot pay for the services of cable operators, and television signals are not available in all parts of the country.

> "Although television is still the most common source of information, the use of the internet and social platforms is constantly increasing.

According to CRA data, B&H has 107 TV stations, 150 radio stations, 12 on-demand broadcast providers, and three public radio and television services, which are available to audiences throughout B&H. In addition, many foreign channels are available. Although television is still the most common source of information, the use of the internet and social platforms is constantly increasing. According to the CRA, 95.6 percent of people in Bosnia use the internet. The State Agency for Statistics reported that in 2022 almost 76 percent of households had internet access. A November 2022 report by the agency found that 77 percent of women and 81 percent of men had used the internet in the three months prior, along with 53 percent of pensioners, 84 percent of unemployed people, 95 percent of those working, and 100 percent of students.

Panelist Maslo of the CRA said that as broadband internet use in B&H constantly increases, companies are offering better service packages. The CRA has started the process of broadband internet mapping with the technical support of Slovenian regulators, which Maslo said is an important step toward gradual implementation of 5G technology in B&H.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information

B&H has a Freedom of Access to Information Act, but it is inadequate, not always obeyed, and spottily enforced. In Transparency International B&H's most recent annual review, only 50 percent of public agencies responded to requests by the 15-day deadline, and their answers were often incomplete. Hambo, of the Klix.ba website, said agencies often respond generally rather than to specific questions, and that even when respected, the 15-day deadline does not work for journalists on a daily deadline. In one example of the law's insufficiency, when the Federation's public health agency found that 10 percent of the samples it tested from bottled water contained bacteria that should not have been present, journalists could not obtain the names of the producers. The panelists agreed that the biggest roadblock is a dysfunctional judiciary that does not push for proper implementation of the law and does not punish violators.

Citizens rarely use the Freedom of Access to Information Act and, according to panelists, they do not understand that it is one of their basic human rights. Whether the media obtain information from spokespeople or information offices of government agencies depends on their willingness and professionalism. Panelists said there are some very professional spokespeople who are always available to journalists.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow

The processes for spectrum allocation and licensing for media are fair, and people can freely establish media. B&H still has not adopted legislation requiring the disclosure of media ownership, even though it is a perennial recommendation by the European Commission in the country's EU accession process. Such a law could lay the foundation for a detailed register of media ownership, helping to thwart hidden media concentration, the CRA's Maslo said.

An existing CRA register of broadcast-license holders does not include information on indirect and related owners. A 2017 attempt by the CRA to collect data and publish a register of direct and indirect media owners was blocked by the Personal Data Protection Agency, which argued it could open the door to state infringements of the right to privacy.

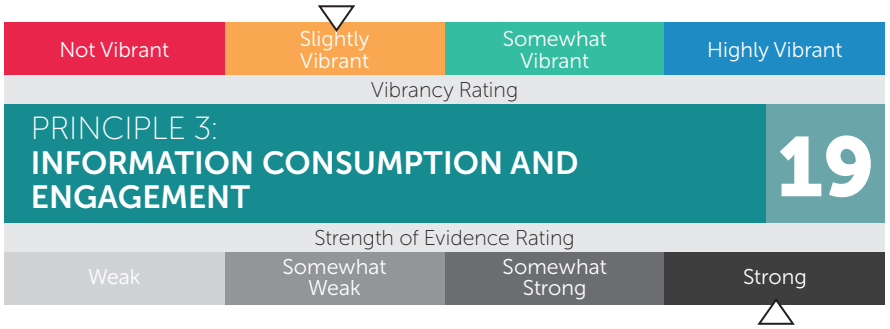
At the end of 2022, the national Ministry of Communications and Transport had plans to include provisions on media-ownership disclosure in an upcoming law on electronic media, but the BH Journalists Association deemed them inadequate, Borka Rudić, the association's secretary general, said. Instead, Rudić said, the issue merits its own law, which should police conflicts of interest among media owners and establish a media register along with an independent fund for media pluralism. Civil society organizations, including the journalists' association, proposed a law on media ownership transparency in 2018 that went nowhere. Public service media provide informative and educational news and information but labor under strong political influence.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent

Ownership structures can significantly sway editorial policies, with the country's many cash-strapped outlets especially vulnerable to the influence of political and business interests. Due to arbitrary and opaque media financing, unclear media ownership, and links between media managers and advisory bodies on the one hand and political parties on the other, political parties wield great influence on the media industry. In addition, publicly owned companies are often affiliated with political parties, and their advertising funds are another means of influence on editorial policies.

The Communications Regulatory Agency acts politically and is not neutral regarding broadcasters' breaches of its codes. Public service broadcasters tend to reflect the opinion of politicians rather than the public, as expressed by Kontić of Mediacentar Sarajevo. The most notorious example is RTRS, which is under the direct control of the SNSD political party, but Kontić said Radio-Television of the FB&H (FTV) is also becoming a platform for promoting certain policies. Politics also influence programming at the state broadcaster, as a slanted October 2022 interview with the elected Serb member of the country's three-member presidency, Željka Cvijanović showed. The state public broadcaster is also beset by financial woes, ethno-national divisions, and discrimination against older journalists.

Political dependence is obvious in many other media, such as Alternativna TV, which is directly linked to the SNSD political party and is under U.S. sanctions, and the Srpska Republika News Agency, which is financed from the budget of Republika Srpska. Media monitoring during the general elections in 2022 noted many anonymous portals and some Facebook groups that targeted certain political parties. Mladen Bubonjić, editor of the investigative Gerila.info website and a journalism professor, said media affiliated with political parties also have exclusive access to certain types of information. There are independent media outlets in B&H, both commercial and those of nongovernmental organizations, that provide professional and unbiased reporting, mostly funded by foreign donors.



Media outlets do not have developed digital-hygiene practices, and the public has few opportunities to learn how to protect their private data. Even though the country does not have a developed media and information literacy strategy, many organizations have activities aimed at sharpening those skills for the public. Professional media producers do not analyze the audience needs, but rather publish the kind of content that is the most viewed by their audiences. Community media still have not been developed in the country, which has only three registered community radio stations. Participants gave audiences' media and information literacy skills and use of privacy protections and security tools the lowest scores, and the work of community media the highest.

> "Tools in local languages to prevent DDoS and other attacks are not widely available and most technology-based tools that help individuals protect their privacy and security are in English.

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

The country has a law to protect personal data, but it is not aligned with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation and international standards. Panelists said it has often been abused to conceal the identities of those who misuse public funds or own media outlets. Kovačević, of the online portal Direkt, pointed to an example: the personal data regulation was used as an excuse to hide the names of the people who received legal aid to which they were not entitled. Rudić, of the BH Journalists Association, said the law has been used to hide the property of high-ranking judges, even though disclosing that information is in the public interest. Some courts, including the Supreme Court of the Republika Srpska, remove all names when publishing their decisions, even in cases of terrorism or high corruption, as explained by Denis Džidić, director of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network in B&H.

Before 2020, it was possible to get the name and business address of anyone registering a website with the national .ba domain. However, in what Cvjetićanin, of the Raskrinkavanje fact-checking portal, called "a violation of the standards of transparency and accountability," the Data Protection Agency decided that this information should not be publicly available.

Tools in local languages to prevent DDoS and other attacks are not widely available and most technology-based tools that help individuals protect their privacy and security are in English. Digital-security training for media outlets happens occasionally, but Džidić said it is mostly in English and so is not useful to some journalists. The country lacks local trainers with expertise in digital security. Media companies' digital hygiene practices are poor, and their websites are not secure. Overworked journalists do not give enough time to security measures and often do not protect their data. DDoS attacks are frequent; Hambo said his Klix.ba portal faces them every day. Panelists agreed that the public lacks digital-security savvy and skills, and awareness of the algorithms driving social media and the mechanics of online advertising, as well as opportunities to learn.

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

No media and information literacy strategy has been implemented at the state level. Various institutions and organizations, however, have made efforts in the field, and the government of the Sarajevo canton is aiming to integrate media and information literacy into formal education

starting in primary school. The CRA, in cooperation with organizations active in media and information literacy, organized a promotional campaign "Days of Media and Information Literacy" in October 2022. The CRA also leads an informal group of experts on the subject, and held a campaign on protecting children on the internet in 2022.

> "Panelists agreed that spaces for the free exchange of opinions and ideologies are limited.

Panelists agreed, however, that the public lacks media and information literacy. Cvjetićanin, the fact checker, explained how, in 2022, more people were victims of online fraudulent advertising practices. These scams often involve fake interviews with doctors or celebrities, with the aim of getting them to hand over information about their bank accounts. She also said more people are reporting disinformation to her fact-checking organization, but the number of conspiracy theorists is also on the rise. Hambo, the Klix.ba editor-in-chief, received threatening messages from readers after writing about the hoax, repeatedly refuted by scientists, that a group of hills in central Bosnia are actually ancient pyramids.

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

Journalists and activists can freely express their opinions but are often targeted on social networks, especially on certain topics, such as war crimes, religion, and homosexuality. Panelists agreed that spaces for the free exchange of opinions and ideologies are limited. For example, during the election campaign, candidates rejected televised debates in favor of social media, where they could promote themselves while avoiding difficult questions and engagement.

Panelists noted that social networks' comments critical of certain political parties or local governments are removed by page administrators. Rudić, of the journalists' association, said political parties blocked social media profiles or erased messages of people who criticized them on their social media accounts and that there was little substantial and engaging debate during the campaign. Amela Sejdić, director of Radio Zos from Tešanj, said even the administrators of the Tešanj municipality's Facebook page blocked critics.

Bahto Kestendžić, of the Press and Online Media Council, said public complaints to the council about hate speech have steadily risen over the past decade, especially in user-generated content, which the platforms have resolved mostly by removing the content or blocking access for the culprits. Open digital communications contain misinformation and malformation even though hate speech in user-generated comments has decreased. There is no evidence that people engage with at least some objective, fact-based information on a weekly basis.

According to research on the media habits of adults in B&H, which the CRA carried out with the Council of Europe in 2021, few people use the mechanisms for reporting inappropriate content.[10] Slightly less than one-fifth of B&H residents have ever reported inappropriate content they have encountered when using media or information and communications technologies. Of those, most reported it directly to the content provider, and significantly fewer went to law enforcement, the Press and Online Media Council, or the CRA.

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

Content producers most often react to the needs of the public by publishing news and content that will draw their interest. In online media, that is mostly infotainment, news about crime and accidents, or statements by popular political figures. According to the Fabrika agency, the most watched TV programming in B&H is entertainment shows, such as regional reality music competitions, and sports. On the strength of reality programming in particular, commercial media outlets are drawing larger audiences than public service broadcasters. Only the larger TV stations are part of a measurement and data-collection system and obtain data from the private Audience Measurement agency. Smaller

10 Snježana Hasanagić et al. (2022). Media Habits of Adults in B&H, the Communications Regulatory Agency and the Council of Europe. https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/-/research-study-on-media-habits-of-adults-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina-presented

TV and radio stations cannot afford audience measurement data and mostly track their online visits with Google Analytics.

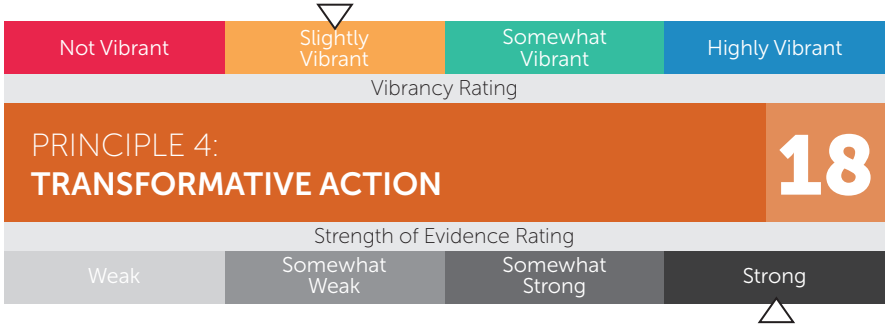
As channels for feedback, the CRA's Maslo claimed radio and television stations often host call-in shows, while panelists from online media said the audience can reach them through e-mail or online comments. Ćuruvija, the RTRS editor, considered the audience is mostly interested in health, employment, and infrastructure issues, based on her communication with the public. Bahto Kestendžić, of the Press and Online Media Council, noticed online and print media actively self-regulate by publishing denials or retractions, or removing comments that contain hate speech. Some panelists responded, however, that posting denials or retractions often do not improve standards of reporting.

Media and content producers interact with their audiences online or on social networks, but do not invest in other methods of building trust with their audiences, such as community events, and most do not publish information about their ownership. Journalists attend and report on civil society organizations events, but there is a lack of productive and regular information sharing and feedback.

Indicator 15: Community media provides information relevant for community engagement

> "Civil society organizations conduct important research on various topics, but it rarely moves policymakers to act.

Community media is largely undeveloped in B&H. The CRA allows nonprofit organizations to obtain broadcasting licenses for radio stations aimed at meeting the specific needs of certain societal groups, but B&H has only three registered nonprofit radio stations: Radio Otvorena Mreža, Radio Active, and Radio Marija. According to the panelist from the CRA, these stations provide their listeners with information that is relevant for their community and give space to marginalized groups to participate in public communication and social debate. The CRA had no complaints about the presentation of inaccurate information by community media radio stations. In addition, nonprofit online media, and even radio stations that are not registered with the CRA but use the frequencies of other radio stations, can be classified as community media, though they are a speck in the country's media universe.



The media and audiences in B&H are split along ideological, ethno-national and political lines, and audiences mostly trust the media that portray their group in a positive light. Despite ample documentation of war crimes or election fraud, voters cast their ballots based on strongly held beliefs rather than arguments and facts. Policymakers and politicians make selective use of research and investigations by the media and civil society sector to discredit their political opponents. Some civil society organizations act in the public interest but their impact on policy decisions is minimal, mainly because political parties rarely agree on amendments or new laws. Panelists gave civil society's use of quality information the highest score and the question of whether information supports good governance and democratic rights the lowest.

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

There are various sources of information, but the media and audiences in B&H are polarized along ideological, ethno-national, and political lines. Research has shown that the country's audiences often follow only certain channels of communication, above all those that cater to their

ethno-national or political group.[11]

Panelists said that during the elections there were almost no constructive debates with the aim of developing a dialogue on the future of the country and political party programs, and some politicians refused to participate in TV debates. During the elections, in the Republika Srpska, public broadcaster RTRS mostly reported positively on the ruling SNSD political party, while BN Television reported favorably on the opposition parties there. Similarly, in the Federation of B&H some media outlets supported the Croat HDZ or the Bosniak SDA political parties, or went after the opposition parties and their political candidates. Even at the local level, there were no real debates, according to Rudić, of the BH Journalists Association. Berislav Jurić, editor of Bljesak.info, claimed public discussions organized in local communities, which should be a way for citizens to participate in decision-making, are pro forma and have no influence on decision-makers. Kovačević, the Direkt editor, said that is especially true for discussions and adoption of local budgets.

Indicator 17: Individuals use quality information to inform their actions

> "Politicians use quality information they receive from the media or civil society, but mostly to discredit their political opponents, settle scores, or serve their own interests.

Panelists claimed the quality of information has no role in forming people's attitudes or voting habits. The results of the elections, panelists said, show that cemented ideological opinions and divisions are not swayed by quality information in the media. For example, during the election year, the media raised numerous questions about corruption in health care and the validity of the diploma of the director of the Clinical Center in Sarajevo, Sebija Izetbegović, who regardless won a seat in the Sarajevo assembly for the SDA political party.

Klix.ba editor Hambo expressed that people often make decisions based on media spins, misinformation, or a trend on social networks. Mladen Bubonjić, editor of Gerila.info, said citizens make judgments based on beliefs that are often grounded in ethno-national rhetoric and mutually exclusive memories of the past. Conspiracy theories on COVID-19 are still very popular and many people refused to be vaccinated, not following fact-based and safety recommendations.

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

B&H has a wide spectrum of civil society organizations, but some of the panelists questioned their motives and impact. As effective examples, panelists mentioned žene Kruščice, a group of women who blocked the construction of a mini-hydroelectric plant in their village in central Bosnia, and the Center for the Environment in Banja Luka. Džidić, director of BIRN B&H, said civil society members do work the public institutions should be doing, such as drafting laws, investigating corruption, and providing media and information literacy education.

Media organizations that function as nongovernmental organizations, such as CIN and BIRN, have repeatedly uncovered instances of corruption but prosecutors have rarely followed up. Civil society organizations conduct important research on various topics, but it rarely moves policymakers to act.

Panelists admit that it is difficult for civil society to influence decision-making, because the authorities in B&H rarely amend existing laws or introduce new ones. For example, Rudić cited attempts by civil society groups to make attacks on journalists a distinct criminal offense. The national parliament has approved the measure, but by the end of 2022 the government had yet to adopt it.

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

Government communication with civil society and the media is confined mostly to press conferences or press releases. Specific officials

11 Sokol, Anida. "Polarized public trust in the media and social networks in Bosnia and Herzegovina". 2021. https://seenpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Resilience-research-publication-3-B&H-English.pdf

might recognize the importance of communication with civil society, but in general the communication between the two sides is poor, as Mediacentar Sarajevo's Kontić explained.

Džidić, of BIRN B&H, cited the adoption of B&H's anti-terrorism strategy in 2022 as an example of civil society clout: Working with the authorities, the Atlantic Initiative NGO insisted, over objections from the Republika Srpska, that right-wing extremism be included in the document, and it was. Panelists also recalled that in 2016, activists waged a successful campaign to have hate crimes recognized by the country's criminal code. However, in 2022, no significant policy decisions or legal solutions were crafted based on civil society expertise. Cvjetićanin, of the Raskrinkavanje fact-checker, said that given how few amendments or bills get passed by legislative bodies in B&H each year, it is not realistic to expect civil society to have a larger influence. Panelists noted that government officials cite quality news media or information from civil society selectively, only when it suits their needs or to discredit their political opponents, and sometimes even use misinformation when explaining their decisions.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights

Politicians use quality information they receive from the media or civil society, but mostly to discredit their political opponents, settle scores, or serve their own interests. For example, the findings of Instinomjer, an online government and politics watchdog, are used selectively by politicians and the government.

When information sources reveal corruption or human rights violations, the government does not respond appropriately. Džidić, of BIRN BIH, reinforced that politicians use the reports of investigative journalists only when they want to discredit their opponents. For example, when the media published information that the government of the Sarajevo canton did not want to give details about its contract with the Chinese company that was contracted to repair the tram line in the city, the representatives of the opposition in the Sarajevo canton used this information against the leading political parties, Rudić said.

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

Maida Bahto Kestendžić, Press and Online Media Council

Mladen Bubonjić, editor of Gerila.info and journalism professor

Tijana Cvjetićanin, editor, fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje

Tamara Ćuruvija, editor, RTRS

Denis Džidić, director, Balkan Investigative Reporting Network

Semir Hambo, editor-in-chief Klix.ba, Sarajevo

Berislav Jurič, editor-in-chief, Bljesak.info, Mostar

Milanka Kovačević, editor and journalist, Direkt portal

Azra Maslo, program standards coordinator, Communications Regulatory Agency

Boro Kontić, director, Mediacentar Sarajevo

Borka Rudić, secretary general, BH Journalists Association

Amela Sejdić, director, Zos radio, Tešanj

Milanka Sudžum, Ministry of Communications and Transport

Senad Zaimović, director, marketing agency Fabrika

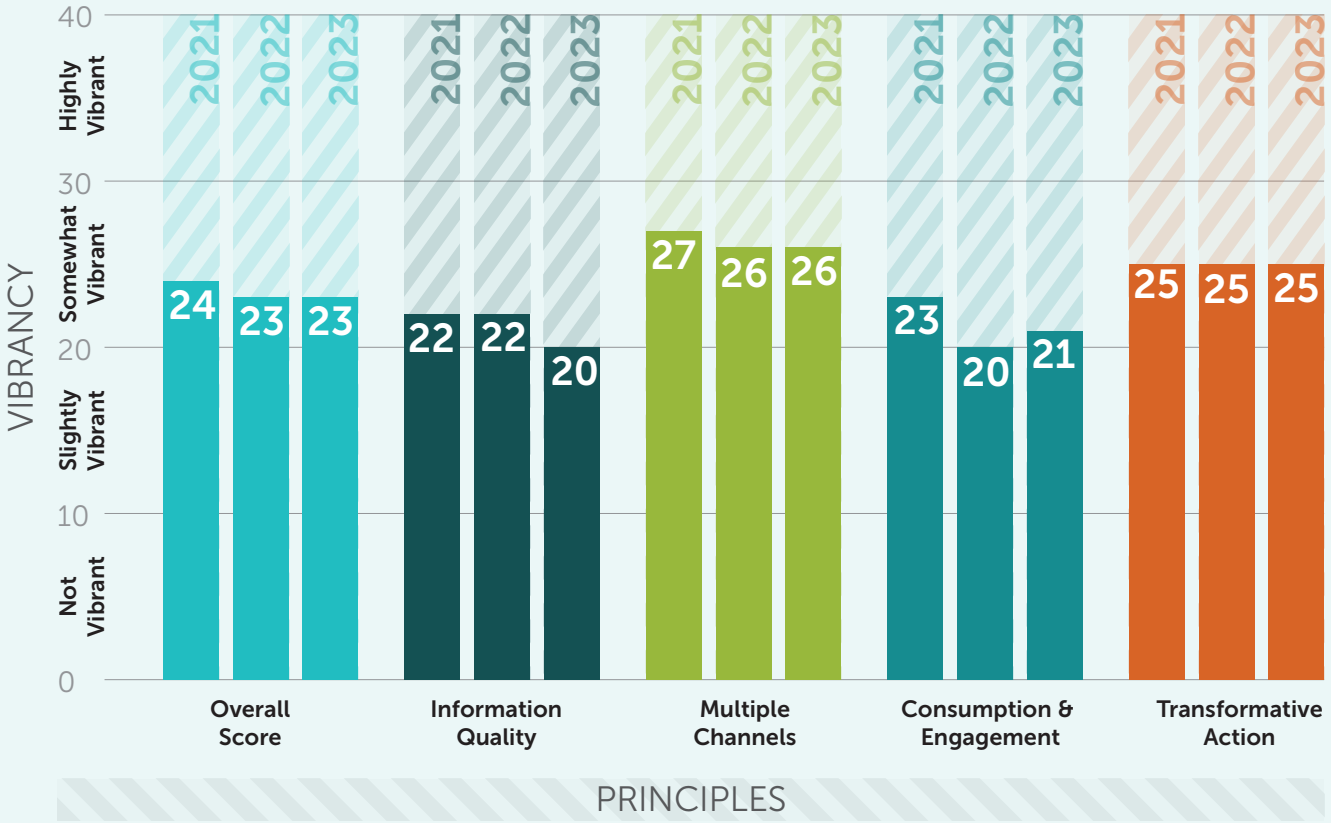
KOSOVO

Vibrant Information Barometer

2023

USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

IREX



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

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

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

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

Highly Vibrant
Somewhat Vibrant
Slightly Vibrant
Not Vibrant

OVERALL SCORE
23

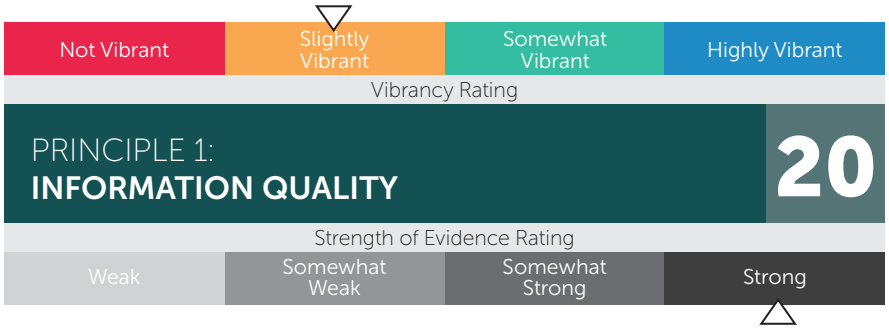
Like other countries in the region, Kosovo in 2022 was buffeted by the effects of the war in Ukraine, including higher energy prices and general inflation, and a new pool of refugees in Europe. Kosovo was among the first countries to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and it welcomed displaced Ukrainians.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

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

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

According to a public opinion survey conducted by the National Democratic Institute, television stations are considered one of the most reliable sources of information by most of Kosovo's population, with 74 percent expressing trust in them. Additionally, social media platforms are an important source of information for young people in Kosovo: 48 percent of young ethnic Albanians and 24 percent of young Serbs get information from them each day, although trust in them is fairly low. Also less trusted are news websites and radio, although young Serbs tend to put more faith in them than young Albanians.

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



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

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

Kosovo media has the infrastructure and technology to produce quality news content across different formats. The infrastructure to receive it, however, is limited because broadcasting still has not gone digital, leaving viewers to subscribe to cable providers to access the country's three national channels. At the same time, the cable industry is becoming monopolized, and the Independent Media Commission, which regulates the broadcast industry, and other monitoring bodies have done little to stop this process. Kosovo has had no print newspapers since 2020, and Kosovo Serbs have not had any print media since 2008.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> **"Kosovo has had no print newspapers since 2020, and Kosovo Serbs have not had any print media since 2008.**

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

Many media outlets in Kosovo have codes of ethics, and some have banned comments on their websites. However, according to Kreshnik Gashi, managing director of kallxo.com, comments have not been banned on social networks, where most hate speech is spread. Only a few media have set filters for certain words in comment sections, and very few edit comments on Facebook or Instagram. According to Flutura Kusari, a media lawyer, mal-information and hate speech is present online, and it seems that it originates mainly from social media rather than from established media outlets. Topics around religion and domestic violence attract and generate hate speech against specific groups, with women often being the main target. However, there is no evidence to prove that nongovernmental actors engage in coordinating the production and dissemination of mal-information or any type of dangerous speech.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

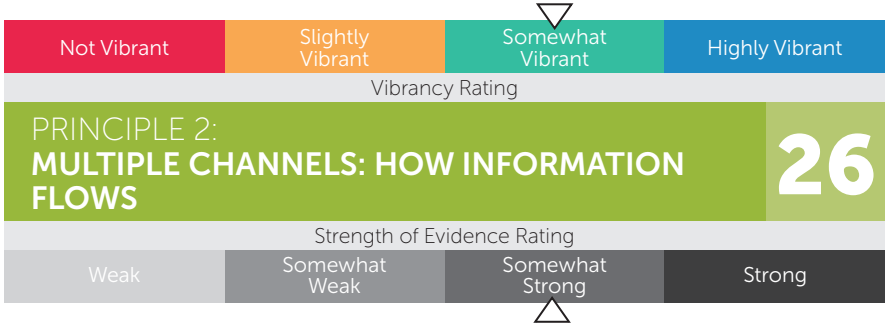
Media companies are not financially stable, and most journalists do not have permanent employment contracts, making them vulnerable to the whims of those who own their media outlets and testing their commitment to quality work. The media rely primarily on financing from businesses and international donors,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

Professional content producers are struggling to find alternative funding streams as traditional sources of revenue such as subscriptions dry up. Media outlets rely on advertising and sponsorships to finance their content--which threatens editorial independence in the form of favorable reporting--especially when these sponsorships come from government institutions or big businesses that thrive from government contracts. One panelist, Brikenda Rexhepi, editor-in-chief of Kohavision, mentioned that her media employer had at least one case in 2022 when one of the biggest private banks withdrew an advertisement when it did not like a news report.

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Most people can afford access to most information channels, including radio, television, newspapers or magazines, and digital or social media. However, Kosovo has lagged in the switch to digital broadcasting, frustrating efforts for more diverse and widely distributed channels. Many residents are forced to pay a cable operator for access to various television channels, which is a hardship for some. According to Ardita Zejnullahu, executive director of the Association of Kosovo Private Electronic Media, since the issue of media concentration and ownership is not regulated and over 90 percent of the audience receives television signals through cable operators, it is crucial to digitize the transmission through terrestrial frequencies. This would enable the provision of free-to-air television signals for the audience. The digitalization of transmission frequencies is an obligation that Kosovo has failed to implement over the years and is extremely important, especially at this time when there is a permanent risk of monopolization of the cable operator sector.

Certain communities or groups of people--including women, people with disabilities, communities in certain geographic areas, or ethnic, racial, or religious minorities--face challenges accessing information due to social norms or other barriers. For example, members of communities who do not speak the dominant language and those with disabilities face accessibility or language barriers. In addition, Avramović said that media in Serb-dominated northern Kosovo that are not aligned with the Srpska Lista, the political party which holds power in four municipalities in that region, have trouble with their broadcast signal there, while those under the direct control of the region's dominant Srpska Lista do not face this issue. Kosovo's public broadcaster, which has a program in the Serbian language, does not have a signal in the north, because none of the cable carriers that operate in that part of the territory include RTK.

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

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

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

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

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

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

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

Otherwise, panelists generally believe that government spokespeople are considered a reliable source. However, the capacity of institutions to communicate information is still not ideal and fraught with delays, and panelists agreed that the government's many spokespeople and press contacts do not communicate much with journalists or even answer their questions.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

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

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

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

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

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

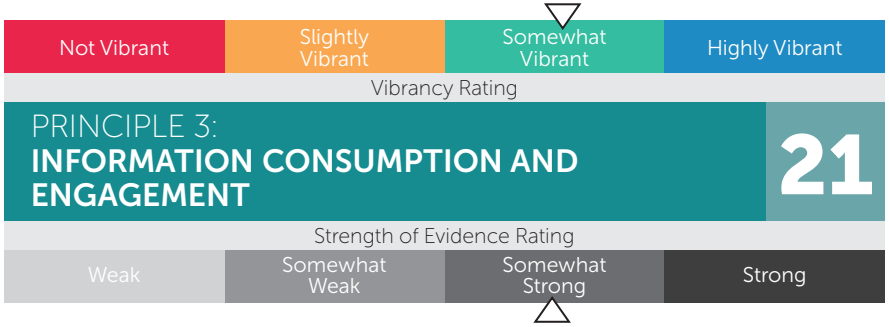
The country's information channels are not completely independent, as ownership and funding of media organizations play a significant role in shaping their editorial stances. There is a blurring of lines between newsroom and business operations, with some media's editorial stances dictated by their owners'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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There is a lack of general knowledge in society about how social media uses user data and promotes certain content through algorithms. There is no national strategy for media education, although foreign donors support various programs. They are not necessarily coordinated, though, and can lack long-term goals. In recent years, two fact-checking tools and websites, kallxo.com and hibrid.info, have been established to help people debunk or expose disinformation. Hibrid.info is a project of the Action for Democratic Society nongovernmental organization, while kallxo.com, an anti-corruption reporting portal of Balkan Investigative and Reporting Network (BIRN), recently joined the International Fact-Checking Network, an international alliance of fact-checkers, and is part of a Meta program to verify Facebook and Instagram posts.[4]

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

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

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

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

Still, a majority of people watch and trust television stations, more than online news portals. Public opinion research shows that Kosovo’s citizens are not fully educated on identifying information disorders. As cited in a 2022 NDI report on information integrity in Kosovo, “On a scale from 1 to 5, they evaluate that the education system has prepared them to do so at an average score of 2.9. They also find it somewhat difficult to distinguish false narratives from true information.”[5]

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

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

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

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

> "The government encourages media literacy but mainly relies on civil society to foster it.

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

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

Independent media and civil society organizations (CSOs) work well together and generally value each other's opinions and feedback, and there are positive examples of media outlets striving to cover the work of CSOs adequately and publish CSO reactions on key issues; for example, media outlets published CSO concerns regarding the recruitment processes for the CEOs of key public utility companies.[6]

Indicator 15: Community media provides information relevant for community engagement

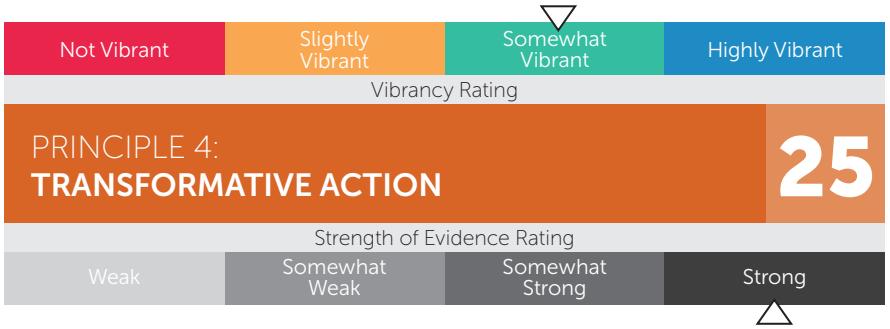
A few media outlets in Kosovo can be considered community media, with specific content for marginalized groups. These include media organizations that focus on women's rights and equal participation in society, such as QIKA (the Center for Information, Critique, and Action), Grazeta, and Dylberizmi,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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Quality information, as opposed to mal-information or disinformation, plays a critical role in shaping people's views on political or social issues. But the lack of media literacy and critical thinking skills can contribute to the spread of misinformation and disinformation, discouraging citizen feedback, cooperation with media, and trust in media. Despite the low level of media literacy, and even in the face of biased reporting and misinformation, people made decisions based on quality information during the last national and local elections. However, according to Zejnullahu, "There are cases where disinformation and misleading information promoted mainly by Serbian media targeting the Serb population in Kosovo have eroded democratic traditions."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic norms.

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

Watchdogs in the media have made the government and public officials more circumspect. According to Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, Kosovo has made progress in fighting corruption, getting its best score since 2012.[9]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

Arta Avdiu, acting television director, Radio Television of Kosovo, Prishtina

Goran Avramović, editor in chief, RTV Kim, Caglavica

Arta Berisha, board member, Radio Television of Kosovo, Prishtina

Kreshnik Gashi, managing director, kallxo.com, Prishtina

Abit Hoxha, media researcher/consultant Norway (formerly Prishtina)

Violeta Hyseni Kelmendi, former board member, Independent Media Commission, Prishtina

Flutura Kusari, media lawyer, Prishtina

Besa Luci, editor-in-chief, Kosovo 2.0, Prishtina

Imer Mushkolaj, director, Kosovo Press Council, Prishtina

Brikenda Rexhepi, editor in chief, Kohavision, Prishtina

Ardita Zejnullahu, executive director, Association of Kosovo Private Electronic Media, Prishtina

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

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

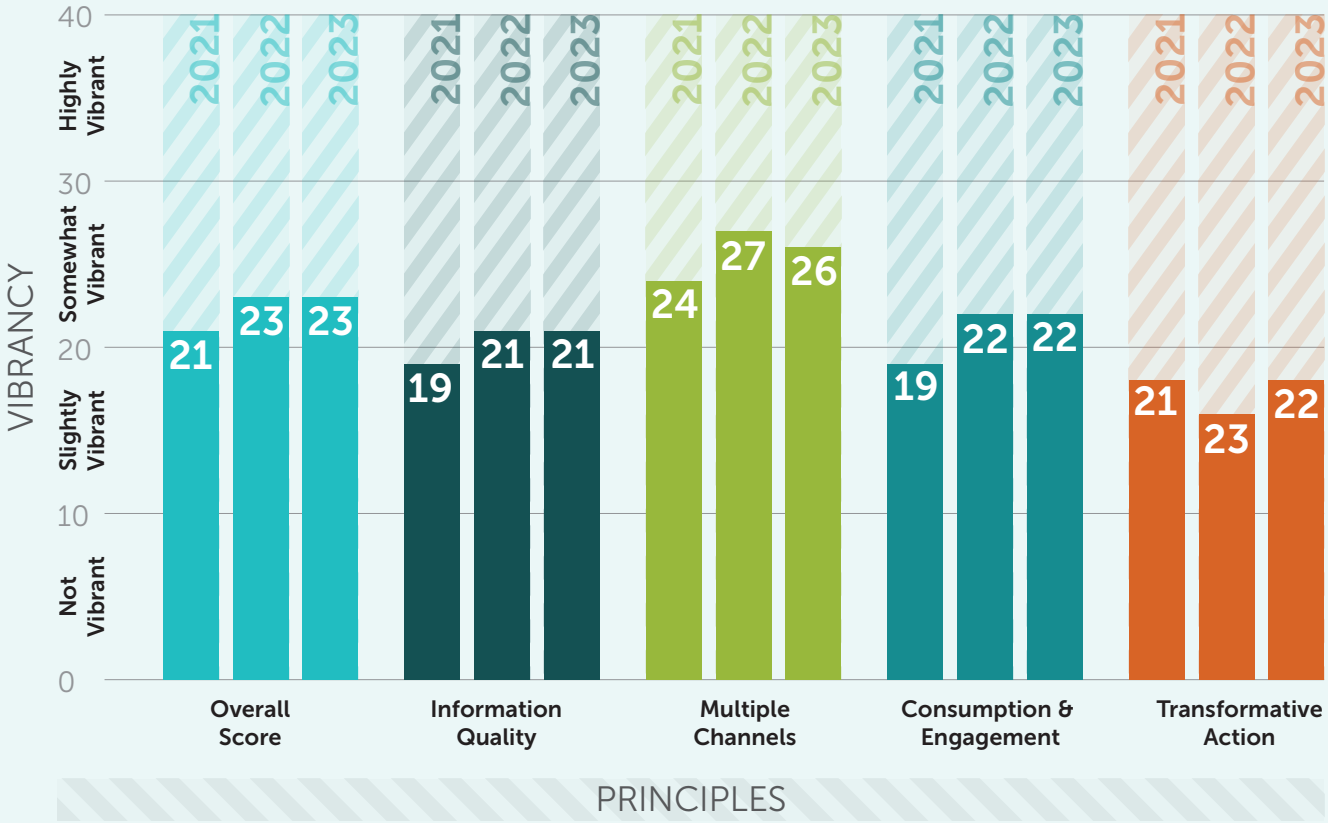
MONTENEGRO

Vibrant Information Barometer

2023

USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

IREX



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

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

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

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

Highly Vibrant
Somewhat Vibrant
Slightly Vibrant
Not Vibrant

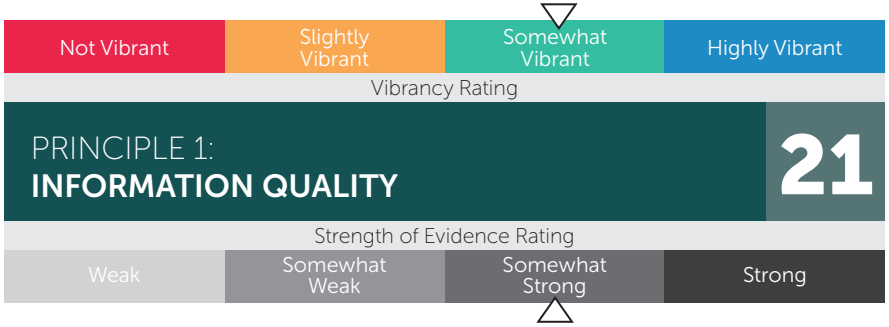
OVERALL SCORE
23

Since the last parliamentary elections held in August of 2020, Montenegro remains in a protracted political crisis. In April 2022, Montenegro voted in favor of a minority government, backed by the opposition, hoping to lead Montenegro into the European Union. Prime Minister Dritan Abazovic aims to stabilize the nation's internal political and economic turmoil, as well as help with its EU candidacy. However, in August 2022, Abazovic's government received a no-confidence vote after signing a basic agreement on relations between Montnegro and the Serbian Orthodox Church, backed by the nationalistic regime of Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic.

The political turmoil of 2022 interrupted Montenegro's pro-European leanings and lead the nation into an economic crisis. Inflation rose 17 percent, food costs increased by 29 percent, and real estate and rent skyrocketed by 30 percent during the year, according to official government statistics. Other government statistics for 2022 were equally concerning: Unemployment shot up 20 percent, and the nation's debt soared to more than €4 billion ($4.3 billion) or 75 percent of its gross domestic product. Amidst this political and economic strife, some 26,000 Russians and Ukrainians immigrated to Montenegro, representing over 4 percent of the population.

Overall, the media sector remained unchanged, except that more TV stations are now under the direct control of pro-Serbian, pro-Putin supporters. Montenegro's media community is increasingly serving political interests and devolving into propagandistic discourse, eating away at the professional and ethical role of the media. Moreover, online journalism is expanding and taking over traditional media. People increasingly obtain information from social media: 900,000 Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts are in use in Montenegro.

The 2023 VIBE study reveals that media quality falls short of the professional standards and norms that characterize a free press in a liberal democracy. Key reasons include political bias of newsrooms, misinformation and false news influencing the internet and social networks, the ongoing anti-Montenegrin and anti-European campaign from Serbia, and poor investigative and in-depth journalism due to limited funding. Although media laws mostly align with European and other international standards, the reality falls short. Professional media unions and trade unions provide uncertain protections for journalists, undermining media freedom and efforts to strengthen the media sector's standing within society. Poor media literacy skills provide fertile ground for propaganda and manipulation of public opinion. In practice, only traditional media, along with some local private media and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), deliver quality information. Political entities and government bodies are prone to misrepresenting content and suppressing facts, limiting the growth of democratic thinking.



The panelists gave average marks to the quality of information in Montenegro. Society is flooded with numerous information streams, and while traditional media present reliable information, nonprofessional content producers on social media sites do not. Social networks and numerous websites often share disinformation. In recent years, several NGOs are striving to reveal fake media content by fact checking. Despite this, panelists notice a rise in fake news and hate speech on the internet, catalyzed by Montenegro's political crisis and the Ukraine war.

Panelists expect the government to become more active in prohibiting the dissemination of disinformation, though attempts have failed to stop the distribution of fake news. Outlets do not sanction journalists for violations. The media sector does not experience censorship except when journalists withhold information that could harm them professionally, given the lack of protections for journalists and the rise in unresolved cases of physical attacks on them. Media platforms are not sanctioned for publishing unsubstantiated information, and panelists expressed the general opinion that Montenegro has significant room for improvement on information quality.

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

The media landscape in Montenegro is growing, with 200 different media outlets employing some 1,800 staff, providing comprehensive foreign and national reporting. broadcast, for their content production. The country has special education centers run by professional associations, such as the Montenegro Media Institute. NGOs provide journalism training in reporting and ethics. Mainly traditional national and local media participate in trainings, and other media, particularly online platforms, are less likely to. As a result, panelists said this lack of training leads to poor quality media content. However, media do cover a range of topics, including political, economic, cultural, and social issues, although the country still has not developed specialized journalism. When covering public officials, the media focus on accountability.

Olivera Nikolić, acting director of the Montenegro Media Institute, noted the media sector has adequate infrastructure, including print, broadcast and digital. However, the content of some media is highly politicized, influencing citizens in favor of media owners' own interests. Four out of five TV stations that offer national coverage are owned by native Serbians, showcasing pro-Serbian viewpoints. Much of their content is produced outside the country, limiting the public's range of opinions and information about national issues. In addition, Nikolić said editorial teams lack self-regulatory practices, and no collective self-regulatory body exists to impartially protect professional standards.

The panelists agreed that misinformation on social networks decreased over the past two years. However, some sites still manipulate public opinion. Many media sites are in political centers in Serbia and therefore, not independent. Despite the existing infrastructure, according to Jelena Martinovic, journalist and editor of the daily *Pobjeda*, many journalists cannot travel outside the country. This makes it difficult to apply new, multidisciplinary and contemporary reporting tools to collect information, using digital and foreign sources. "Montenegro's media does not have full journalistic independence and media policy is influenced by editors and owners", she added.

Sixty-five percent of Montenegro's journalists say editors have extreme, significant, or partial influence on reporting, and 40 percent claim media owners have influence, according to the 2021 report, "Socio-economic Positions of Media Professionals in Montenegro," funded by the Balkan Trust for Democracy Fund (a project of the German Marshall Fund) and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. A 2021 Digital Forensic Center

(DFC) survey on media literacy, corona virus and citizens of Montenegro - 2021 – 2021 found 41 percent of 922 citizens surveyed think the media reports differently on the same event, and almost 40 percent claim the media omits important elements from the news, or ignore certain events.

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

The panelists held the general view that traditional media are trying to publish fact-based information. Professional content producers create accurate information and do not intentionally attempt to disseminate false information. Nonprofessional content producers typically do not engage in fact-checking and often produce dubious or outright false reports or politically motivated propaganda.

During 2022, the media criticized government bodies for producing false information or outright government propaganda. The panelists agreed that the media are trying to fact-check government information or public officials' statements, and to debunk statements identified as disinformation. The fight against disinformation is a daily challenge in Montenegro, and specialized NGOs are the best sources to disprove fake news. An abundance of online information –on websites, portals, and social media– helps fact-check news. "However, established, professional media in Montenegro are not the source of disinformation, nor do they publish [fake news] intentionally," according to Nikolić. A serious source of disinformation are tabloids from neighboring countries, especially Serbia, and some of them are among the most popular in Montenegro, she added. IN4S, a popular pro-Serbia right-wing online newspaper, is a major source of disinformation. These media are not registered in Montenegro, even though they operate here. Surveys and monitoring of established media show that these outlets do not take responsibility for their accounts on social networks, which are often a primary source of disputed information, Nikolić pointed out.

"Dissemination of fake news and disinformation through various media channels and social platforms is at an all-time high," noted Samir Rastoder, editor-in-chief of Radio Petnjica, a local news platform. Despite laws pertaining to disinformation, sanctions for fake news are not enforced, and journalists are witnessing a trend where serious lies, manipulations, and accusations are being disseminated by top public officials, he said. "There are fact-checking tools, but apart from being used for statistical purposes, they are useless," he lamented.

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

Panelists generally agreed that professional producers of media contents do not create information to intentionally hurt anyone. The same, unfortunately, cannot be said for nonprofessional producers of media content, even though no clear evidence exists of coordinated activities among platforms disseminating toxic information. Panelists note that foreign governments, particularly Serbia and Russia, are disseminating disinformation and hate speech through media outlets they control, which have editorial policies aimed at undermining Montenegrin sovereignty and pro-Europe foreign policy.

> "Panelists note that foreign governments, particularly Serbia and Russia, are disseminating disinformation and hate speech through media outlets they control, which have editorial policies aimed at undermining Montenegrin sovereignty and pro-Europe foreign policy.

Certain respectable NGOs are engaged in exposing foreign media disinformation. One such organization is the Center for Democratic Transition (Raskrinkavanje.me), which works in collaboration with the International Fact-Checking Network. Another is the Digital-Forensic Center, operating within the Atlantic Council of Montenegro.

The panelists observed that Prime Minister Abazovic often makes irresponsible and arbitrary statements. On several occasions he has threatened media companies, including City TV, and daily news site *Pobjeda*. His statements undermine the credibility of the current government, which, according to public opinion surveys, is supported by just 4 percent of the electorate.

The absence of a self-regulatory body of influential media is a great handicap. Self-regulation is decentralized due to decades-long disputes among major media companies. "In Montenegro we do have a professional code of journalists, but it does not apply to disinformation and misinformation, nor does it compel media outlets to take responsibility for moderating comments on their social networks accounts," said Nikolić. For example, the popular web portal IN4S, which disseminates propaganda, disinformation, and hate speech, is not officially registered in Montenegro, and therefore bears no legal responsibility for the content it publishes, she noted. "Self-regulatory practices are not sufficiently developed," Nikolić continued. "Ongoing legislative reform does not foresee a ban of unregistered media. However, it does discourage and even bans the public sector from advertising in unregistered media."

> **"Professional media are in the worst possible situation, because revenue sources from the local market are insufficient to cover the operations, even at the biggest media companies," said Boris Darmanovic, CEO and founder of Media New Holdings.**

"Foreign governments media are disseminating hate speech and disinformation against Montenegro," added Martinovic. The most obvious ones are Serbian and Russian media outlets. As far as Montenegro outlets, web portals IN4S and Aktuelno, widely disseminate hate speech by journalists who do not adhere to professional ethics, even though they present themselves as legitimate media outlets and are popular across the country. However, Martinovic said professional media pay attention to information they disseminate and take responsibility for content.

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

News sources are generally inclusive and diverse, according to the panelists. Media disseminate information in all languages spoken in Montenegro. Different media provide information from a broad ideological and political spectrum, as well as from diverse experiences and opposing viewpoints. Panelists agreed the Roma community is underrepresented in media content. The professional media sector tries to cover activities of all ethnic and religious communities, and local media play a particularly important role in this respect. Gender diversity is present in both professional and non-professional media.

Poor representation of the Roma community was particularly problematic during the COVID health crisis, Nikolić noted. In the past, media presented more Roma-language content, but now few media outlets use the Roma language, including state-owned TV and Radio-RTCG. The only Roma-oriented content was reduced to a 30-minute weekly program on national TV, Nikolić said.

Media does not cover many issues related to persons with disabilities. Youth-related issues are neglected as well. There are no media surveys on young people that explore issues such as where they get their information, what their topics of interests are, or whether the media meets their needs, Nikolic explained. The survey, "Media Through Gender Lenses," by the Montenegro United Nations Development Program (UNDP), notes that women make up the majority of journalists in Montenegro. More women are anchors and editors of prime-time news; yet key managerial positions are still overwhelmingly male. The survey shows media outlets do not consider or promote gender equality, despite recommendations from numerous international reports and local regulations.

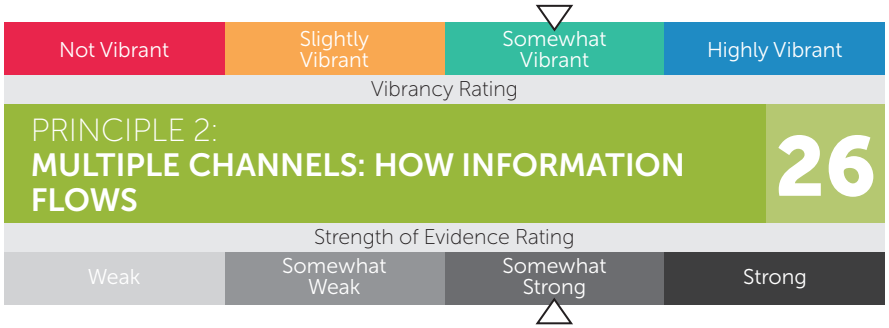
Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

The lack of funding is a constant issue for all media content producers. The government funds some information projects through its Fund for Stimulating Media Pluralism and Diversity, which receives 0.09 percent of the current national budget. Publications have no subscriptions and national and local public media services depend on government subsidies, opening them to political influence.

Advertising makes up the main revenue for private media, which comes to about €11 million ($12 million) a year, which is not enough to support a thriving media landscape, according to the panelists. Advertising revenues increase by approximately €2 million ($2.2 million) during electoral campaigns. The government pays for media advertisements, raising objections over transparency and politicization of those ads. The exact amount of the government's advertising budget is unknown. Journalists continue to struggle with low pay, with the average journalist's salary estimated at €600 ($648) per month. Low salaries are an important reason journalists move to public and public relations work in the private sector.

"Professional media are in the worst possible situation, because revenue sources from the local market are insufficient to cover the operations, even at the biggest media companies," said Boris Darmanovic, CEO and founder of Media New Holdings, which produces newspapers across the country, "Some of them are funded from abroad, like, for example the daily newspaper *Vijesti*, while other media are forced to rely on the local market." Often political institutions invest in small web portals and meme creators, or quasi-influencers, rather than in real media, since media still try to uphold professional standards. Darmanovic notes media companies pay large amounts in taxes and social networks do not, which is especially problematic. Media pay income taxes for advertisements with funds that come from Montenegro that target Montenegrin clients. Media also are responsible for payroll tax for their staff, while the social networks do not. Social networks have access to powerful tools, and software, while media companies do not have enough funds to pay professional programmers and engineers to develop competitive software.

"Every fourth journalist in Montenegro is earning between €500 and €600 net ($540 to $647) per month, and 73 percent of journalists do not receive any remuneration for overtime," said Natasa Ruzic, political science professor at the University of Montenegro. The Center for Civic Education's report, "Level the Playing Field for all the Media," shows there has been progress recently for funding transparency, Ruzic noted.



Media regulations largely follow international journalistic and regulatory standards and the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms. In 2020, Montenegro added two important laws: The Law on Media and the Law on National Public Service, which are currently enforced. Over the past two years, public debate has focused on revising media laws, including those two. The new Law on Media draft includes the definition of journalists as media professionals. It stipulates that any person engaged in the collection, processing, shaping, sorting, editing, or performing any other intervention on information for the sake of publishing, whether a freelance or full-time employee for national or international media outlets, is considered a journalist.

The panelists concurred that Montenegro has no political limitations in terms of creating, distributing, and using information. Furthermore, access to information channels is easy and unlimited, except for financial limitations, such as subscriptions to cable TV, mobile phones, and the internet. The government disseminates its information through all available media channels including social networks. Information and communication technology has progressed significantly in Montenegro. Both public and private media are now available in digital form, and

mobile telephones are omnipresent with four very competitive mobile operators in the country. Internet service is available in all urban centers and in larger rural regions.

Obtaining licenses for operating electronic media is problematic, due to issues around unfair competition in the electronic media market. Broadcasting foreign media through cable providers is threatening the operations and revenue of local TV stations. Panelists agreed that TV news channels are not independent, as their editorial policies are either politicized or under the strong influence of their owners. This seriously violates professional standards and the principle that media should act in the public interest. There is obvious political influence on the operations of the state-owned and local councils' public media, violating the democratic principle that publicly funded media should act in the general population's interest. Political parties are clearly interfering in the work of public media. In addition, publicly owned media engages in self-censorship, which significantly limits the development of high-quality and responsible journalism.

> "Obtaining licenses for operating traditional radio and television media is problematic, due to issues around unfair competition in the broadcast media market.

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

Montenegro's media regulations provide legal protection for free speech and freedom of press. Laws are enforced in principle, but issues remain as to how they are implemented. For example, in 2022 there were no recorded violations of freedom of press by the government, except when politicians gave an inappropriate statement. The public and media criticize these actions. Generally speaking, government agencies do not censor media. However, self-censorship exists, mostly in public service media than in the private media sector.

Libel was decriminalized years ago and is no longer a felony. Now libel claims end up in litigation before the courts as a civil matter. Physical violence against journalists was minimal this past year, but many disputable, unresolved, and controversial cases of attacks or pressures on journalists remain from previous years. The laws protect information sources, but a controversial provision in the Law on Media states journalists are obliged to reveal a source when necessary to protect national security, the territorial integrity of the country, and public health. At the same time, the Law on Media broadly protects journalists' sources, with the exceptions noted above; with the decriminalization of libel, Montenegro does have something of a legal framework to protect the work of journalists.

Montenegro laws guarantee a free press and media freedom, but the current deep political crisis is impacting the media sector, according to Nikolić. High profile officials are targeting journalists who criticize the government, and deep social divisions have also polarized the media and influenced a negative environment for journalists' work, she added. In addition, politicians are boycotting news outlets if they dislike its reporting. Journalists are under pressure to do their job professionally; however, politicians, through their inappropriate statements, encourage citizens to express their dissatisfaction with social problems by making inflammatory statements that target the media. This is essentially an attack on media freedom, leading journalists to self-censor, she said.

"The Montenegrin Constitution and the Law on Media are protecting free speech, and media legislation, and the Montenegrin Code of Journalists are protecting the journalists, but only on paper," Ruzic pointed out. According to the Trade Union of Media of Montenegro, 2021 saw 54 active legal cases with charges of violation of individual rights. Journalist Nenad Zecevic of daily *Pobjeda* faced charges of disclosing classified information and was pressured to reveal his source. Freelance journalist Jovo Martinovic was sentenced to prison in 2021 under allegations of drug trafficking. Although rights groups have criticized Montenegro's government for lack of evidence in the case, the government pressed for a conviction.

Dusko Kovacevic, a blogger, commented on attacks against journalists:

"Recently, gruesome retributions against journalists and media assets have occurred, including the killing of an editor-in-chief; beatings and intimidations," he said, "But today we basically have none of that. One can freely write and speak even about delicate and dangerous topics." However, he noted that now Montenegro deals with problems surrounding self-censorship and the practice of loyal and apologetic journalism, due to personal interests or unprofessionalism.

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

Citizens enjoy adequate access to information channels, and to a range of communication devices. The information and communications technology infrastructure generally meets consumers' needs and almost the entire nation has broad access to cable providers, internet, and mobile telephone services. Cable TV subscriptions and internet connections are generally affordable, giving citizens easy access to many information channels. Even socially vulnerable groups, and ethnic and religious minorities have access.

> "Owner interference in media editorial policy varies from one outlet to the next. It's also exercised through financial pressures, which impact media independence," said Marijana Bojanic, chief executive officer of Vijesti.

"A 2021 MONSTAT (Montenegrin Statistical Office) report on Montenegro's technology infrastructure shows 81 percent of citizens had access to the internet," noted Ruzic, "In terms of a breakdown, about 81 percent in the central region have internet access, 90 percent in the southern region and 73 percent in the northern region."

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

Montenegro's Freedom of Information Act, adopted in 2012 and amended in 2017, provides access to information held by public authorities. The law is based on the principles of free information access, public authority transparency, the public's right to know, and equality. The government enforces the laws in line with standards from ratified international treaties on human rights and generally accepted rules of international law. According to this law, any national or foreign person, and lawyer, has the right to access information, without the need to state their reasons or explain the interest behind the request. Local NGOs widely use this law to request government information. No major positive trends were detected in the past two years in terms of government communication, although the populist-minded government decided to broadcast its parliamentary sessions live on national TV.

"Government communication with journalists has improved in the last several years," according to Damir Ramovic, editor-in-chief of public media outlet RTCG1, "On the other hand, government officials are trying to get as much media coverage as possible, so now we see the prime minister on TV all the time." This encourages opposition officials to seek equal time. Public service media is attempting to have equal representation of all sides of the political spectrum in its programs.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

The 2010 Law on Electronic Media section on pluralism protection and broadcast media diversity regulates ownership transparency and media concentration into monopolies. The panelists noted that channels do not experience significant information flow restrictions. However, major challenges to ownership transparency occur among anonymous websites, along with insufficient sanctions or normative obstacles for their operations. Media distribution channels are not monopolized, and the process for establishing a media outlet is free, depending on financial, technical, and human resources.

"The Law on Media should insist on registration of all media platforms,

with a special focus on anonymous web portals, which are still not subjected to regulation," said Milan Jovanovic with the Digital Forensic Centre, "No mechanisms presently force the web portals to register, so they cannot be subjected to any legal sanctions or other kind of restrictions."

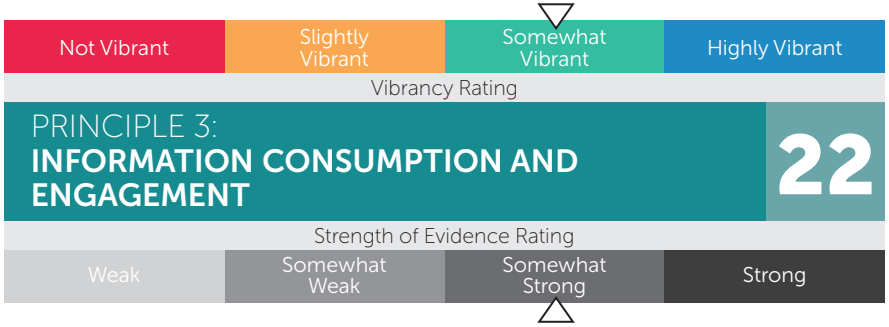
Public service media provide news and educational programs, although consumers continually debate the quality and scope of information offered. Internet providers do not discriminate based on consumers, content or destination addresses.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Panelists concurred that news outlets are essentially not independent due to constant interference from their owners, political groups, and large advertisers. Panelists noted that the government's advertising policy favors media that do not criticize the government. A particular problem for public service media is pressure from politicians with their editorial policy, depending on who is currently in power.

Government regulatory bodies try to maintain professional independence but are criticized because of their political bias, their unwillingness to protect professional and media standards, and a failure to prevent foreign media activities that violate fundamental journalism principles. Public service media does not have privileged access to equipment, internet, or tax relief when compared to private media.

"Owner interference in media editorial policy varies from one outlet to the next. It's also exercised through financial pressures, which impact media independence," said Marijana Bojanic, chief executive officer of Vijesti. She added that her station is free from that negative influence.



Laws protecting privacy and digital security in Montenegro include the 2008 Law on Protection of Personal Data, and the 2010 Law on Information Security. A new law adopted at the end of 2022 replaced the 2008 Law on Electronic Documents to protect digital communication. The laws allow safe use of the internet, although citizens have a personal responsibility to protect their own communication channels.

A major problem in Montenegro is poor media literacy. With a large amount of information freely available, citizens, especially with poor education, are not protected from manipulation or fake or misleading information. The media illiterate population is especially prone to believe disinformation. Additionally, Montenegro's government needs to implement better laws and be more responsive against persistent hate speech, especially on social networks, panelists said. For years, the media have not had adequate resources to conduct professional public opinion surveys to position their outlets for their target audiences. Instead, media mainly use data coming from NGO surveys. Panelists said local media are very much committed to keeping their local communities informed on issues that matter to them, which is the primary reason why their rating is relatively high.

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

The panelists noted that, in recent years, new laws are strengthening the protection of information privacy and digital communications, which has in turn improved online media. The media are much more

committed to their digital security and protection of their websites and portals because the country now has competent IT companies offering digital tools and services that protect against destructive digital attacks. However, the majority of citizens do not have basic knowledge or skills in protecting their electronic data, and most are not aware that social media algorithms are collecting and using their data.

Martinovic provided an overview of digital protection in the country: "The most recent attacks on Montenegro's government servers show that, although there are protection systems and IT sectors in every government agency, cyber-attacks are possible. Servers and data, whether state owned or private, are never 100 percent safe, especially if someone is determined to breach them." She added, "Experts concluded that there is an insufficient number of trained IT staff, and that is quite worrisome." Citizens are aware of cyber threats but choose to ignore them—they do not normally make backups or use protection software. Media resolve cyber-attacks relatively quickly, and their websites are usually up and running again in no time.

> **"A significant number of media operate in the country with no legal restrictions on using foreign information channels, which are often used for political propaganda or to subvert Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic goals.**

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

The panelists unanimously said that media literacy is crucial to protecting the public from false and misleading news and increasingly manipulative political propaganda. A major problem the panelists identified is that the government has made no commitments to develop an adequate media literacy strategy or suitable positive practices within the country's education system. Most citizens, except for a some highly educated people, often fall for ideological and political misinformation and fake news. Montenegro is among the worst countries in Europe for media literacy, the panelists noted.

Ruzic pointed to reports that show Montenegro's level of media literacy. Specifically, the 2021 Digital Forensic Center survey showed that 73 percent of interviewees noticed 'fake news' in the media. Thirty-four percent said they saw disinformation in the media often or even on daily basis, and 37 percent said they would not do anything even if they did notice certain media disseminating disinformation.

Milan Jovanovic noted that there is a rising awareness of the need to address critical thinking in the media. "Our educational system is offering media literacy as an elective subject in senior high and, as of next year, it will be available in junior highs and primary schools as well," he said. However, because media literacy is an elective and not a mandatory subject, very few students take the course. "Critical thinking—being able to analyze and summarize data and information, to perform research, to be able to express oneself creatively in different formats—are all crucial skills, not just for the area of media literacy but necessary for the 21st century, and therefore should be made a mandatory subject in schools," Jovanovic stated. He thought the government should play a bigger role in supporting media education, which until recently has been offered mostly by NGOs.

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

The panelists were split regarding citizens' commitment to exercising freedom of speech and using available information. A significant number of media operate in the country with no legal restrictions on using foreign information channels, which are often used for political propaganda or to subvert Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic goals. The unrestricted internet community provides a broad platform for online debates, comments, and individual views. However, the panelists said that the level of media culture and measured online debate is inadequate, and still dominated by partisan rhetoric instead of democratic principles. Another problem is anonymous, unregulated web portals, which are often used to spread

political propaganda and disseminate disinformation and hate speech. The media have a positive and productive relationship with civil society organizations; however, most citizens are unaware of what a media ombudsperson is or what they do.

According to Nikolić, controversial hate speech in social networks increases in times of deep social crises in Montenegro. The media do not take responsibility for content posted on their social media accounts, and they do not have self-regulatory practices to manage debate in an ethical and professional manner. She thought the media also fail to offer guidance to help citizens file complaints, leaving the public to assume they can have no impact on what and how media report. The public service broadcaster appointed an ombudsperson in July 2021, but the role is still relatively unknown to the general public and management is not aware of how important an ombudsperson's role is in protecting viewers' rights.

> **"The public generally trusts its local media more than they do national outlets, whether they are private or public service media. Unfortunately, local media have a lack of funding to buy equipment and maintain their infrastructure.**

Ramovic mentioned how many NGOs help people engage productively with media, but some organizations' spokespersons are more concerned with their own political and financial ambitions. They can be politically partisan, especially when serving as political analysts. In addition, some NGO activists only criticize the national public service broadcaster, because of the activists' close ties with commercial media.

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

Media companies have not improved their ability to conduct public opinion surveys and position themselves to target their audience. Instead, to respond to their audiences' interests, many media companies use market surveys, research and analysis conducted by international organizations and by NGOs, including the Montenegro Media Institute, the Media Center of Montenegro and the Center for Civic Education. Panelists agreed that Montenegro has positive cooperation between the media and NGOs, although much depends on editorial policies. This cooperation is much more intensive and productive than among government agencies.

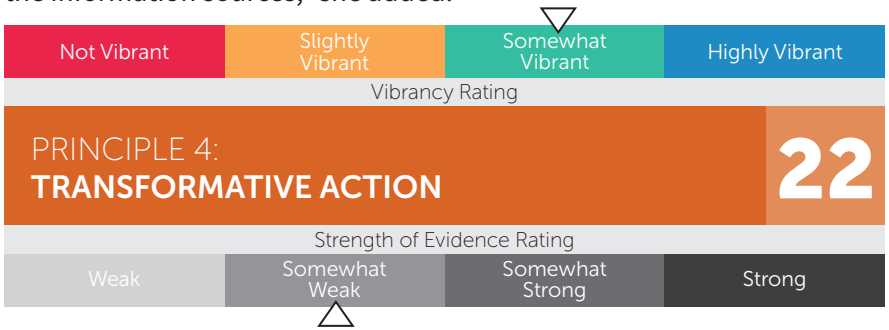
"The media share information with each other to give audiences stories they can't uncover by themselves," Martinovic noticed. However, she said that because of financial pressures, they do not generate their own public opinion surveys to find out what their target audience wants. Most media allow users to send letters to the editors to respond to an article, issue a denial, or spark debate, and in most cases these issues are resolved fairly and in a timely manner. However, comments posted on websites remain a major problem, because they are published in real-time and are only removed or moderated after they are posted. "Trust is built by reporting accurate information and using real bylines without hiding behind pseudonyms or editorial teams," Martinovic continued. The media are networking among themselves on political bases; as a result, Martinovic noted that "…this networking is as polarized as the media community itself, which is something that has been confirmed by numerous foreign organizations reports."

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

Montenegro does not have many community media outlets, as it is defined by the VIBE methodology; however, numerous local media operate provide similar coverage that community media outlet would. Most of the local private media are radio stations and regional web portals, while larger cities--like Podgorica, Budva, and Niksichave--have more public service media. Local media meets the informational, cultural, and entertainment needs of the local population to a much greater extent than the national media does, including organizing inclusive debates. This is why the public generally trusts its local media

more than they do national outlets, whether they are private or public service media. Unfortunately, local media have a lack of funding to buy equipment and maintain their infrastructure.

Ilmira Lika, executive director of TV Teuta based in Ulcini, described the efforts of her outlet, which provides bilingual social, political, and economic news. She said that her station covers events in Ulcinj but also in other areas of Montenegro, and cooperates with several TV outlets from Podgorica, the nation's capital. They share daily stories as needed and continually cover events in Ulcinj when other media ask for coverage. "We are very proud of the fact that we managed to gain the trust of our citizens for our accurate information," she said, "We haven't had a single accusation of broadcasting fake news—whatever our viewers see, it is based on accurate and verified information." She also noted that some politicians or businesses try to pressure her station to change how they report news, especially if the groups do not like a certain report. So far, however, they have been unsuccessful in changing TV Teuta's fact-based reporting. Lika explained that TV Teuta has close ties with their community to accurately report about their problems and is particularly proud of helping solve some local issues. "Local media are very important for the surrounding population, because they are close to the information sources," she added.



Information sharing across ideological and political lines has risen significantly over the past year. Montenegro has had two failed governments since 2020, which has caused major political instability, coupled with institutional crises contributing to partisan bias in media reporting. Serbian and Russian nationalistic and propagandistic narratives also contributed to a negative media environment along with promoting disinformation and disseminating hate speech. There are media outlets--including *Pobjeda*, independent radio station Antena M, and web portal Analitika--that are critical of the ruling parties while other media either supports the government or at least tries to minimize its problems. Even the national public service broadcaster (RTCG) favors government policies, although it maintains a neutral appearance. There is some solidarity between media that are on the opposite sides of the political spectrum, which results in a lack of quality public debate and social and political discourse. Panelists agreed that open and constructive debate between conflicting political and ideological stances is clearly missing.

Much of the public is vulnerable to misinformation and false news. This is an ongoing problem, and panelists said the media shares responsibility for not helping citizens recognize and confront disinformation. Montenegro has a number of strong and influential NGOs that are neutral actors in the county's civil society sector—including some that work to debunk fake news--but there are also organizations that are aligned with the government. The panelists said the government does not sufficiently use quality information when creating public policy, which citizens notice and criticize. In general, quality information is not integrated into public government to exercise democratic principles and constitutional rights.

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

Formally, the media sector has nonpartisan media, but media outlets are ideologically colored and politicized. This is apparent when media outlets give different interpretations of the same events. The general public's media choices are typically based on their political leanings even though they will read or watch a variety of different media. For example, the highest-rated private TV outlets, web portal and TV station *Vijesti*, and the public service broadcaster RTCG are pro-government. Montenegro is still under the grip of strong ideological and political

extremes, which means open public debate between conflicting points of view on TV and social networks is almost non-existent. Even information based on undisputable facts can be misinterpreted.

The 2021 Digital Forensic Center survey revealed that 24.2 percent of interviewees said the media does not comply with professional and ethical standards, and that media often present diverging viewpoints on the same event, noted Ruzic. "Citizen journalism is poorly developed, despite state-run outlets RTCG and PCNEN's web offerings, which demonstrates the general public's media passivity," she observed.

> **"The media do not take responsibility for comments posted on their social media, which are often just insults and hate-fueled diatribes, Nikolic added. (Olivera Nikolić, acting director,** Montenegro Media Institute**)**

"In Montenegro we have many web portals but few comments," Nikolic said. Media outlets do not guide commentators in engaging in constructive social debate. Comments are often used almost as a campaign against opposing viewpoints and are often the sources of insults and hate speech, especially against religious, ethnic, gender minorities--and increasingly against women. The media do not take responsibility for comments posted on their social media, which are often just insults and hate-fueled diatribes, Nikolic added. Jovanovic agreed, adding that, "People do exchange information with those they disagree with on different digital platforms, but usually those debates quickly turn into confrontations. Because of a lack of moderators, these comments are not removed and are accessible to the public."

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

The dominant opinion of the panelists was that citizens do not make good use of quality information, and many give in to misinformation and fake news, predominantly disseminated by non-traditional media on websites, social media, or influencers. Many are unable to distinguish between accurate and false news reports--even in the case of undisputed facts—due to a lack of education and mistaken personal beliefs, especially when assessing healthcare news and foreign political influences. This problem affects the overall quality of political and social relations in Montenegro.

For example, Martinovic pointed out that during the COVID-19 pandemic people often disobeyed numerous official and scientific guidance, to the detriment of their health, based on misinformation and social network conspiracy theories. Online communications propagated anti-vaccination attitudes and spread unfounded claims about vaccine efficacy, content, and safety, she noted. As a result, post-COVID, not as many children have gotten the mumps, measles, and rubella vaccine as well as the HPV vaccine, even though the HPV vaccine has been proven to prevent cervical cancer, she observed. Montenegro now has one of the lowest immunization levels in Europe.

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

NGOs and trade unions tend to use quality news and information when presenting their missions, surveys, or positions on public policies. NGOs are also actively engaged in countering misinformation and disinformation. The media regularly publish NGO reports, and in that sense civil society has a level of positive and productive cooperation. However, religious communities do not have the same level of cooperation, particularly the Serbian Orthodox Church, which acts as para-political entity and an extension of the Serbian regime under Russian influence.

Montenegro has a strong and influential NGO sector, but some have become loyal to the new, right-wing government. Others--including the Center for Civic Education (CGO), an organization against corruption and organized crime MANS; the Center for Democratic Transition

(CDT), the Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (CEDEM); Atlantic Council, Human Rights Action, and the Montenegro Media Institute--are influential in public discourse and recognized for their criticism of political structures. Some organizations, including CDT and its platform Raskrinkavanje.me, along with the Digital Forensic Center, are active in debunking fake news.

However, civil society organizations in Montenegro tend to be one-sided just as they were before Montenegro's 2020 regime change, according to Darmanovic. Before the new government, CSOs valued their status as opposition leaders and presented and received information from only that side of the political spectrum. "CSOs are very biased and very much afraid to cooperate with the media, because they consider the media to be tools for political actors," he said. He also pointed out that CSOs do not understand that difference of opinion and political activity are allowed and normal in Montenegro, as long as they are fairly presented. CSOs are under the influence of certain media circles and do not form their opinions independently, and it is clear that they tend to be too afraid of public opinion and the opinion of their donors, he added.

> "Government officials are not equally open and accessible to opposition media that criticize it, panelists observed. They tend to avoid difficult questions and debates, and politicians are generally boycotting and even targeting the media when they dislike certain reporting.

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

Panelists agreed that the previous government's practices were negative in terms of cooperation with civil society and its management of general political discourse. The current government has already been criticized for its poor communication with the media and the public, except for pro-government such as TV Vijesti and RTCG. Government officials often do not use quality information from civil society but instead select information in line with their political interests. The panelists also pointed to the government's tendency to disseminate disinformation, with political preferences and ideological positions more important than facts.

"Government officials rarely hold press conferences—they did begin broadcasting sessions live, but journalist don't get to ask questions," said Nikolic, adding that the live sessions are just used to broadcast government policy not for give and take with journalists. Officials are increasingly communicating through social media networks and answer journalists' questions during or after certain events that are organized either by the government or select actors. Government officials are not equally open and accessible to opposition media that criticize it, panelists observed. They tend to avoid difficult questions and debates, and politicians are generally boycotting and even targeting the media when they dislike certain reporting.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

The panelists were convinced that quality information is used neither for the purpose of holding the government accountable, nor to contribute to developing democratic norms. Panelists said the government claims it supports investigations into corruption, but their proclamations do not lead to effective results. Although there were examples of competent government agencies reacting to media coverage related to corruption or infringement of human rights, panelists claimed the government reacts with rhetoric rather than offering concrete actions.

Political confrontations and the need to discredit political opponents in public are often more important than taking suitable anti-corruption measures and actions. NGOs--including CDT, MANS, and CEMI--attempt to provide quality information to prevent violations of civil liberties and to ensure free and fair elections, which is a major contribution since voters often face threats by political parties.

Dragan Markesic, general manager of Direct Media, emphasized that a lack of funds limits the effectiveness of investigative journalism. He provided figures from his advertising agency on media finance: "The [total estimated] advertising budget for Montenegro in 2022 was about €10.5-11 million ($11 million). Out of this, 50 percent goes to TV stations (Vijesti, RTCG, TV Prva, Nova M and PINK M take 95% of this amount); 20 percent goes to billboards and street advertising; seven percent to print media; and approximately 17 percent to online media and social media networks."

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

Marijana Bojanic, CEO, *TV Vijesti*, Podgorica

Boris Darmanovic, CEO, *Media New Holdings,* Podgorica

Milan Jovanovic, director, Digital Forensic Center, Danilovgrad

Dusko Kovacevic, blogger, Podgorica

Ilmira Lika, CEO & Editor in chief, *TV Teuta,* Tuzi

Jelena Martinovic, journalist and editor of the daily *Pobjeda,* Podgorica
Bojan Brajovic, CEO, *Radio Danilovgrad*, Danilovgrad

Olivera Nikolić, acting director, *Montenegro Media Institute,* Podgorica

Damir Ramovic, editor of informative program Radio and Televison of Montenegro, Podgorica

Samir Rastoder, editor-in-chief, *Radio Petnjica,* Petnjica

Natasa Ruzic, political science professor, *University of Montenegro*

Dragan Markesic, CEO, *DIRECT MEDIA,* Podgorica

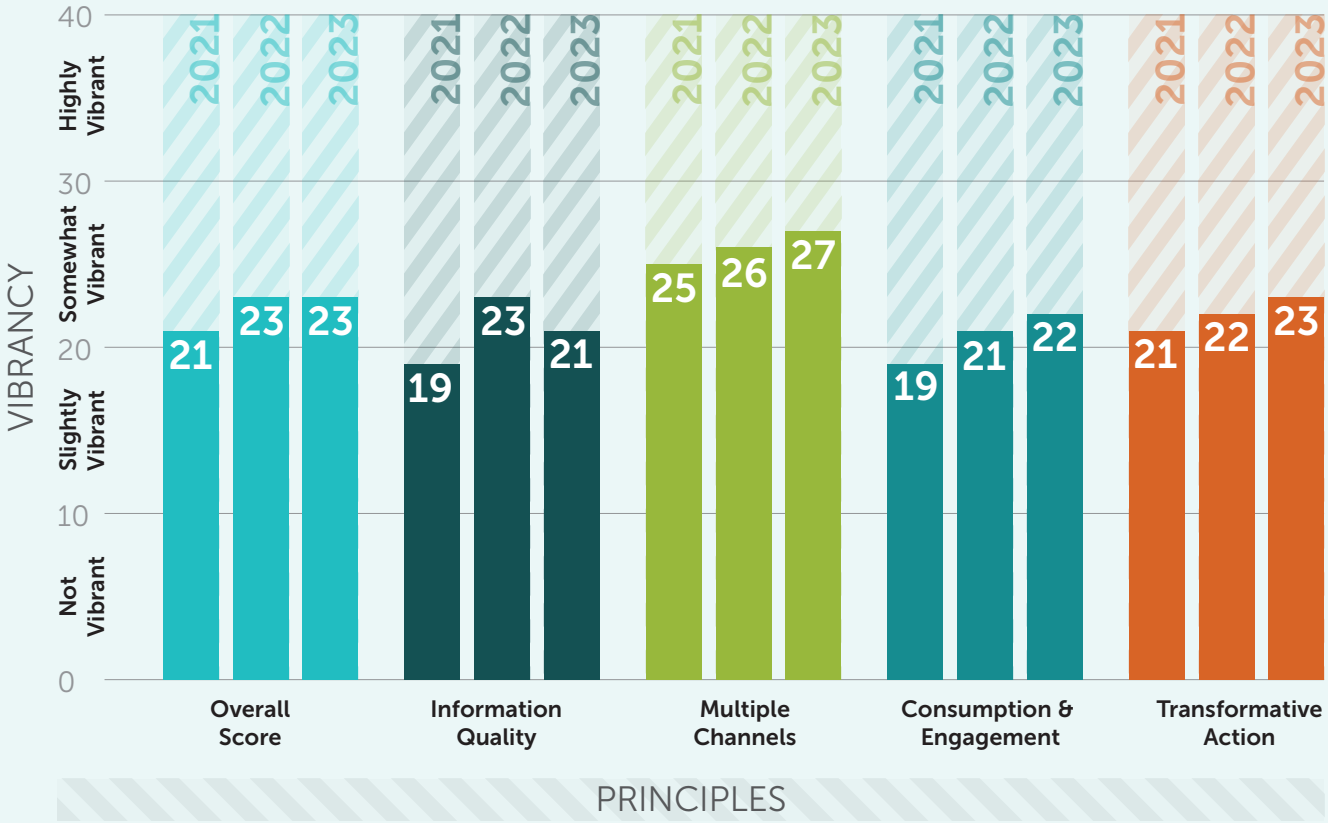
NORTH MACEDONIA

Vibrant Information Barometer

2023

USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

IREX



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

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

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

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

Highly Vibrant
Somewhat Vibrant
Slightly Vibrant
Not Vibrant

OVERALL SCORE
23

For the media sector, 2022 amounted to yet another year of waiting for the sector's much-needed reforms to start. The energy emergency and related economic crisis, caused by the Russia's invasion of Ukraine—along with obstacles to North Macedonia's progress toward European Union membership stemming from Bulgaria's objections—meant that, once again, little would be done to remedy the problems facing the country's media sector.

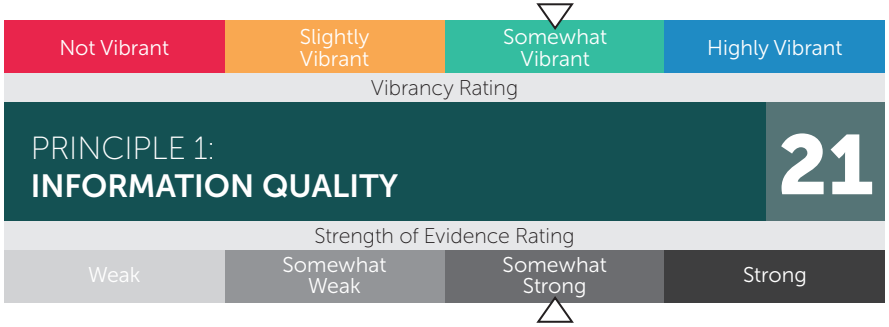
Sustainability remains the main challenge, and VIBE panelists dedicated much discussion to initiatives by media owners—but also by journalists, editors, and other media professionals—to secure some form of public funding or support beyond the current subsidies program covering the print media. Other key concerns include media literacy and disinformation and misinformation campaigns, especially those related to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing dispute between North Macedonia and Bulgaria over recognition of a separate North Macedonian state and a separate Macedonian language.

In July 2022, the government announced that it accepted the so-called French Proposal, an agreement that aimed to remove the Bulgarian blockade of North Macedonia's integration into the EU, and the political struggle shifted to the issue of listing the Bulgarian community in North Macedonia's constitution—a challenge, as the change requires the support of a two-thirds majority of all MPs, which is impossible without the consent of the parliamentary opposition. The public and the media also followed with great interest the developments surrounding the establishment of Bulgarian cultural centers in several towns in Macedonia, but also the Macedonian cultural center in the town of Blagoevgrad, in Bulgaria.

The rising costs of energy caused by the war in Ukraine drove price hikes across the board, and the rising costs of living hit North Macedonians hard—with an 18.7 inflation rate in December 2022, accompanied by a 15.1 percent increase in costs of living. The media focused much of its attention on the effects on the everyday life of citizens and on the government's efforts to secure the best possible energy deals for the coming winter.

The country's 2021 official census results, shared in March 2022, showed that the total residential population dropped from 2.07 million in 2002 (the year of the previous census) to 1.81 million in 2021. Immigration to Western European countries has long been identified as the major concern for the country; some public opinion surveys have found that up to half of the young people would like to leave the country.

The overall VIBE country score remained the same as the 2022 study, with a score of 23. For three of the four principles, small improvements in scores were recorded. However, Principle 1 (information quality) scored 21, a drop of a couple of points from the 2022 study, illustrating the main points made by the panelists: the prolonged sustainability issues and absence of a secure, stable funding model that denies the media proper resources; the audience migration to unregulated online platforms, which continue to grow into major sources of news and information despite lax ethical and professional standards; and the society's polarization, which makes discussion and communication difficult and nearly impossible. Another notable observation is that the quality of information may not have significant effect on citizens' choices, decisions and actions.



Overall, North Macedonians have access to quality media content, but a clear division exists between the traditional and new online media and platforms in terms of information quality and adherence to ethical and professional standards. The media's ongoing sustainability crisis also means that journalists increasingly struggle to secure sufficient resources to perform their duties adequately.

The indicator addressing the media's overall inclusivity and diversity, received the highest average score for Principle 1 (27), while the indicator exploring the level of resources for content production, got the lowest average score, 14.

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

North Macedonia has the necessary infrastructure to produce quality content. The 43 television and 63 radio stations (covering the national, regional, and local levels with terrestrial, cable, and satellite platforms), 21 print media outlets (four dailies and two news magazines, plus other periodicals), and about 200 online news sites ensure, for all practical purposes, that the public has access to quality information. However, many media lack the funds to invest in the latest technical and technological production solutions, forcing them to rely on older technology and studio facilities.

Quality varies greatly in the oversaturated media landscape. The panelists drew a clear distinction between traditional, mainstream media (broadcast and print) and online media, with the former leading the way in terms of quality. All major broadcasters have adopted the approach usually reserved for public broadcasting services and pay equal attention to informing as they do to entertaining the public. Still, the panelists recognized a number of online newspapers, particularly several specialized investigative journalism websites, that adhere to the standards and best practices of legacy media and offer information content of the highest quality.

Although several universities have journalism schools and departments, the panelists noted some concerning trends. Primarily, mirroring a global trend, fewer and fewer young people seem to be interested in journalism, discouraged by the low salaries and uncertain career prospects. Additionally, those schools now focus increasingly on public relations courses, which are in far greater demand—a rising preference reflected by the migration of many experienced journalists for better-paid positions in public relations. Surveys conducted by the Independent Trade Union of Journalists consistently find that close to half of all journalists would like to leave the profession if possible.

Various civil society organizations (CSOs) offer occasional trainings covering a variety of topics—specialized coverage, online safety and security, use of new technologies or formats, investigative journalism, etc.—which panelists noted are useful but tend to be dictated by donor agendas and not necessarily the needs of journalists and newsrooms. "It is fine that we have trainings in investigative journalism techniques. I would like to see also some trainings focused on basic reporting skills, which seems to be in decline with the young journalists," said Nazim Rashidi, editor at cable broadcaster TV 21.

The divide between traditional and online media is also evident in the approach and adherence to professional ethics, with the latter seen as far more unconcerned with ethical issues—an impression backed up by the Council of Media Ethics, a self-regulatory body, which reports that online media account for the bulk of complaints received. In spite of self-regulation efforts, panelists noted that unprofessional reporting, as well as the spread of hate speech or misinformation, bring few consequences. "It is limited to some form of moral sanction, which is not enough. In

reality, publishers and journalists caught red-handed care little, and some more tangible sanctions may be needed," commented Petrit Saracini, of the Institute for Media Analytics (IMA).

Journalists, in general, tend to hold the government—on all levels—accountable. Still, the newsrooms tend to focus on national government and parliament, dedicating far less attention to anything that goes on outside the capital city of Skopje. Few media outlets have networks of correspondents from smaller towns and cities, and foreign affairs coverage relies almost fully on material available from foreign media and wire services (which only the largest broadcasters can realistically afford). Even for such major events as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, only one daily sent a special correspondent to Kyiv. Several freelance journalists who traveled to Ukraine noted that their pitches for war zone stories attracted little, if any, interest from media outlets.

Specialization among journalists has also suffered, as they are expected to cover whatever topics editors may send their way. Specialized journalism, especially investigative reporting, has moved almost completely online; there are also a number of quality websites dedicated to economic affairs, culture, new technologies, etc.

Panelists also noted that the prevalent trend toward superficial coverage often leaves audiences without the contextual underpinning a story. As an example, they pointed to the coverage of a decision by health authorities to ban a certain dairy product. "Everybody reported that the yogurt was dangerous and was removed from stores. What was so dangerous about it, what kind of damage to human health could it do? What were possible consequences? Hardly anyone reported those aspects," said Stevo Basurovski of Tera TV, a regional cable broadcaster from Bitola, in southwestern North Macedonia.

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

Broadcast and print media are far less likely than online media to spread misinformation or disinformation, although a limited number of online media adhere to the best standards and practices established by the traditional newsrooms. Panelists noted that except for a handful of investigative journalism newsrooms, there are no internal fact-checking departments or offices in the media to conduct pre-publication fact-checking. Deepening the problem, the speed of today's news reporting and shrinking newsrooms contribute to a situation in which media and journalists are more susceptible to making mistakes.

Fact-checking and debunking of incorrect or false information is mainly done post-publication by a handful of fact-checking CSOs. According to the panelists, they do a good job, but their societal reach and influence is limited. Some panelists commented that mainstream media are completely disinterested in debunking content. "We have had the good fortune to secure a spot for a 10-minute debunking program on AlsatM TV," commented Saracini, whose organization, IMA, runs a fact-checking program. "We have excellent ratings, on par with the popular Turkish telenovelas. It shows that the people like to see when someone is caught lying," he added.

The situation is much more critical in the online domain, especially social networks, which seem to be the platforms of choice for various malcontents and people with questionable ethics, who often act as hired hands for other actors, foreign and domestic. Panelists noted that, with the exception of the Embassy of the Russian Federation's Twitter account, there are no examples of a foreign government engaged in hate speech or other forms of prohibited expression., However, Bulgaria and North Macedonia routinely trade accusations of hate speech and misinformation campaigns—part of a long-running dispute that has intensified amid Bulgaria's objections to North Macedonia's EU accession.

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

The panelists traced the perceived prevalence of misinformation and hate speech to the country's deep divisions along ethnic, political, and ideological lines. "For the opposition, everything that the government says is a lie, and vice versa," said Naser Selmani, editor-in-chief of ZOOM.mk online newspaper.

Still, the mainstream media, especially the numerous political talk shows aired by all national television broadcasters, make every possible effort to give representatives of all perspectives a chance to present their views and positions. Existing divisions, especially along ethnic lines, greatly limit the quality of information accessible to various ethnic groups, while audiences are denied the whole story.

> **“Fewer and fewer young people seem to be interested in journalism, discouraged by the low salaries and uncertain career prospects.**

Panelists do not think the government intentionally uses misinformation or hate speech but said it prefers to spin information, as part of its need to control the public discussion on any given issue. “Since I come from the field of public relations, from that point of view their statements are fine. From the point of view of providing full information to the public, not so much,” said Tatjana Loparski, director of Element PR agency.

According to the panelists, people who spread misinformation, hate speech, or other types of harmful expression face serious consequences, professional or otherwise, and prosecutors rarely act to pursue instances of hate speech. However, some panelists noted that people often label statements and expressions they disagree with as hate speech or extend their meaning to cover a number of other offenses and non-criminal actions, such as insult, libel, and slander.

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

Media offerings are available in all major languages and formats needed by the citizens, thanks primarily to the public broadcasting service MRT, which broadcasts programs in nine languages domestically (the highest number of domestic-language services in Europe). Numerous media outlets also publish in Albanian, the language of the country’s second-largest ethnic community. Commercial media in the languages of smaller ethnic communities find themselves in a far more precarious position; the panelists noted that many were forced to shut down because of sustainability issues.

Mainstream media make a special effort to ensure that different ethnicities are represented on their political talk shows. However, that usually refers to the major non-majority Albanian community, while representatives of other smaller ethnic communities—such as Turks, Romani, Serbs, Vlachs, and Bosniaks--appear much less frequently and are usually invited on specific dates or events of significance for their respective communities.

The mainstream media approach issues related to gender balance in a similar fashion, although it is clear that middle-aged men make up a majority of the commentariat and pundits invited on political talk shows. Gender imbalances in media ownership, management, and the editorial staff persist as well. For broadcasting, women continue to make up most of the journalistic workforce, while men continue to dominate leadership and managerial positions. The online media situation is harder to determine, due to a dearth of proper research data, as well as the lack of transparency of ownership or managerial structure in the online newspapers and news sites.

Marginalized groups are not represented well enough in the media. For some historically targeted groups that have endured discrimination and violence, such as the LGBTQ+ community, interest may increase in response to cases of physical violence against them or their property. However, panelists pointed out that although the online domain and the social networks provide a platform for verbal attacks, they also offer a chance for marginalized groups to create their own systems of information and exchange, including websites operated by human rights organizations or social network groups and pages dedicated to those issues.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

The panelists traced most of the problems related to the quality of media content to low resources and the media sector’s poor sustainability. The hundreds of media—broadcast, print, and online—all expect to survive

and thrive on total advertising spending of about €33–35 million ($38 million). Sources in the advertising industry point out that, at least for broadcasting, a significant share of the total media buying by advertisers in North Macedonia flows outside the country, who either want to enter a new market or they have a new product for the international market. Thus, while advertisers spend a total of approximately €24 million ($26 million) on television airtime, only €17 million ($18.6 million) benefits the national market. The proportion may be higher for digital advertising, with all estimates indicating that the big technological companies (including Google and Facebook) control about 60 percent of the total digital advertising spending in the country.

Panelists agree that commercial advertisers mostly distribute their budgets evenly, paying attention to cover as many media as possible, and that political concerns may have little influence on their media buying decisions. On the other hand, they do agree that the media take care not to anger major advertisers. One panelist shared a personal experience: "We reported some problems with a local company that is an important advertiser for us. The same day, they terminated the contract. They tried to sell us a story that the decision was made at the start of the month, but I am certain it was because of that report," said Suzana Nikolic, editor and owner of the local online newspaper kumanovonews.com in Kumanovo, in North Macedonia.

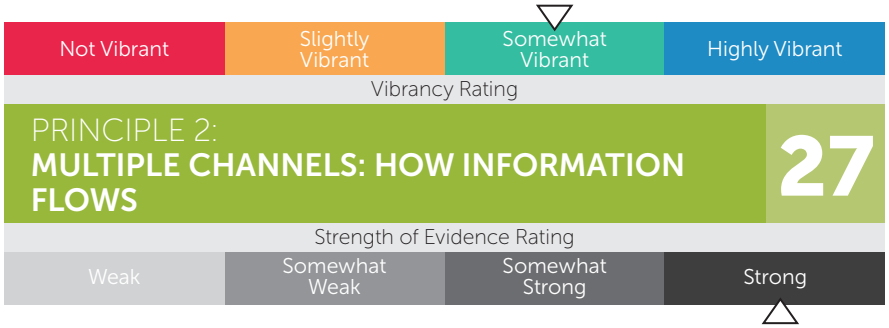
It should be noted that, as far as media investments go, news and information receive the most resources. In North Macedonia's highly politicized and polarized society, covering news and current affairs also helps media owners maintain political relevance, which is important for securing lucrative state contracts. Furthermore, the traditional media have at their disposal only small funds for procurement of expensive, popular, quality television drama series or sports rights. Despite some movement—especially after the emergence of the first local online streaming service, "Gley"—investment in the production of quality television drama or comedy series is almost nonexistent. Another trend evident over the past several years is reliance on cheaper "daytime television" formats and transplantation of classic radio formats, such as call-in shows, directly to television.

> **"The panelists traced the perceived prevalence of misinformation and hate speech to the country's deep divisions along ethnic, political, and ideological lines.**

Sales of advertising space remains the main business model for the media, except for a handful of online investigative journalism newsrooms financed exclusively with donor funding. Some panelists noted that because the available advertising spending is not nearly sufficient, many media outlets have learned to search for alternatives. "For many, project funding from some donors is an important source of financing. Especially for smaller local media, a good project can cover lots of needs," said Zoran Madjoski, journalist and owner of "Radio G," a local station in Gostivar, in western North Macedonia.

The panelists dedicated a lot of attention to the availability of public funding for the media. For now, only the print media receive government subsidies (covering parts of printing and distribution costs), and panelists concluded that the linear distribution of funds under that program prevents any political meddling — and that the program has distorted the market positively, as it practically guarantees the survival of print media. The possibility of a similar subsidies program for the broadcast media emerged as a major topic of discussion in the media sector in 2022. The five national terrestrial broadcasters launched an initiative to abolish legal provisions that prohibit "government advertising" and to reintroduce the possibility of media buying for public information campaigns—a proposal that divided the panelists. Memories from the years of previous authoritarian government, when public funds were abused to "purchase" the loyalty of the media, are still fresh, and many are rightfully hesitant to give the government such a powerful instrument. The panelists that come from broadcast media, however, support the plan. "I don't think it would be a distortion of the market. It is not just adding money to the market that distorts it. Taking away money from a market also distorts it," said Rashidi.

In any case, the panelists agree that the distribution of such funds would have to be transparent and follow strict rules to avoid, to the extent that is possible, past abuses of public assistance programs and public information campaign practices. At the very least, panelists agree that any investments of public funds should go toward the production of quality content and not simply to "save" the media that would otherwise go under.



North Macedonia's citizens enjoy the right to free expression and speech fully, with access to different and varied information channels and without fear of censorship. Laws also support their right to access information, although the system is not without glitches. Serious questions persist, however, regarding the independence of information channels.

The indicator examining access to channels of information received Principle 2's highest score (31)—reflecting North Macedonia's robust information space--while the indicator looking at the independence of information channels the principle's lowest average score of 18, indicating political and media outlet financiers' influence on editorial content.

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

People in North Macedonia hold the right to create, share, and consume information, with freedom of speech and media protected by laws including a constitutional guarantee prohibiting censorship. All evidence indicates that the laws are implemented impartially and equally, and there is no evidence to prove the contrary.

The government makes every effort possible to avoid even the slightest suspicion that it may try to curb freedom of expression. Panelists agreed that the government, while making all efforts to ensure that its messages and agenda dominate the public discourse, has not engaged in direct or indirect censorship, and in that area, the situation is much improved compared with the rule of the previous government. Similarly, the government does not exert pressure on information and communications technology (ICT) service providers to do its bidding.

Yet fears concerning self-censorship persist. "Self-censorship, in my mind, is the second name for Macedonian journalism. It should be included as a course in journalism studies, if you ask me," said Katerina Dafcheva, a journalist at TV VIS, a regional broadcaster in the country's southeast region.

Indeed, various forms of pressure on journalists and media continue, including a growing number of defamation lawsuits, reversing the falling trend of the previous several years. On the other hand, North Macedonia has decriminalized defamation, and journalists face no threat of being targeted for prosecution for their reporting (other than civil defamation suits).

Media owners and managers pressure journalists equally, according to some panelists, who underscored attacks on labor rights and poor working conditions as serious cause for concern. "Our members are constantly under pressure. Even those on sick leave have learned that they are constantly monitored. God forbid that you publish a photo of yourself someplace other than your home while on sick leave. They even use geotagging for photos published on social networks to see if their employees stayed at home during sick leave," said Pero Momirovski, a journalist and activist with the Independent Trade Union of Journalists and Media Professionals.

Instances of journalists being targeted by threats and insults, usually over social networks, also persist—and fail to elicit an adequate response

from the relevant authorities. "In spite of prominent campaigning and trainings on journalist safety for competent law enforcement institutions over the past several years, the rate of resolution of cases of harassment of journalists remains low," commented Lazar Sandev, a partner at a law firm specializing in freedom-of-expression cases. That was the case with the beating of journalist Zoran Bozhinovski (whose status as a journalist has been challenged, amid accusations of unethical conduct) by several assailants in September 2022; the investigation has so far failed to identify the attackers or produce charges against anyone. Panelists did note that an agreement was reached with the public prosecutor's office to designate one prosecutor who will be charged with investigating all attacks on journalists.

Although some panelists praised a coming change, expected in early 2023, to the criminal code that will qualify attacks on journalists as an "attempt to prevent an official person from performing its tasks and duties," others opposed the idea, noting that other European countries do not include that specification. "It may not exist anywhere in Europe, but I do believe it will help increase the safety and security of journalists," Momirovski commented.

The panelists could not think of a case that challenged legal protections for confidentiality of sources, although they did note that journalists frequently get questions like "Who told you that?" or "Where did you get that information?" Such questions have, so far, failed to stir legal action or court rulings ordering journalists to reveal their sources.

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

Citizens have more than adequate access to channels of information. North Macedonia enjoys excellent ICT infrastructure and coverage, with internet penetration covering about 85 percent of the population. Broadband internet is available across the whole country, although several panelists expressed concerns about an urban/rural divide—noting that mobile telephone reception, for instance, may be a problem for some remote, sparsely populated mountainous regions. Digital terrestrial television is available throughout the country, and cable (DVB-C), IPTV, and satellite (DVB-S) networks account for approximately 95 percent of the access to television content.

Most citizens name television and online sources (including social networks) as their main sources of information, according to the latest surveys. For instance, a 2020 study prepared by the RESIS institute shows equal number of respondents pointed out at TV and internet as their main sources of political news. The latest national poll conducted by IRI Macedonia (the national office of the International Republican Institute) in September – October 2022--while placing TV and internet as main sources of political news--gives clear advantage to TV as primary source of political news. Internet and cable television services adapt their pricing to the low purchasing power of the citizens, who usually can access more than 60 television channels (domestic and foreign) for about $10 a month. Most cable operators provide bundled services (cable television, internet, and telephony), which may be problematic in the event of outages. However, the widespread use of mobile phones indicates that there is at least one distribution channel available almost universally.

Offerings for people with disabilities, especially those with impaired sight or hearing, remain limited. Only the biggest and wealthiest television broadcasters can afford to hire sign-language translators—and even then, their services are limited to news broadcasts, although the government provides a sign-language translator at its press conferences. There is no special subtitling intended for people with impaired hearing.

In more conservative rural communities, panelists noted, women and girls may have limited access to new technology or little say in household media choices. However, Aleksandra Temenugova, a program coordinator at the Institute for Communication Studies in Skopje, provided a different perspective, commenting: "I remember that we were doing a report on one of those communities, and there were all these girls in traditional folk dress, all focused on their smartphones." An urban/rural divide may be present, especially in remote mountainous areas, in terms of accessibility of some platforms or range of services available.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

North Macedonia has a Law on Free Access to Public Information that is considered to be among the best in Europe. The new government, in a move to distance itself from its autocratic predecessors, adopted an Open Government Partnership strategy that follows principles of radical and active transparency. The Agency for Protection of the Right to Free Access to Public Information reported just six complaints in 2022—all positively resolved in favor of the plaintiffs who filed complaints against institutions that restricted access to public information.

> "Self-censorship, in my mind, is the second name for Macedonian journalism. It should be included as a course in journalism studies, if you ask me," said Katerina Dafcheva, a journalist at TV VIS, a regional broadcaster in the country's southeast region.

Panelists expressed concern, however, that government and state institutions rarely update the newly established online databases and websites with new information as intended under the radical transparency policy. In its 2022 annual report, the agency issued a reminder to all institutions, listing the information they must publish on their websites as part of their active transparency obligations. The institutions, however, seem to be selectively transparent, according to some panelists. "The impression is that the transparency is more of a formal kind. When you ask them something, the institutions tend to give you only the information that suits them best," Dafcheva said.

The panelists also called out institutions moving to preempt or "kidnap" a story, an especially common tactic when journalists ask questions that require responses from several institutions. While the journalists wait to hear back from all the sources, one of the institutions organizes a press conference, releasing the information to all media in an effort to give a story a positive spin.

Citizen awareness about freedom-of-information (FOI) rights remains unclear. Past surveys conducted by the Centre for Civic Communications (CCC) showed that CSOs account for the vast majority of FOI requests. CCC representatives say that, while they do not include that type of data anymore, their findings from recent years show that CSOs may file up to 80% of all FOI requests filed in the country, with ordinary citizens in very distant second place. CCC representatives also add that the journalists, according to their findings, do not use the FOI request as a tool in their reporting or investigations enough. However, it may be possible that journalists have filed requests for information while not identifying themselves as journalists. Although the panelists agreed that no groups face systematic or intentional denials, they also said that practices to inform citizens about opportunities to participate in public discussions surrounding new policies or legislation and comment on proposed bills are insufficient and often fail to inform the very people they were intended to reach.

Journalists who have decided to switch to public relations, in search for better pay and working conditions, fill most spokesperson positions in government and state institutions, the panelists noted—adding that often, former colleagues appear most eager to manipulate the journalists. "In general, it is a mistake to appoint journalists as PR specialists. Journalists often think it would be easy for them to move into public relations, but these are completely different disciplines," said Loparski, who is also a former journalist.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

North Macedonia, with a multitude of media, offers many and diverse information channels. Strict legal provisions regulating ownership concentration produce both positive and negative effects, per the panelists. On the positive side, they foster strong media pluralism. A negative consequence, though, is that there is not enough funding to support the crowded field—leading to low levels of sustainability, which adversely affects the quality of content. "Some of the provisions to

prevent media concentration are too restrictive and need to be changed. I don't know what we are waiting for," Selmani commented.

Ownership transparency obligations apply to broadcast and print media alike under the Law on Media, which requires all outlets to publish data on their ownership, management, and editorial structures on a quarterly basis. The panelists, however, called the decision to leave the online media outside such regulatory obligations a mistake, noting that many online media continue to publish without proper masthead information to allow audiences to see the media's backers. It also renders their "standing to sue (or to be sued)" practically nonexistent, allowing bad actors to publish unethical and harmful information with impunity.

> "Instances of journalists being targeted by threats and insults, usually over social networks, also persist—and fail to elicit an adequate response from the relevant authorities.

The panelists did not note any cause of concern regarding possible monopolies in the area of media distribution. There are numerous providers of cable and IPTV services and internet service providers, although three companies emerged as dominant forces in the market, both in terms of numbers of users and quality of services. The allocation of frequency spectrum needs to change from the current policy of allocation of all free capacities to a more reserved policy that would account for both the size of the market and the needs of the audiences for quality audiovisual content, contributing to much necessary consolidation of the audiovisual broadcasting market. Panelists noted that the audiovisual media services regulator (AVMU) lost a case brought against it over the decision not to open a public call on an initiative of a cable television station to expand to terrestrial broadcasting. The court found that AVMU's procedures were incomplete and failed to meet the standards for transparency and quality, confirming long-standing suspicions in the media sector that the regulator may not be acting fully independently and transparently.

Panelists agreed that those who want to establish media outlets face no obstacles, joking that may actually be the problem, considering the current overcrowded, unsustainable media ecosystem. Some panelists commented that the established, traditional media and journalists seem to dispute the right of others to invest in new media or engage in providing information to the public. Saracini noted that it seems that traditional journalists, who once endured questioning over whether they deserved to be called journalists, now do the same thing to people behind "these new forms of expression."

The public service broadcaster, in general, meets its obligations to inform, educate, and entertain. It also tries to serve all members of society—and largely succeeds, despite frequent accusations of partisan reporting. Funding shortfalls, however, impede the public broadcaster's performance, causing it to fail to meet the international standard of being sufficient, stable, and predictable. "They do meet their obligations to provide information, education, and entertainment for as diverse an audience as possible"—but budgetary constraints limit the quality of programming, calling into question the public service broadcaster's impact, Temenugova commented.

Furthermore, political horse-trading in the country's parliament resulted in two failed attempts to appoint new members of the public broadcaster's steering body, the Programming Council (as well as the audiovisual regulator's council), effectively preventing the start of much-needed reforms of the public broadcasting service.

The public service broadcaster remains under strong influence of the former government, the panelists added, primarily because managers and leaders appointed by the former government remain in office. The government, on the other hand, has made very political decisions to deny the public service broadcaster the full share of financing from the state budget prescribed by law—contributing to the prolonged crisis in the public broadcasting service.

The audiovisual regulatory council displays more independence from political meddling, especially from the government—explained, perhaps, because the previous parliament appointed the current members back

in 2014 (they have continued in office in a "caretaker" role for almost two years now, until new councils are appointed). However, the panelists commented that in such a politicized country, it is difficult to fully eliminate political considerations in any area, and media regulation is no exception.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

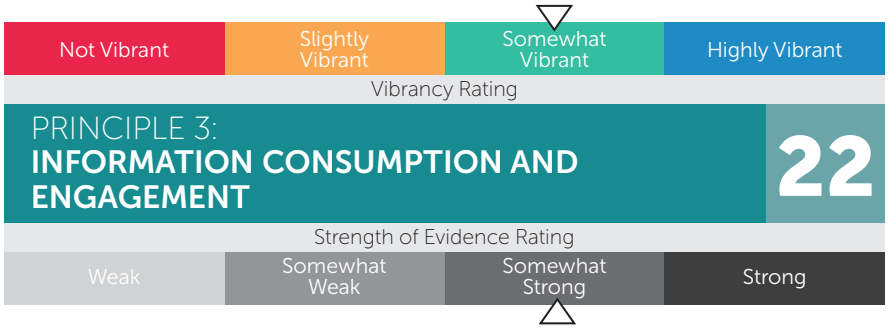
The independence of information channels remains an issue of great concern, as evident from the low scores the panelists gave this indicator. The notion that owners exert huge influence on the editorial policies of the media has been a mainstay of past VIBE reports. Panelists noted that most owners do not enter the media sector with the aim to inform, educate, or entertain, but rather to use the media as a bargaining chip in efforts to secure lucrative government contracts for their other businesses and as an instrument to fight competition. Some panelists noted that this issue is not unique to North Macedonia.

"There is no such thing as independence from the owners. That is a global trend, and there is no escaping it," said Loparski.

On the surface, major advertisers do not attempt to influence editorial policies and decisions. However, the panelists commented that concerns over the potential loss of advertising revenue remain very real. "You rarely, if ever, see negative reports or serious investigations of operations of major advertisers," Rashidi said.

Furthermore, it is difficult to draw a clear line of division between ownership, management, and newsrooms—particularly in the online sphere. The vast majority of online newspapers are small operations, with just two to three people, and everyone is expected to do a little bit of everything. "Consider my case. I am the owner, the general manager, the editor, the marketing person, and the lead reporter. All at the same time," Nikolic commented. The situation is better in the traditional media, although in at least one national television broadcaster, one person holds the position of general manager and editor-in-chief, erasing the traditional division between business and newsroom operations.

The panelists could not identify any obstacles or barriers, apart from financial capacity, that prevent the media from procuring equipment needed for reporting.



North Macedonia's citizens have at their disposal all the necessary tools to protect themselves on the internet, but insufficient levels of digital and media literacy, combined with low purchasing power, sometimes prevent people from taking full advantage of these resources. Nevertheless, the abundance of available media, as a whole, provide them with all the information they may, or may not, want to consume and engage with. Indicator 15, on community media, received Principle 3's highest average score of 25, while Indicator 12, on media literacy, received the lowest average score of 17.

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

North Macedonia has aligned its legislation with the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) standards in the area of protection of privacy. It is difficult to speak of the actual implementation, because there are not enough cases yet to draw any conclusions. For instance, all entities in the country are now legally obligated to have published a privacy policy that includes sections on use of cookies. Some panelists expressed reservations but also noted the positive efforts by data protection authorities to promote knowledge and awareness in the general public.

Panelists could not point to any particular cases involving use of privacy protection rules to silence reporters or to deny access to information in 2022, although a precedent of such cases exists from earlier years, and people of interest to the media often raise privacy concerns.

The media and citizens alike have access to quality digital safety instruments, but uptake depends primarily on finances. "As journalists, we often have trainings on protection and safety on the internet, and we are aware of the challenges. Adequate protection also requires resources that need to be provided by the media companies, and they don't invest in protective measures," said Meri Jordanovska-Cancarevic, editor at Vistinomer fact-checking services. Other panelists expressed doubts, too. "I don't think our colleagues are aware or informed to a sufficient degree. There are not enough trainings in that area for media professionals. I am equally skeptical about the levels of skills in the general population," said Momirovski, while other panelists complained about the lack of adequate information in all local languages.

The panelists noted a perceived generational gap, with older citizens possessing lower digital literacy skills than the younger generations that grew up in the digital era. That holds true in terms of knowledge of social network algorithms, targeted advertising practices, etc. The panelists did not think, however, that many young people are sufficiently concerned about those issues to actually change their media consumption habits. In their view, it is a matter of mentality, not a lack of awareness.

Some panelists believed that the state could take a much more active role. "Institutions need to offer more information in digital format, to digitalize more and more of their services. Investment in digitalization of services will automatically raise the digital literacy, by necessity," said Bojan Kordalov, an independent communications expert.

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

Panelists generally agree that media literacy levels are low, citing international reports from organizations such as the Open Society Institute's Bulgaria office that routinely place North Macedonia in last place among European countries in terms of media literacy skills. Some, however, offered dissenting opinions. "Surveys conducted in the country show that, contrary to accepted wisdom, media literacy of the citizens is high. However, everybody is focused on the surveys conducted by the Sofia-based Open Society Institute, and we find the methodology they use lacking in so many areas. The methodology of self-evaluation, used by the audiovisual regulator, is much better suited, although we need other research so we can compare the findings and make more consistent conclusions," said Temenugova.

The need to improve media literacy has gained urgency in North Macedonia—along with much of the world—as a key tool to fight misinformation and the rise of populism.

The government has been paying lip service to the importance of media literacy for years, but actual efforts to introduce media literacy curricula at all levels of education—primary, secondary, and higher—started in earnest only with the launch of the USAID-funded YouThink project, implemented by IREX in cooperation with educational institutions in North Macedonia. The first results started to show in September 2022, with media literacy's inclusion in elementary school curricula for select grades.

Panelists praised AVMU's engagement in the area of media literacy, both in terms of promotion and in the gathering and analysis of data. Some noted the important role the media and journalists can play in media literacy efforts, too. "The media will contribute, through their work, by helping people recognize quality reporting. Education is important, of course, but if the media fail to do their share of the job, it is all in vain. People need to see how quality products should look," Selmani said.

Several CSOs, following the lead of the major donors operating in the country, have been working to provide media and information literacy training for different segments of the population, but older generations have been somewhat left behind. Some panelists have pointed out the difficulty of changing long-held views, especially among older generations. Differences in information and media literacy levels also exist among people with different levels of education, according to

panelists. "What is especially disturbing is that even people with higher education are prone to believing disinformation and false facts," Saracini commented.

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

Some panelists--while expressing discontent that large swaths of the public follow nontraditional, online media or get their information from social networks--said they were not sure that people are in the dark about the quality of the information they may consume. Some panelists pointed out that issues such as "confirmation bias" play a role in decisions related to consumption of media and information. "People in general like to read reporting that fits with their own views. We forget how many diverse groups of people live in the country. In communication, you have to take into consideration all types of people," said Kordalov.

> "The need to improve media literacy has gained urgency in North Macedonia—along with much of the world—as a key tool to fight misinformation and the rise of populism.

Freedom of speech and freedom of information are protected and guaranteed by the country's constitution. Some of the existing restrictions to the freedom of speech—regarding hate speech, for instance—are inadequate, and the existing legislation should be amended, the panelists felt, to better regulate such matters and address a reluctance by the relevant authorities to prosecute people who engage in prohibited speech, especially hate speech.

Judging from surveys, such as IRI North Macedona's national poll, on media consumption habits of North Macedonian citizens, a majority manage to access quality information daily. Seventy-one percent of survey respondents indicated that television remains their main source of information, supporting the view that traditional broadcast media can be relied upon for quality and factual information, as opposed to the majority of online sites.

Citizens also have various public debate platforms at their disposal, although the relevant institutions often circumvent town-hall meetings and public consultations on new legislation, the panelists noted. For example, too many pieces of legislation are pushed through the parliament in a shortened, urgent procedure, without proper public discussion, under the guise of the so-called European flag legislation (referring to laws that need to be aligned with the corresponding EU legislation).

As noted earlier, the need to cut costs pushed many television stations to adopt formats traditionally found on radio, as a form of "daytime television." As a result, almost all television stations have call-in shows that discuss current affairs. CSOs also organize debates and panel discussions on issues of interest to their constituencies, often in cooperation with government institutions, especially on matters of public policy—debates that are inclusive and diverse, the panelists agreed. They praised the hosts of the call-in programs for their vigilance in calling out unacceptable speech on their platforms.

Panelists also pointed out that citizens, especially members of the activist community and representatives of different CSOs, are quick to report instances of unacceptable speech, especially hate speech. They did reiterated that the relevant authorities are slow to act or fail to take legal action on perceived hate speech and other forms of prohibited expression, although they admit that the authorities are obligated to apply a much higher standard to what may be admissible for legal action. Other than the prosecuting authorities, other institutions, such as the ombudsman, have only limited scope to act against hate speech.

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

Only a handful of traditional media in North Macedonia invest in proper audience research to gather information about their respective audiences' needs. Only the five national terrestrial television

broadcasters are part of the joint industry committee that measures the reach and share of audiences and thus have access to some quality data. Online media all nominally use some instrument to measure statistics, such as Google Analytics, but panelists reiterated concerns from past VIBE and its predecessor Media Sustainability Index reports that many outlets do not have the knowledge and skills to properly interpret and apply the data to improve their services.

> **“Public trust and confidence in the media and journalists continue to dip.**

Readers' editors or newsroom ombudsmen are virtually unknown in the media in North Macedonia, although efforts have been made in the past to install such positions in some media outlets. Communication with readers and viewers is a responsibility divided among all members of the newsroom. Television broadcasters are in a somewhat better position, panelists noted, as audiences have been known to make comments on their offerings in the call-in shows now running on most television stations. Only a handful of media outlets have “letters to the editor” departments. Social networks serve as the main communication channel for most media. Formal complaints can be made solely through the self-regulatory body or in private correspondence with the editors, of which the public is rarely aware.

The situation may be better with the local media, which seem to communicate much more with their audiences and are more responsive to initiatives coming from the citizens. “Just this morning, I was trying to contact the national railways company, because people from my town were complaining about the fact that it terminated a train that was the sole means of public transport for several villages in the area. So, we try to listen for local problems in our area and report them,” said Nikolic.

Public trust and confidence in the media and journalists continue to dip. The 2022 International Republican Institute survey shows that both trust and mistrust in media hover at 49 percent, and the media are not taking active steps to build that trust. The panelists noted that the practice of many online media to not publish masthead information, keeping the audience unaware of the owners and editors, further undermines trust. “The media have the instruments to interact with their audiences but don't use them properly. Therefore, mutual trust has eroded. They don't take into consideration the information received from the public. There are exceptions of course, but they are far from becoming the rule,” said Saracini.

The panelists are equally dissatisfied with the cooperation between the government, the media, and civil society. The blame, they say, rests primarily with the government. “There is no cooperation, and I blame the institutions, because they are not open enough and they avoid any criticism. Our government institutions don't recognize the existence of problems. They only recognize and boast about the solutions of the problem —the existence of which they previously refused to recognize,” said Kordalov.

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

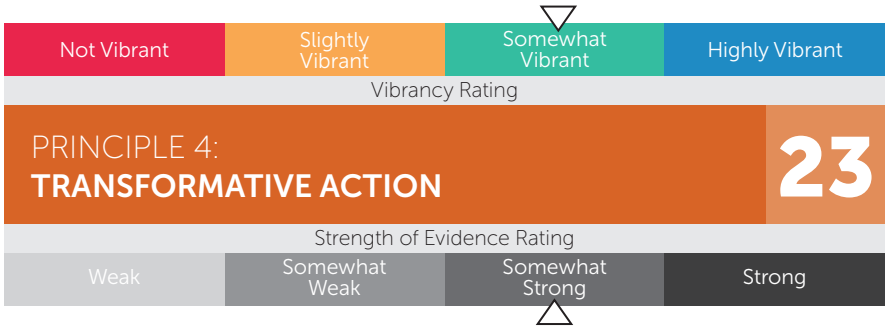
Formally, there are four nonprofit/community radio stations in North Macedonia. Three serve student populations in Skopje, Bitola, and Stip, while the fourth is dedicated to the Catholic community in the country's southeast region. These stations, featuring a completely different legal structure than the public or commercial radio stations, are expected to serve their constituent communities. The panelists agreed that the whole concept of community media is largely underestimated and underused in the country. “There are too few community media in the country to make a valid assessment. They remain small, and their reach and impact remain insignificant. Mainstream media continue to dominate here,” Temenugova said.

Local commercial radio is expected, to some extent, to fill in at least one role of community radio—to provide local information. That is especially true of the radio stations that broadcast in minority languages.

Various marginalized groups and communities in Macedonian society have found out that the Internet provides a cheap and readily accessible platform and have established community media of their own—such

as RadioMOF, a youth-oriented online radio and news site, and several human rights organization websites, especially those that work with LBGTQ+ communities. The latest addition to the list is Radio ESI, an online radio outlet for blind and visually impaired people that was established in June 2020 with little evident promotion or fanfare. Social networks, especially various Facebook groups established around specific topics or locations, have also taken over the role of community media for various groups of people. They tend to be heavily issue-driven; for example, there are many such groups for a variety of environmental protection issues, such as air pollution alerts.

Such media outlets tend to survive on donor grants and commonly employ professional staff. Local donations, unless they come from the corporate world, are not all that common. Some are volunteer supported, but according to the panelists, the concept of volunteering never established deep roots in Macedonian society. Panelists noted that, due to their very nature and typically strong relationships with CSOs, they never engage in hate speech or other forms of unacceptable or prohibited expression.



The sheer number of active media, on all platforms and formats, ensures that the citizens of North Macedonia engage with a lot of information representing diverse political, ideological, cultural, and other value systems. Growing polarization, however, raises concerns about the actual preparedness of the citizens to engage with the information in a constructive manner, for the benefit of the whole society. The panelists raised concerns about the reaction, or lack thereof, of the authorities to reports of corruption, abuses, and human rights violations.

Indicator 18, on civil society's use of quality information, received Principle 4's highest average score of 29, while Indicator 17, on individuals' use of quality information to inform their actions, received the principle's lowest average score of 19.

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

Nonpartisan news and information sources exist. A majority of traditional media, especially in broadcasting, are at least nominally non-partisan—with some exceptions—and follow centrist, liberal, pro-western, middle-of-the-road editorial policies, according to the panelists, and they have huge audiences, especially television broadcasters. Partisan, ideologically strict (along the whole spectrum of left-right division), nationalist, populist reporting is found primarily in the online domain.

Several panelists pointed out that, although "news avoidance" in a growing trend in the country, a significant number of news consumers seek out several sources of news, of all formats and orientation, on a daily basis in order to get a clearer picture of issues of interest.

The media offer opportunities to exchange ideas across political or ideological lines, most commonly in the form of call-in talk shows. However, the panelists noted a lack of higher-quality content offering both discussion and proper analysis, as well as sufficient human resources dedicated solely to producing such material.

Citizens readily engage in exchange of information and opinions with people they disagree with, judging by the very loyal audiences of popular call-in shows. Several panelists pointed out, though, that typically the same 20–30 people with opinions and positions on seemingly every issue call in repeatedly.

Another issue the panelists pointed out is that most people do not go into discussion or debate ready to have their opinions and positions

changed but are in "full attack mode," caring only about presenting their own argument. That seems to be the preferred model of communication online and on social networks, with the added element that rules of common decency quickly deteriorate in no-holds-barred shouting matches.

In the current climate of confirmation bias and echo chambers, people care little about basing their perspectives or views on facts or quality information, the panelists concluded. It would be more precise to say that people tend to have a set of facts that they already believe, and it is very difficult to change minds. "People want to read and hear things that fit in with the views they already hold, and the media provide them with what they want," Kordalov said.

> "In many cases, CSOs spark the interest of media and journalists in issues or stories that need to be covered.

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

Family traditions, peer pressure and influence, current trends and fads, and generational gaps may be far more influential than the quality of information in forming citizens' opinions, positions, and actions. As an example, panelists pointed to global sources of content and information, such as social media, exerting a major influence, especially on the younger generation. "My daughter, in spite of the fact that both her parents are very much interested in news and information, has no interest in what is going on here. The media here don't offer content that would attract the youth, attract her attention. She knows much more and is much more interested in Black Lives Matter (BLM) than in national politics," said Nazim Rashidi, of TV 21.

The same issue applies to citizens' voting habits, according to the panelists. As they point out, the main political parties enjoy very loyal constituencies who will vote for their respective party regardless of what the media report. Such voters are likely to disregard any negative media reports regarding the side they support as "media lies." Given the low levels of trust in most state and government institutions (local administration, notably, fares much better in that regard), citizens interact with them reluctantly.

The type of information people consume also hugely influences their choices and actions in the area of health care or general safety. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed a strong anti-vaccination presence in North Macedonia, the panelists mentioned, which affected citizens' decisions on whether to vaccinate themselves against the COVID-19 virus. The situation repeats itself, some panelists pointed out, with other conditions. "Look at the HPV vaccine. The huge influence of the anti-vaccine movement has resulted in dropping numbers of girls who get the HPV virus. Now the fear of the vaccine is prevalent, as opposed to past times, when the fear of the disease was far greater," Dafcheva commented.

The panelists also noted the cases of several prominent medical doctors—professors at Skopje's University Hospital "Mother Theresa"—who issued public appeals after filing actual charges to the law-enforcement authorities failed. They wanted the relevant authorities to do something about abuse of their names and titles by peddlers of various "miracle cures" for all ailments and diseases and various dietary supplements. That type of abuse of media and advertising rules is quite common; as several panelists pointed out, the notorious youth from Veles who helped Donald Trump win the 2016 U.S. presidential election cut their teeth in manipulating social-network algorithms on health and nutrition websites.

A similar situation is found in other areas, such as environmental protection. No amount of reporting, public education, or public information campaigns on air pollution or overdevelopment and over-construction in the country, especially in Skopje, has resulted in any behavior changes. The motive to make a quick profit seems to trump the public good or public interest every time, whether it relates to overdevelopment of the city center or the need to limit the use of personal automobiles and use public transportation.

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

Most of the panelists agree that civil society—whether formally organized in NGOs and CSOs, or as issue-oriented activist communities or groups—provides a bright spot for the country's information system. In their view, CSOs always use quality information, based on proper research and analysis, when promoting their mission, or to promote the rights and interests of their constituents. Similarly, when promoting new policies or initiating a change in existing public policies, CSOs use quality information, usually augmented with proper comparative analysis of similar policies and solutions applied in other countries, especially EU member-states or countries from the immediate region of the Western Balkans.

> "Panelists feel that all public and political debate has been reduced to a prolonged shouting match.

Some panelists, though, offered dissenting opinions. "Of course, like all other interest-based groups, the NGOs also approach information and facts selectively, adding a spin that favors their constituents. But they don't lie," said Madzoski. Panelists also noted efforts by various NGOs to manipulate findings of public opinion surveys to suit their needs and goals.

However, the panelists also praised the role CSOs play in the fight against misinformation, pointing out that the country's few fact-checking and debunking operations are NGO initiatives. Several panelists again expressed regret over the fact that mainstream media do little to join such efforts, both in terms of establishing fact-checking operations of their own or providing greater visibility to the civil society sector's efforts.

The media have long recognized CSOs as a source of quality information, routinely inviting civil society representatives as commentators and pundits on their current-affairs talk shows. CSOs are also usually very skilled in using new media, especially social media and networks, as a channel for communication with their constituencies and the general public.

In many cases, CSOs spark the interest of media and journalists in issues or stories that need to be covered. Several panelists noted that the few specialized investigative reporting outlets active in North Macedonia are all registered as NGOs to secure access to foreign donors' grants program, aware that advertising revenue is out of their reach as an income source. For similar reasons, a number of other newsrooms, not necessarily specialized in investigative or other specialist reporting, operate as NGOs.

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

The panelists agreed that government's mechanisms to engage and inform the public are, if anything, too robust. That is the case for most political actors, parties, and politicians, who engage large armies of public relations experts and spokespeople on the front lines of daily political struggle. The panelists repeated the complaint that public relations departments of both national and local government agencies now produce their own video and photo reports that they distribute to the media, in an obvious effort to ensure that their story will be told.

Much of the political discussion has been reduced to press conferences organized by a political party, followed by counter press conferences to rebut the claims of the opponents and launch counterclaims and accusations of wrongdoings. Each side of the given altercation then invokes evidence and facts that support their own claims, disregarding the arguments and the claims of the other side. Both sides routinely dismiss the claims of the other side as "fake news" and misinformation, and their positions are then adopted by the already polarized audiences. Some panelists feel that the government rarely relies on the use of false information or misinformation, instead putting the blame on the opposition (possibly due to past experiences when the current opposition held power).

The media have adapted to that approach, panelists noticed, and much of the news broadcasts—and indeed the political talk shows that dominate the prime-time slots of major television broadcasters—

follow the same pattern of mutual accusations and counteraccusations displayed by the government and the opposition. In general, the panelists feel that all public and political debate has been reduced to a prolonged shouting match.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

The extent to which reporting of corruption, human rights violations, or electoral shenanigans helps to prevent their reoccurrence is questionable. All relevant global reports and ratings—such as Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index in 2022, along with EU progress reports--point to corruption as the main evil holding the country back for years, and reports dealing with respect for human rights, freedom of the press, or democratic freedoms in general give the country low marks for the state of human rights. The panelists noted, however, growing interest from the international community in tackling corruption in North Macedonia, which may lead to improvements in that area.

Panelists pointed out that the government provides two types of reactions to reports of corruption. The first is to pledge immediate, serious investigation and sanctions for those responsible. The second is to stand in defense of those accused and maintain their innocence until proven guilty. More often than not, the two approaches are applied simultaneously.

Panelists complained that it is rare for reported corruption cases to end in courts, with proper judicial ruling one way or another but said it is certainly not because the media under-reported or ignored the cases. "There is a general absence of proper institutional reaction, even in cases when we have quality media coverage of abuses or criminal actions. I would point out the examples of IRL's (the Investigative Reporting Lab) reporting on the 'Zhan Mitrev' Clinic[1] during the COVID-19 pandemic or the reporting of people who illegally passed the bar exam without completing the proper degree programs first," Temenugova said.

It is a similar story with reports of violations of human or civil rights, which receive similar pledges of immediate and thorough investigation and sanctions for those responsible. Again, panelists noted, impunity seems to be a serious problem; they noted that the status of the journalism profession and the treatment of cases involving threats to journalists illustrates the situation well.

The panelists did offer some positive examples. "Remember the case of little Ambla and the ostracism and discrimination she faced in her elementary schools. The reporting of the case actually led to positive changes and greater acceptance for persons with impaired development in society," said Madzoski, referring to an effort by parents in his own town to expel a child with Down syndrome from the local elementary school under allegations that "she was disturbing and aggressive toward other children."

Doubts and complaints about election results emerge after every election—local and national—despite extensive reporting of alleged wrongdoing. The panelists pointed out that it may have more to do with the unwillingness of losing candidates to admit defeat than actual improprieties taking place—especially in such a polarized society, with the well-established "winner takes all" approach of election participants. As noted earlier, for most people, no amount of quality reporting or information will succeed in changing their opinions or choices at the ballot box.

Some panelists underscored the responsibility of the media in this respect. "Whether it is corruption, human rights, or elections, the media's attention is rarely consistent. We tend to be interested in one topic for a day or two and then move to another issue, another affair, usually at the behest of the government and the political parties. And then we are surprised that voter turnout drops with every election," Selmani said.

1 IRL's story, titled "Impure Blood," investigated the clinic's actions and behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic, and it accused the clinic and its eponymous owner and chief surgeon of misleading patients and providing expensive procedures that were untested and not officially approved for the treatment of COVID-19.

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

Aleksandra Temenugova, program manager, Institute of Communication Studies, Skopje

Nazim Rashidi, editor, TV 21, Skopje

Petrit Saracini, analyst, Institute for Media and Analytics, Skopje

Naser Selmani, editor-in-chief, Zoom.mk online newspaper, Skopje

Bojan Kordalov, communicologist, Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Information Technologies, Skopje

Tatjana Loparski, general manager/owner, Element PR Agency, Skopje

Pero Momirovski, journalist, Independent Trade Union of Journalists, Skopje

Steve Bashurovski, journalist/editor, TV Tera, Bitola

Lazar Sandev, lawyer/partner, Medarski Legal Office, Skopje

The following people submitted questionnaires and were interviewed one-on-one:

Meri Jordanovska-Cancarevic, editor and journalist, Metamorphosis Foundation, Skopje

Katerina Dafcheva, journalist, TV VIS, Strumica

Suzana Nikolic, editor-in-chief/owner, Kumanovonews.com online newspaper, Kumanovo

Zoran Madjoski, owner/editor-in-chief, Radio G, Gostivar

The panels for this edition of VIBE for North Macedonia were held on November 25 and December 2, 2022, respectively.

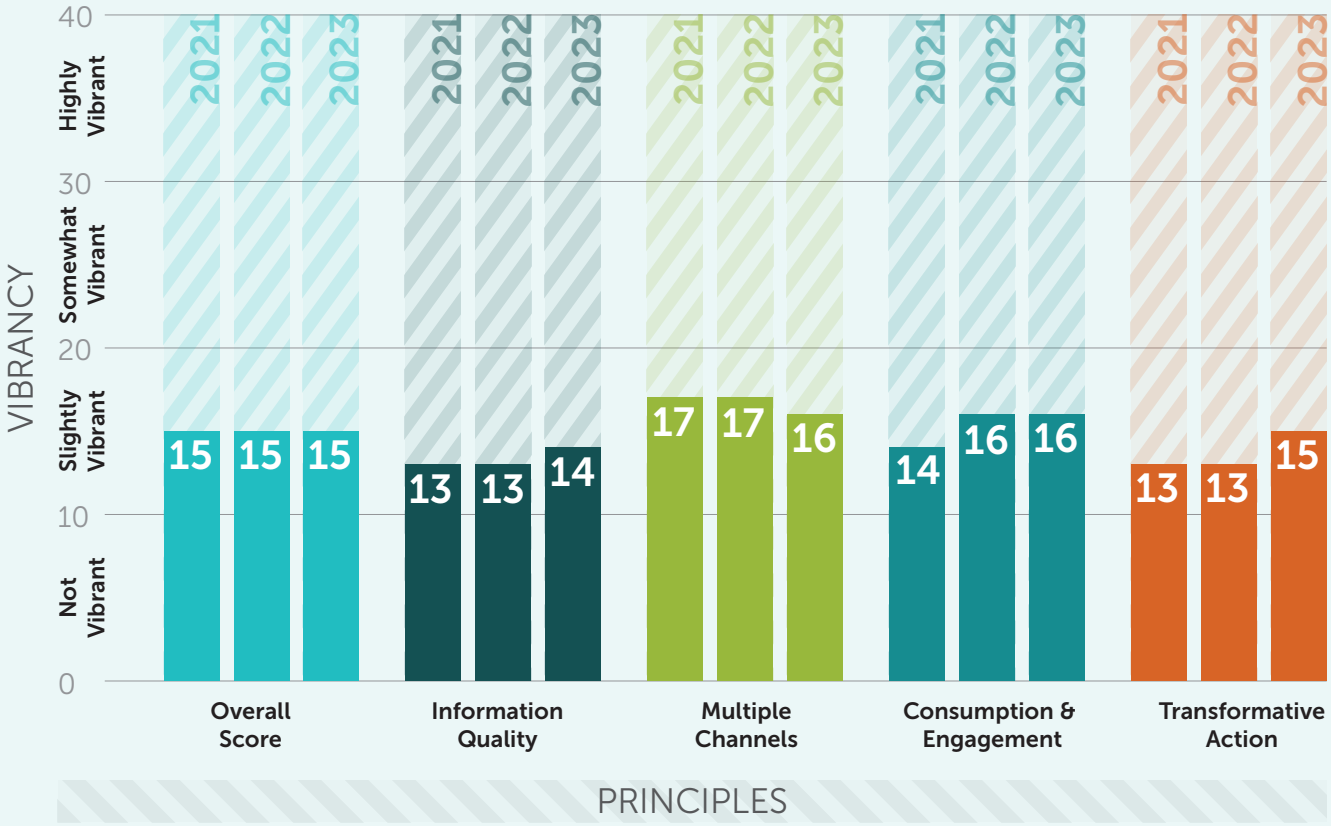
SERBIA

Vibrant Information Barometer

2023

USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

IREX



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.

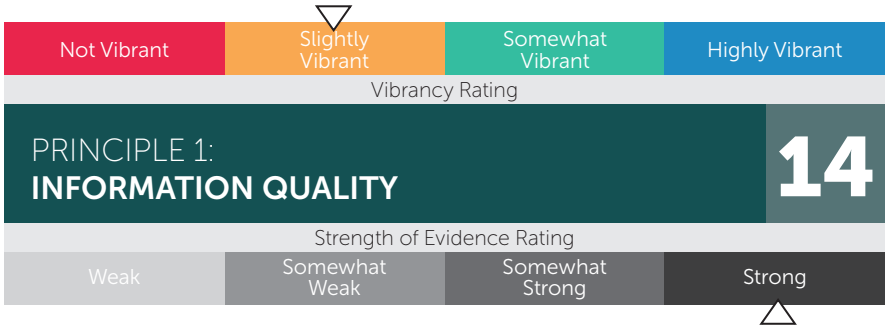
Highly Vibrant
Somewhat Vibrant
Slightly Vibrant
Not Vibrant

OVERALL SCORE
15

Serbian democracy and rule of law deteriorated further in 2022. Legislators did not advance any laws to protect fundamental rights, freedom of expression, or freedom of the media. Moreover, Serbia faced many political and economic issues during the year: The inflation rate soared to 15.1 percent in December 2022, the largest increase in the last 15 years, and food and non-alcoholic beverage prices rose 22.5 percent, according to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia. Serbia's external debt was at $39.1 billion in September 2022, according to Serbia's Circular Economy Innovation Communities (CEIC) program.

Despite these worrying trends, political leaders invested enormous effort to persuade people that the nation's political and economic situation is the best in the history of Serbia. This propaganda campaign led to political rulers and their followers monumentally conflicting with professional media and independent investigative civil society organizations (CSOs). The Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation's four-month study in 2022 reported 84 cases of politicians verbally attacking journalists and investigative non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that were critical of national policies. More than 80 percent of those attacks came from President Aleksandar Vučić, Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, and President of the Committee for Justice Jasmina Vasović from the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). Compared to the prior year, in 2022 Serbia's journalist associations recorded twice as many cases of pressure, attacks, threats, and other forms of media repression.

The 2022 VIBE overall score is 15, for a third year in a row. Though most panelists held the belief that freedoms deteriorated in 2022, several positive trends kept the low score from further decline. The year saw several improvements among the small number of independent and investigative media in Serbia' capital, Belgrade, and in other regions. These outlets bravely detected misinformation biases and acted professionally in the public interest. Journalist associations actively defended journalists and media under attack, especially in local areas. Women journalists continued to be on the front lines of the profession, and resisted government constraints. These media conducted serious research on media trends, and the journalism sphere widely spread fact-based data to counteract fake news content in government-controlled tabloids and television programs.



Serbia has more than 2,600 registered media and social networks, which produce volumes of information on a range of topics. However, the media sector has a dearth of quality content based on professional and ethical standards. Media controlled by authorities dominate in Serbia. As a result, many outlets avoid covering important themes and instead produce ethically questionable content and often report based on misinformation. As in previous years, this principle has the lowest score of the Serbia study. Two indicators in this principle—on sufficient resources for content production and on information is not intended to harm—received the lowest scores. The indicator on inclusivity and diversity received the highest scores, driven in part by the content that is available in national minority languages and the availability of news content in minority languages.

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

Serbia has an infrastructure that enables various content production. But availability is limited to professional local and regional media that operate under ethical and legal norms. Some digital media have adequate infrastructure, such as equipment, financial resources, and knowledgeable staff. These outlets produce quality short video formats, infographics, and maps. However, most media do not employ front-end developer professionals who could produce custom solutions for a specific newsroom or topic. Most local digital media frequently train their staff but have no capacity to produce quality content, given the few employees in their newsrooms and their less-engaged younger journalists. Large, corporate media houses have incomparably better equipment, said Tamara Skrozza, a journalist and member of the Press Council's Complaint Commission, Serbian media's independent self-regulatory body. "Compared to us small media, they are spaceships."

New and experienced journalists have training opportunities through state and private colleges as well as by NGOs. During 2022, journalists have access to a large number of training courses thanks to help from foreign donors. However, panelists agreed that no sponsors at any level offer training specifically for editors.

The Serbian fact-checking project *Raskrinkavanje* (Disclosure), produced by the nonprofit Crime and Corruption Reporting Network (KRIK), analyzed more than 4,000 texts that five national print dailies published from February through July 2022 regarding the Ukraine War. Those media transmitted short agency news or published texts in which journalists were neutral. But about 40 percent were biased, mostly supporting Russia and Putin, with daily outlet *Večernje Novosti* using heavy-handed misinformation. According to the International and Security Affairs Center (ISAC Fund) NGO, the most popular media sites in Serbia show pro-Russian narratives' penetration into public opinion.

Tabloid editors and journalists do not respect professional and ethical standards, nor do staff at five of the national state-controlled television outlets (public service RTS 1, private Prva srpska televizija, private TV B92, private TV Pink, and private Happy TV). Tabloid media ignore the weak censures by the Press Council and its appeals commission. However, the most unregulated space is on social networks, where hate speech and the spread of misinformation go unpunished.

Most media work under direct or indirect government authority and therefore produce content with controlled topics. Panelists agreed that manipulative content prevails, and important stories and serious analysis of social, political, and economic issues are rare. Only a portion of Serbia's consumers—those with access to media that honor professional standards and ethics—offer better insight into various topics.

Stojan Marković, editor-in-chief of *Čačanske novine* independent print and online portal Ozon Press, said that national online news outlets, including the public broadcaster Radio Television of Serbia (RTS), do not offer quality information and are influenced by political parties. "Program content of private TV stations with a national coverage cannot be characterized as ethical," he commented. Journalist stories in numerous so-called "regime media" do not represent honest reporting on government actions or actors, and are mostly obvious examples of "flatter journalism," he added.

Transparency International data show that President Vučić, public officials, and candidates from Serbia's ruling party were on the front pages of print newspapers 468 times in the pre-election period, with 86 percent in a positive tone.

"Regardless of the large number of media in Serbia, the quality of information is at an extremely low level," noted *Raskrinkavanje* manager Vesna Radojević, "The small number of truly professional media that respect the Code of Journalists of Serbia are a counterweight to pro-regime media that do not respect standards and publish fake news daily."

In public state-run media services, sensitive socio-political topics are reported only to the extent that they keep a safe distance from criticizing the ruling power. "Independent editors are the exception rather than the rule," explained Siniša Isakov, professor at the University of Novi Sad.

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

Panelists noted that a small number of Serbia's independent media adhere to presenting fact-based reporting, but the majority do not. Marković said that national TV reports from public service broadcasters RTS in Belgrade and Radio Televizija Vojvodine (RTV) in Novi Sad are normally unreliable and unobjective. Stories lack credible sources and abound with misleading information from state officials, according to Marković. Authorities use spin and manipulation almost every day, and the tabloid media follow suit.

Media do not face enough effective sanctions to prevent unprofessional journalistic work. Milivoje Mihajlović, RTS assistant general manager, pointed out that "disinformation dominates in the majority of pro-government media. Where there is no disinformation, there is concealment of information."

Panelists noted an egregious case of unethical journalism in 2022. The tabloid *Informer* sparked public outrage with its interview of a recently released serial rapist, who talked about how women should behave when he rapes them. The Culture and Information Committee of the Serbian Parliament refused to discuss the reporting publicly; government-controlled media rationalized the interview and gave the *Informer* editors time on national TV to defend its actions.

In spite of the current government's ambition to control the entire media space, the internet remains beyond its reach. The panelists acknowledged that social media platforms have generally improved access to information, but they said that the negative consequences of their misuse continue to grow. Online forums do not offer spaces where political debate and freedom of the press can thrive. Instead, they serve as weapons for advancing pro-government narratives and attacking critical voices, and ruling parties use them as tools to consolidate political power.

The Novi Sad School of Journalism and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) conducted investigations that showed the main targets of fake news on social media are journalists and the few credible media outlets in Serbia. These attacks are particularly apparent during elections.

Misinformation and fake news are a ubiquitous part of Serbian politics. Journalists hold the government responsible, but few criticisms of the ruling elite reach the public. Panelists pointed out that evidence of disinformation is easier to find on social networks. Several pro-journalism NGOs, such as the Fake News Tracker by *Raskrinkavanje* as well as journalist associations, are detecting fake news and disinformation. In 2022, *Raskrinkavanje* became a member of Poynter's International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN).

In June 2022, the NGO ISAC Fund published an article analyzing comments on popular Serbian news portals. The article reported that many Balkan media have removed their website comment areas, but influential media outlets in Serbia maintain them. "They are widely used by regular readers and by political party troll networks," the article stated, "These comments on news portals have additional significance, as they can oppose editorial policy of certain media."

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

Russian state-funded news website and radio station Sputnik still strongly influence public opinion in the Serbian media landscape. In November 2022, RT Balkan (Russia Today-Balkan) was launched. According to a regional analysis, Serbia has the largest number of media in the Balkan region spreading disinformation about the war in Ukraine.[1] Panelists said TV Happy has a daily debate program on Russian aggression in Ukraine, which only discusses a pro-Russia point of view. *Raskrinkavanje* analyzed several pro-Russian tabloids and dailies in Serbia, including *Informer* and *Večernje Novosti*, which show the outlets openly spread Russian propaganda.

The Association of Journalists of Serbia (UNS) recorded a total of 140 cases of pressure, attacks, threats, and other forms of repression against the media in 2022, representing almost twice as many as in 2021. The UNS database shows that the ruling party conducted the majority of recorded threats. Opposition leaders also hurled insults at journalists. The year began with Pink television's broadcast of a fake quasi-documentary film *Meta Porodica*. The 20-minute video labeled certain independent journalists as foreign mercenaries who were collaborating with intelligence services and criminal groups to attack and overthrow President Vučić and his family.

> **"Most media work under direct or indirect government authority and therefore produce content with controlled topics.**

According to Isakov, "In 2022, the number and frequency of published malicious information increased." Hate speech and attacks by the government were directed towards certain groups, such as LGBT activists and Pride 2022 organizers, along with protesting farmers and environmental activists, he reported, adding that authorities targeted "critical media, journalists, and editors much more often and more harshly than towards political opponents."

Panelists agreed that government officials openly repressed and censored journalists by preventing them from doing their jobs. According to panelists'observations, media were often forbidden to attend public events such as the session of the Council in Grocka, the session of the Commission for Spatial Plans of Sremski Karlovac, and the opening of the Teachers Faculty building in Subotica. For a year-and-a-half, journalists at news outlet Danas were not able to question the mayor of Niš, who also ordered municipal employees not to make statements or talk to Danas reporters.

According to the NUNS database, media workers are often physically attacked while performing journalism work. Media companies also experienced attacks on property. Panelists reported an incident in which office windows were smashed of a building housing three newsrooms: Glas Podrinja, Television Šabac, and the RTS correspondent office.

The case of OK Radio in Vranje demonstrates the treatment of journalists and the pressure against employees in professional local media. OK Radio (in Vranje) owner Olivera Vladković refused consent to the construction of an illegal gaming house, which required the windows of OK Radio's newsroom to be forcibly bricked up. After her refusal, she and the newsroom staff received threats, and the premises of the radio station were attacked. The Vranje Basic Court sentenced the owner of the illegal building to 14 months in prison for violent behavior towards Vladković and her employees. However, by the end of 2022, the windows were still bricked up.

1 https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=Izvestavanje-u-regionu-Najmanje-1-500-dezinformacija-za-150-dana-rata-u-Ukrajini-1071

Hate speech is common in most Serbian print and online media. Most prevalent is content writers using derogatory names for members of certain nationalities, while others libel political opponents, critics from the civil society sector, and media representatives. Mihajlović noted, "More and more often, information is aimed at creating confusion among the audience, to conceal the true meaning of a news report] and to deceive citizens."

> **"The advertising market on social networks and other media is not transparent. The majority of ad placement goes to media aligned with the government, and advertising in Serbia is highly politicized.**

National TV outlets, including Happy and Pink, broadcast programs that call for violence, normalize hate speech, glorify war criminals, and support ultra-right organizations. The Institute for Media and Diversity studied the frequency of hate speech in Serbian media and concluded that women are the most frequent targets, along with ethnic groups and the LGBT community.

Journalists often generate hate speech, but are also targets as well. Panelists said sanctions for hate speech are very rare, with even fewer convictions. The Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM), appointed by the National Assembly, is responsible for allocating frequencies and applying broadcasting laws, but almost never takes action. REM's yearly report on programs accessible to people with disabilities has not been published since 2019.

The Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation surveyed pro-government tabloid outlets from April to July 2022 and found almost 200 attacks on media critical of the government. On average, outlets published one article per day that discredited, insulted, or targeted all those who write critical reports about the authorities. Several articles also attacked the Press Council and NUNS. About 22 percent of those articles used the same or very similar words, which indicated that the tabloids ran ready-made articles from the same sources.

Serbia's journalism associations are introducing initiatives to reduce threats on journalists and support freedom of the press. In October 2022, the Protector of Citizens Ombudsman of Serbia launched the Platform for Recording Attacks and Pressures on Journalists, which was created in cooperation with 10 media and journalist associations.

According to Jana Jacić, an editor with the radio and online news outlet BOOM 93, "Media in Serbia that have a national presence are most often prone to unethical behavior." The Press Council offers ethical self-regulation of news outlets, but it only covers print and online media; TV and radio outlets have no self-regulation. The Press Council received 44 complaints of unethical offenses by journalists and outlets during the first six months of 2022. The most frequent offenses were related to discrimination against national minorities and the spread of stereotypes about these groups and publishing the identities of minors and children in reports on family tragedies. The Independent Journalists Association of Vojvodina (NDNV) has appealed to journalists, calling for them to respect the rules of reporting on personal tragedies.

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

RTV and the National Minority Council produce programs in minority languages in the Vojvodina province, with longtime good coverage. Radio Belgrad offers a program in the Romani language, and RTS TV has a news program in Albanian. A number of Albanian- language media in the Preševo Valley in Bujanovac cover local topics and are editorially autonomous. The Bujanovac region leads the way in the number of media reporting in the national minority languages, with approximately 26 registered media. Commendably, the local governments where national minorities live offer bilingual reporting on their official websites.

Even though Serbia held elections in 2022, panelists observed that the majority of citizens were not exposed to diverse content. All national television stations worked in the interest of the government. Media still do not sufficiently represent the different experiences and viewpoints of

racial, ethnic, and religious affiliations that would permit reaching most Serbian citizens. All pro-government tabloids and television channels exclusively address the Serb majority community. Their coverage targets followers of the Orthodox Church and male viewers, while the presence of other communities is marginalized.

The media sector only includes rare offerings of Serbian language content produced by members of minority groups. One exception is the program *Paleta* on RTV, a daily television show. RTV's editors select the content, produce it in the languages of national minorities, and provide Serbian subtitles.

In new developments, RTS and the Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing of Serbia struck a deal in 2022. They are adapting the RT3 program *Dnevnik 2* to better meet the needs of people with hearing loss.

The Association of Independent Local Media's "Lokal Pres" research report showed that in 53 Serbian local media outlets, women make up 57 percent of newsroom employees—a sharp increase from 43 percent in 2016. The report stressed that "women journalists in local areas most often face discrimination when invited to local events; it is more difficult for them to reach male interlocutors; their salaries are at the level of the minimum wage; and they are exposed to insults more often than their colleagues, especially on social networks." The research noted that politicians make the most sexist comments to the public. Very few women report harassment. "As far as editorial and ownership functions are concerned, the majority of them are occupied by men, while the editorial offices are mostly occupied by female journalists," Radojević observed.

Media coverage of women is problematic. Reporting often includes stereotypical sexism, normalization of gender-based violence, and romanitcizing femicide. Moreover, womens' voices are often left out of reporting on various important social topics. Multiple cases of sexual violence occurred in 2022 where mainstream media took an unprofessional approach, including superficial analysis, relativization of violence, and shifting the responsibility from the abuser to the victim. Blaming women for Serbia's low birth rate is a popular trope heard on TV programs and even from some ministers.

In 2022, a report by the group Journalists Against Violence revealed that between 2019 and 2021, Serbian media published more than 36,000 headlines about violence against women. In 40 percent of these articles, the media violated ethical rules by revealing the identity of victims or family members. In traditional and new media, women are still most often seen in the role of sex symbol, then wife, mother, or housewife. The general prevailing trend—that authorities do not react to violence against women—has contributed to the normalization of these acts. Tabloid headlines such as "I killed my love with a hammer" and "I had to kill her, I loved her very much" are common.

Most of the violence against women are reported by online outlets. The Serbian female activist Minja Marđonović was involved in a case of "digital murder," as she called it, in 2022. She published critical comments about the tabloid *Informer's* interview with a serial rapist[2]. The next day, her email was hacked, and posts of child pornography appeared on her Facebook page. All three platforms she used (Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp) were immediately taken down, and she was marked as an ineligible user. With enormous efforts, and with the help of groups that address digital violence against women and activists, she managed to have all three accounts restored.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Serbian media funding sources--such as advertising, public funds, international donors, and commercial services--are unreliable and inconsistent. "Producers of professional content do not have enough funds to work," noted Mihajlović, "Apart from television N1 and NovaS[3], which have stable financing, other professional media are facing a difficult financial situation. There is no apolitical financing, nor transparent distribution of public funds for the media." Co-financing

2 Serbia's Press Council later said that *Informer* violated the Serbian Journalists' Code by publishing the interview and called upon the tabloid to abide by professional standards.

3 N1 and NovaS--along with *Danas*, Serbia's daily newspaper of record—are part of the United Group, a company that operates telecommunications platforms and media outlets throughout southeastern Europe.

media projects have become one of the few sources of income for local and regional media.

In 2022, Serbia had 2,600 registered media outlets. Financing for local media is much more difficult to obtain than for national outlets. The local advertising market is almost non-existent, as all large companies mainly advertise in the national media or on major social networks.

Local media are at the mercy of project co-financing with municipalities, and local governments mainly reward loyal media with co-financing. In this way, project financing has turned into a political tool, instead of primarily serving the public interest. This type of funding tends to go to state-backed print and television tabloids instead of reaching professional journalists, as prescribed by law.

An investigative series by online media outlet Subotičke.rs uncovered many forms of fraud in local co-financing projects. The investigations identified some media commission members as involved with government organized non-government organizations (GONGOs) that media owners have established. The investigators also found media content copied from Wikipedia; other conflict of interest cases in which representatives of outlets awarded funds to their own programs; and no type of project evaluations after completion. Panelists observed that the municipalities Bela Palanka, Ćićevac, and Varvarin exemplify the paradoxes of co-financing: They all allocated fund tenders for co-financing media projects in their towns, even though none of the outlets were registered in their territories.

In early 2022, the OSCE Mission to Serbia, the Center for Sustainable Communities, and the Ministry of Culture and Information presented its database on media project co-financing in Serbia from 2015 to 2021. The database contains 14,000 approved media projects by all local authorities, submitted by more than 1,600 applicants. The database is completely open and can be used by the media members, media associations, state institutions, and citizens.

Media outlets find donor funds increasingly difficult to secure, as the panelists pointed out. They explained that foreign donors do not understand that Serbian media workers, especially in local media, cannot manage the extensive administration required to obtain donor projects. Some institutional donors are permitted only to give funds to NGOs, which results in NGOs engaging media units as subcontractors. The panelists emphasized the need to review donor media programs and their responsiveness to the realities of Serbian professional media, and how well the programs cover current important priorities. Panelists also recommended creating donor projects designed to increase media participation and thus improve the media environment.Regional media representatives on the VIBE panel advocated for this approach to help alleviate pressures that smaller, non-Belgrade-based media face with local authorities and operating resources.

Panelists noted that crowdfunding for media is on the rise. KRIK, whose stories mainly focus on crime and corruption, has seen gains: the greater the risks and attacks the outlet faces from politicians, the greater the attention and donations they receive. Seven years after asking readers to sign up and donate, now 25 percent of KRIK's annual income comes from readers, who are offered free access or gifts and exclusive content in exchange. To be sustainable, this approach demands constant production of relevant content and continuous promotion to followers.

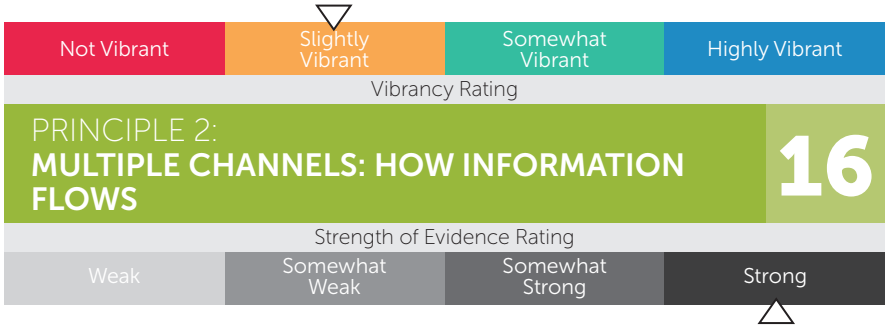
The advertising market on social networks and other media is not transparent. The majority of ad placement goes to media aligned with the government, and advertising in Serbia is highly politicized. Pro-government media also get direct state subsidies. In July 2022, REM extended the licenses for four national television stations (Pink, Happy, Prva and B92). These outlets violated Serbia's Advertising Act 1,430 times during May 2022 alone, almost 50 times a day without serious ramifications.[4] For the entire presidential election campaign, Vučić spent around €6 million ($6.6 million), (14 times more than his competitor). €1.5 ($1.6 million) went to advertising on Pink television. According to Transparency Serbia, data published on election campaign finance indicated that €660,000 ($723,000) went to advertising on Radio-Television of Serbia; €649,000 ($711,000) went to Prva television; and €620,000 ($680,000) to print media. All the winners of the largest

4 https://nova.rs/vesti/drustvo/cetiri-nacionalne-televizije-za-samo-mesec-dana-1430-puta-prekrsile-zakon-o-oglasavanju/

amounts are under the clear control of the ruling party.

In July 2022, the Trade Union of Journalists of Serbia (SINOS) conducted a study of journalist income and found that salaries are not enough to live on, and journalists are forced to look for additional work. One reason is trade union organizations are not strong enough to improve journalists' socio-economic position. In one study, 88 percent of respondents were not trade union members, while 95 percent were members of some journalism association and believed that only these associations represent their interests.

Regional journalists' standard of living is even more endangered. In the Rasina district, journalist monthly earnings are 25 to 40 percent lower than the average salary there, according to a Center for Investigative Journalism in Kruševac survey conducted during June and July 2022.



While Serbia has media-related laws that are up to European standards, their implementation is weak, and journalists work with little legal protections. For example, ownership of media is regulated by law, but numerous abuses have led to ownership concentration and influence over the media. Overall, the country's media infrastructure is strong, with broadcast and internet coverage reaching most regions, which led to panelists giving this indicator their highest scores for this principle. Given the level of influence exerted on editorial content by owners and financers, panelists were very critical of the indicator on independent information channels, which scored the lowest at 8. They also scored very low the indicator that examines people's rights to create, share, and consume information.

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

Serbia's laws relating to the media sector are generally adequate and in line with European democratic standards. However, just as reported in last year's VIBE, lawmakers did not implement any frameworks to govern freedom of expression or freedom of the media in 2022. "There are no substantive mechanisms to protect journalists," noted Mihajlović, "Formally, there are laws, but they are not implemented." Government officials use every press conference to attack dissident journalists. Consequently, media staff engage in a high degree of self-censorship.

Public officials' constant targeting of certain critical media and journalists has been particularly pronounced, even despite international organizations, domestic journalism associations, and NGOs urging officials to refrain from attacks. Professional media were countersued by politicians in almost 60 percent of court cases.

Often, the judiciary does not understand the role of media and journalists in a democratic society. During 2022, only a few court cases concerning threats and attacks on journalists were resolved quickly, and all of those were suits of private individuals.

The Council of Europe report published in March 2022 warned that Serbia ranks among the highest of all countries surveyed, with the most threats to journalists. On World Press Freedom Day 2022, organized by UNESCO in Serbia, speakers revealed that journalists are experiencing a continual increase in attacks, death threats, and defamatory campaigns. Often attackers target journalists' families, as was the case of NDNV Media Hub's program director. His family members, including his wife and sister, were explicitly threatened.

In December 2022 and following other professional media outlets and journalists' associations earlier withdrawals, the UNS Assembly decided to leave the Working Group on the Safety and Protection of Journalists, established by the Serbian government in 2020, because the government did not fulfill its promise of protecting journalists from politicians' attacks. Marković, who also been targeted by politicians,

remarked, "The murders and then burning of Milan Jovanović's house remained unsolved. Murders are forgotten and drastic cases are not solved. The working group for the safety of journalists is farcical and counterproductive because we sit and discuss with them, and this does not serve to improve the safety of journalists, but rather serves to confuse the public."

In the panelists' view, the wide spectrum of attacks on media that criticize the government produces an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship, down to the smallest media outlet. Journalists in local media have been more exposed to pressure and threats, and now working in local media is more difficult than even in the 1990s during the Yugoslav wars, the panelists reported.

The most common consequences of controversial reporting are threats to journalists, which can be uttered publicly, or more often, through social networks and tabloid campaigns.

The Serbian NGO Citizen Initiatives became a member of the Coalition Against SLAPP (strategic lawsuits against public participation) in Europe. The group aims to expose and fight the use of lawsuits to bully and intimidate journalists into silence. In early 2022, KRIK faced 10 ongoing SLAPP court proceedings filed by powerful authorities against the company and its journalists, to divert the organization from its work. On October 20, 2022, the coalition awarded Serbia the title of the "SLAPP Country of the Year." Many judges in Serbia are unaware that SLAPP lawsuits are deliberately aimed at hindering journalists from reporting on controversial topics. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) called on Serbia to implement anti-SLAPP measures recommended by the European Union.

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

Serbia's media infrastructure meets the needs of most people, with TV and radio coverage and internet services available in the majority of the country. The panelists noted that Serbia, more than many developed countries, is covered by cable operators. According to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 95 percent of households in the country have a mobile phone, 98.5 percent have a television, and 77 percent have a computer. All businesses in Serbia have an internet connection.

With regard to "use of ICT 2022, " the Statistical Office's survey indicates that 88 percent of urban households have an internet connection, along with 76 percent of rural households. According to the same survey, only 67 percent of households in rural regions have a computer. A current conflict between Telekom Serbia and Serbia Broadband (SBB) has resulted in some urban users having two optical connections, which is not only irrational, but is detrimental to infrastructure development in rural areas.

The report also noted that 98 percent of Serbian households with an income higher than €600 ($663) a month have an internet connection. Approximately 71 percent of households with an income of less than €400 ($442) a month, and only 33 percent of those with an income of less than €250 ($276), have internet. Many rural citizens are not interested in broadband and cable due to the expense, and they turn to terrestrial television and mobile internet for coverage.

Research conducted by the Center for the Creation of Policies and Strategies shows that 94 percent of young people in Serbia get most of their information from social networks, while the smallest percentage of respondents get information through television (4.7 percent), and print media (0.6 percent). The Youth in the Media Mirror survey, conducted by the Youth Umbrella Organization of Serbia, shows year after year that the stereotypical pattern of Serbia's mainstream media coverage of youth depicts the image of violent, drunken young men under the influence of drugs, as well as promiscuous girls. Other types of youths outside this stereotype are ignored. Public service broadcasters, and especially news media, have no political content for young people.

Freedom House's "Internet Freedom 2022" report ranks Serbia as a "free" country compared with 70 countries, or 89 percent of internet users in the world. But the nation faces challenges, and the report rates it low in the section on disinformation.

Serbian authorities do not restrict access to media and rarely block

websites. Occasionally, internet users are detained for nefarious online activities, but most often do not face rigorous punishment from authorities. Serbia has a high level of access, a low level of blocking, and low penalties for unaccountable online activities.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

Panelists agreed that Serbia's law for the right to access public information guarantees access, but frequently the law is not upheld. For example, UNS asked the information office of the City Municipality of Grocka why the sessions of the city's Municipal Council were closed to the public. Officials claimed they decided to close the sessions to prevent arbitrary interpretation and public presentation of their information and views. Isakov points out that, "The government often avoids answering questions of public importance. The media then get information through the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance, which at best only complicates the work and prolongs the research process."

> "Panelists agreed that Serbia's law for the right to access public information guarantees access, but frequently the law is not upheld.

In 2022, the Serbian research organization BIRODI presented the results of a 10-month survey. This study showed that the constitutionally guaranteed right of citizens to objective, complete, timely, and truthful government information is "to a great extent threatened" because citizens consume propaganda and promotion that is missing critical evaluation of the government's work.

During the process of integrating into the EU, Serbia was required to increase government transparency, but this directive is often ignored. The Commissioner for Information of Public Importance announced that the number of complaints about data protection and obtaining information of public importance has skyrocketed—in 2022, it received 10,000 complaints, more than twice the average of 4,000 per year.

"When it comes to free access to information, neither the Ministry of Finance nor the Treasury Board are absolutely responsive and thus prevent a transparent insight into the spending of public money," according to journalist N.J., who did not wish to use her full name, "We cannot monitor either how the [taxpayer] money is distributed, nor how money flows towards state institutions and private companies. It is impossible to obtain data on private foreign investments that drastically change the entire natural environment in parts of Serbia."

No group is systematically excluded from exercising the right to information. However, knowledge of that right appears to be low among Serbian citizens, as is their understanding about how to even request information.

In the panelists' experience, government representatives have a permanent ban from appearing on the so-called "critical media," which disallows these outlets from publishing both sides or conducting professional interviews with officials. Skrozza noted that in other cases, government officials agree to a studio interview, and then cancel at the last minute. She commented that citizens become ill informed when officials continually ignore the media. "A multi-year trend that escalated in 2022 is that government representatives absolutely do not talk to journalists of professional media, which is discrimination contrary to the law," she explained.

Politicians tend to ignore the professional media, as do representatives of state institutions and experts who are loath to answer journalists' questions. State institutions require questions to be in writing, and officials usually give general answers. Journalists can provide consumers with quality information through personal research, but their work is difficult to undertake when they have no possibility of direct contact with sources. In addition, all contacts with journalists are centralized by the state institutions.

Panelists noted that the government has spokespersons and information offices, but they often give useless answers to journalist questions.

Government spokespersons repeat what they are told by their superiors. When news outlet *Južne vesti* asked government officials why the tabloid *Informer* was able to publish an extensive interview with a serial rapist, the officials answered that *Južne vesti* systematically attacks the authority of President Vučić and undermines his function. This is a narrative that is used against journalists throughout Serbia whenever they ask challenging questions.

Top officials speak directly at press conferences or more often in multi-hour broadcasts on national television, where they conduct monologues and occasionally answer pre-approved questions. In 2022, a trend arose where ministries began making their own media reports and taking their own videographers to public events. Instead of speaking with journalists who post their analysis of events on websites, ministries with their own media always present their actions and viewpoints in a positive way. If somebody asks an unpleasant question at a recorded event, it is excluded from the published report.

> “Members of the ruling party own a large number of local media outlets.

Jacić pointed out that this trend has spread from the ministries to local municipalities. In Požarevac, the mayor and members of its council use social networks to communicate with journalists, rather than answering questions directly. These officials post announcements and photos, Jacić said, but they do not give journalists the opportunity to communicate. She gave the example of when public company representatives ask important questions concerning the local environment, and local leaders do not give concrete answers. Thus, the relationship between media, Belgrade authorities, and the local communities becomes equally flawed, she added.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Members of the ruling party own a large number of local media outlets. Although ownership of media is regulated by law, numerous abuses have led to ownership concentration and influence over the media. Despite the law that was passed two decades ago prohibiting state ownership of media, the government owns quite a few outlets.

A serious problem arising from ignoring media ownership law is the activity of the state-owned Telekom Srbija cable company, a key outlet for the ruling regime. Telekom “recognized” control over five private television stations, which is a violation of domestic laws that require the state to withdraw from media ownership.

Serbia still has not adopted a law on media ownership transparency, despite the EU’s recommendations and the efforts of civil society. Anyone can identify formal owners of a given media outlet by searching the APR (*Agencija za privredne* register) website. The site is run by the Serbian Business Registers Agency, a state organization registering all economic units established in Serbia. Registering is obligated by law. However, the site cannot be searched by a person’s name—only by the outlet name or a registration number—which hinders determining how many media outlets an individual owns.

REM’s inefficiency has led to issues surrounding media transparency and the state’s unlawful media ownership. The regulator does not monitor or punish broadcasters that act illegally, and its process of allocating radio and TV frequencies is not transparent and is highly partisan. No independent or critical media were awarded national broadcasting licenses at any time during 2022. But in July, REM again granted all four of Serbia’s national TV frequencies to the same television stations that are close to the government (Pink, Prva, Happy, and B92)—causing a public outcry. REM explicitly broke the law and code of journalism when awarding frequencies to these outlets, because they all had been cited for violations in the past. The Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation and the Center for Research, Transparency, and Accountability (CRTA) filed a lawsuit against REM for its award process.

REM did open up bidding for a fifth TV frequency for eight years; the decision was expected by December 2022, but officials made no announcements. “The privilege of having a national frequency was also retained by channels whose programming is almost exclusively based on reality programs,” said Radojević, “The process of allocating the remaining fifth frequency is still not completed, and this process has

been marked by numerous controversies."

TV Nova S and N1 protested the lack of a decision by blacking out their screens for 24 hours with the message, "Darkness in Serbia without free media." REM responded to criticism by going on strike, exemplifying the obedience of state institutions to political demands.

"The quality of public service information is getting worse, topics of public interest are not covered, nor are important social issues raised," according to journalist N.J., "There is no room for political debate and opposition, except for the dominant ruling narrative. Public television has almost no cultural or educational program. The dominant shows are quizzes and shows about cooking, the countryside, and sports."

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Through financial support, owners dominate the media and dictate editorial attitudes. During 2022 there were several important changes in media ownership, backed by the government, that have worsened the media environment. In May, the owner of the daily newspaper *Večernje Novosti*, businessman Boban Rajić, bought half of the ownership in the oldest daily newspaper *Politika*, while the state still owns the other half. Adria Media Group (which owns the pro-regime tabloid *Kurir*) became the exclusive partner of the Euraktiv Network (which covers EU integration), and the Russian state television outlet *Russia Today* launched a Serbian language site, RT Balkan. "Owners influence the media," confirmed panelist Mihajlović, "The source of funding influences the editorial policy, especially state organizations." Petković agreed: "Media supported by the government do not have independence in reporting and are not independent."

During the 2022 elections, Serbian research firm BIRODI announced that the most visited websites for election information were n1info.rs (a partner with CNN International)--with 18 percent of the Serbian public visiting--and Nova.rs, with nine percent. RTS had the largest TV election information viewership, with 39 percent of the public--followed by Pink with 26 percent, Prva Srpska Televizija with 25 percent, and Happy with 16 percent. All of these were the stations where President Vučić spent the most money on advertising during the election campaign. During the election campaign, from March 2 to 16, President Vučić appeared on 27 programs, with a total duration of 32 minutes on RTS's Dnevnik 2 program. Prime Minister Ana Brnabić appeared on four programs, with a total duration of six minutes.

Both public services, RTS and RTV, are poorly financed. Since 2016, both outlets have received funding from citizens' income taxes and the Serbian state budget. The fee increases from year to year, so RTS was excluded from the 2021 and 2022 budgets, while RTV is still partially financed from the budget. RTS income from marketing was particularly high in 2022 due to the exclusive transmission of the FIFA World Cup.

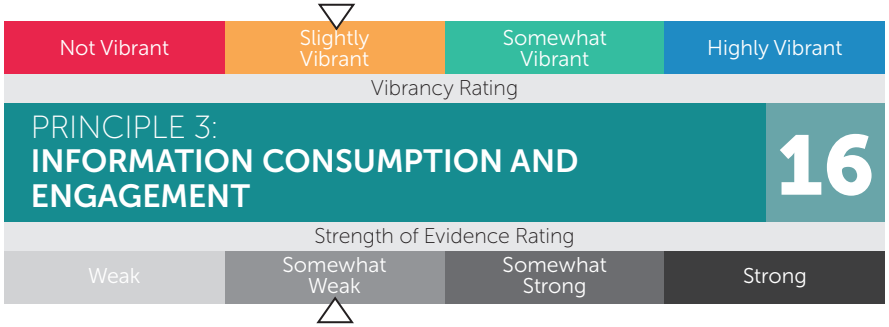
Parliamentary politicians appoint all members of regulatory bodies—leaving them far from apolitical. Panelists agreed that in 2022, REM's independence has further deteriorated and continues with almost complete control by the ruling parties. Independent media experts, professional journalists, and observers on the panel expressed that REM does not perform its work as defined by law. It protects the narrow interests of private broadcasters and the ruling structures, rather than the interests of Serbian citizens.

Due to REM's shortcomings, the Serbian public is deprived of objective and timely information, panelists lamented. However, REM's professional staff members have made some regulatory progress: They found commercial television stations with national frequencies violated the Advertising Act (allowing a maximum of 12 minutes of commercials per hour) as many as 3,491 times from April to July 2022. REM submitted 5,327 cases of violations of the law to the misdemeanor court in Belgrade.

The Regulatory Agency for Electronic Communications and Postal Services (RATEL), which worked for years as an effective regulator, remained completely silent concerning the multi-year dispute between Telekom Srbija and SBB, the two largest cable and broadband operators in Serbia. In 2022, state-backed Telekom aggressively attacked SBB, offering SBB users legal aid and financial compensation if they switched to Telekom. In an unscrupulous campaign, they set up Telekom

mobile phone stands directly in front of SBB branches and in local government buildings where the public does business. RATEL did not react to these aggressive moves, nor did it try to restore regularity in the media content distribution market. RATEL did not fulfill either of its two basic missions: to ensure fair market competition and to protect the telecommunications and media services users. REM also did not point out these unfair business practices; on the contrary, it supported Telekom in its efforts to prevent the expansion of the SBB network. "Regulatory bodies are not independent and act according to the dictates of politics," Mihajlović confirmed.

Formally, media outlets should be treated equally. In reality, however, officials often provide pro-state media exclusive access to certain information. For example, access to Bureau of Statistics data is free to the public by law. But independent media have a hard time obtaining such information from state sources, and often must seek help from the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance.



Professional media, together with investigative centers and civil initiatives, succeeded in offering reliable information that has been neglected by mainstream media. Facility with technology tools is improving, but digital hygiene tools and skills are still lacking. Moreover, media and information literacy skills are still low throughout the country; to increase media literacy, the government will likely have to make more serious investments. As a result, panelists gave their lowest score for this principle to the indicator on media literacy.

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

In 2022, Serbia had no publicly known systematic violation of citizens' rights to privacy. However, isolated cases arose, such as the unauthorized collection of personal data published in tabloid media outlets.

The panelists pointed out that most journalists do not have mobile phones issued to them by their employers that are subject to security protocols and periodic checks. They conduct private and business communication from the same device, including confidential conversations with sources. Digital safety protocols depend on an individual journalist's personal preferences, because most media still do not have official procedures for protection. "Controlling mobile phone [data privacy] is important for the safety of journalists," according to journalist N.J., "The protection of a journalist's source in the context of biometric surveillance can be dangerous for the work of journalists, because their contacts can be revealed, threatening the source's secrecy." Legal protection for data privacy exists but is widely abused, said Mihajlovic, who added that journalists can access digital security tools, but they are expensive and smaller media cannot afford them.

In 2022, the OSCE's report "Digital Competences of Journalists" shows the majority of respondents are aware of the importance of using digital technologies and their impact on media. Journalists also have accepted new standards of professional practice and actively acquire new knowledge and skills. According to the report, journalists have solid abilities with using and managing social networks. Their most developed skills are digital communication with others; internet searching and content downloading, and organizing the information found; and critically evaluating the reliability of internet sources and information. The study revealed the least developed skills are information fact-checking and photo authentication, both of which are key in combating fake news.

The report also showed that the media sector is underdeveloped in using statistical and analytical data on audience reactions to published

content. In Serbia, approximately two-thirds of the interviewed journalists produce digital content on a daily basis, exemplifying the changes taking place in the media in terms of digitization.

Panelists noted that several cyber attacks were registered in 2022. In April, the Beta News Agency website was offline due to intense hacker attacks. In November, multiple media outlets reported that a cyber attack was underway on many internet infrastructure areas in Serbia. UNS has created a guideline for journalists on digital security, entitled "Don't risk, protect data," which instructs media professionals on how to preserve personal data privacy.

According to research on digital competences by the NGO Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID), Serbia's digital literacy index in 2022 was 10.68 out of 15, which can be rated as good. But that number is slightly lower than last year's 11.01, and 2019's score of 10.97. The CeSID survey's media literacy index for 2022 is 3.96 out of 6, which is better than in the last two years, but worse than in 2019 when the score was 4.07. This research also records progress in internet security, and its results show that the older population is significantly lagging.

> **"Media literacy in Serbia's educational curricula is only just beginning, and low media literacy skills has been a major impediment in reforming society.**

Panelists held that Serbians have kept the greatest media trust in personal contacts, followed by television along with internet portals and social networks. According to the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) survey "Trust in Media 2022," Serbian citizens trust radio the least, which is completely opposite that of most of Europe, who trust radio the most. Moreover, when compared to the rest of Europe, Serbians trust the internet and social networks the most, and European citizens trust these media the least, confirming the Serbian public's skepticism towards the controlled media.

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

Media literacy in Serbia's educational curricula is only just beginning, and low media literacy skills has been a major impediment in reforming society. The Ministry of Education offers an elective class on language, media and culture for elementary school students, and numerous NGOs and donors emphasize media literacy programs to develop a more democratic civil society in Serbia. Serbia's problem is not only media illiteracy, but also functional illiteracy. The Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts' 2021 research, "Key Data on Education in Serbia," found that between 40 and 50 percent of 15-year-olds are functionally illiterate.

The tabloid media audience is broad and unquestionably believes what is produced in those media, Jacić pointed out. She thinks that improvement is only possible by educating people in media literacy. "We need to implement media literacy as an important method of social reform," she said. "The Ministry of Education's current solution of introducing pro forma media literacy as an optional subject is absolutely insufficient."

The development of critical thinking has been entering the republic's education system in recent years through optional programs that are multidisciplinary and project oriented. In the 2022 school year, the free teaching activity "Media Literacy" has been offered to students in the fifth or sixth grade of elementary school.

In 2022, a large number of media literacy training programs on information literacy and critical thinking were held all over Serbia. Moreover, the Institute for the Advancement of Education, with the help of the US Embassy in Belgrade, created the online training, "Our students in the world of critical thinking and media literacy," which was accredited as a training of national importance. This program's second training round was held in 2022, and its manual on media literacy is available to all users on the Institute's website.

"Something needs to be done," said Skrozza, "In elementary school, they give 30-minute lectures on media literacy. But the very next day, children

are bombarded with lies and propaganda about other nations and other religions. So, there is no system that would improve media literacy, because the activities aimed at promoting media illiteracy are stronger."

The new Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) publication "Handbook for Media Quick Fact-Checking," which came out in 2022, provides guidelines for the process of checking information before editing. The manual also contains useful tools for searching and fact-checking information. This resource is practical and easy to use, panelists said, and they believe it could be useful for civil sector activists and all citizens.

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

Panelists agreed that independent media and professional journalists use their freedom of speech and rights to information, despite authorities' strong efforts to limit the availability of information. In 2022, a counterbalance arose between information availability over massive misinformation distributed by public officials, which led journalists and CSOs to increase their free speech activism. The trend is mostly due to journalists increasing their research capabilities, several independent media outlets strengthening their activity, and investigative units further improving their skills, along with activity of opposition MPs and CSOs.

Stakeholders sponsored a greater number of public forums in 2022 than in previous years. These debates were organized by media, media associations, or NGOs. Unfortunately, public officials at all levels absolutely refused to participate. Discussion platforms are very rare and are prepared mostly in advance, so they do not allow for a range of opinions.

> "People are thirsty for local information to find out what is happening in their area," said Nikola Lazić, editor-in-chief of Bujanovačke.

Once-numerous radio and TV shows with viewers' phone comments have almost completely disappeared, and the few that remain do not include multiple viewpoints. Even Nova S's popular TV program *Impression of the Week* only includes comments by viewers who are not in favor of the government. For its part, government representatives substitute debates with "one person" TV shows with no pre-planned questions. Independent media in local cities organize discussions, which are especially important, and are growing in popularity among local citizens.

Panelists said that debates initiated on social networks have not changed authorities' behavior, but debaters regularly attack state representatives, tabloids, and opposition members of parliament who put forward different viewpoints, and on media that broadcast alternative views. Inappropriate speech, hate speech, and misinformation, as well as serious threats, are constantly present on social networks and media outlets.

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

Some media try to understand the needs and interests of their potential audience. But only large, corporate media are able to research audience satisfaction, while smaller local and professional media cannot afford to do so. Social networks can determine reader profiles quite well. However, most media outlets do not have the funding to hire someone to edit and analyze reactions on social networks. The Serbian media reality is that it offers more tools and information than staff have capacity to use.

The panelists pointed out that they were unaware of any media conducting a detailed audience survey for topic preferences in 2022. Most media delve into established topics that editors consider important. A number of media use detailed analysis of visits and feedback from online platforms.

In December 2022, RTS's Program Council held a public debate on its program content in Kragujevac, Vranje, and Belgrade. These sessions could help RTS improve its position, which, according to general opinion, is far from its legally prescribed mission to host debates with participants

who have opinions outside of the ruling regime's propaganda.

Open debates among citizens, politicians, and media actors take place on social networks, where many express opinions that do not contribute to political discussions, and instead lead to further conflicts. Confrontations played out on social networks occasionally outgrow the networks and are transferred to in-person life.

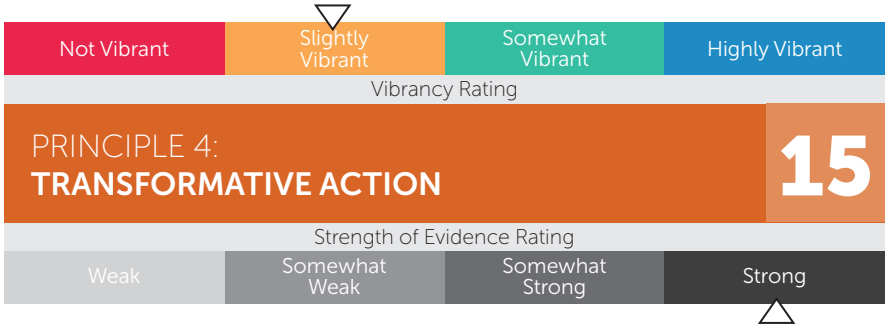
Indicator 15: Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.

Serbia has no community-based media with volunteers or audience donations. Functioning in their place are a few private, local outlets that keep a professional approach to local problems, in spite of enormous economic, political, and criminal pressures. Serbia does not have many of these outlets, but they play an extraordinary role in local areas, panelists said. "People are thirsty for local information to find out what is happening in their area," said Nikola Lazić, editor-in-chief of *Bujanovačke,* "Our innovations, short clips that directly convey current events in our town, achieve a very high viewership. Only those [journalists] that work in the public interest are real local media similar to classical community media."

These local outlets are a small percentage of the 2,600 registered media, but credible ones are useful for citizens and marginalized populations in local areas. Serbia has more local private media outlets financed by the state, and under the direct influence of the authorities, that spread propaganda, with pronounced self-censorship for public-interest topics.

The two most common problems local media face are refusal of official information from institutions that offer no access to independent media, and authorities' attempts to discredit and diminish the importance of local media reports. A prime example is the Portal Kruševac Press's project on violence against women, financed by the City of Kruševac. The region's Center for Social Work, police department, and hospital all ignored the project, even though violence against women is a major issue for the Kruševac community.

Local media suffer from poor financial support from local institutions. Issues surrounding project co-financing and the trend of frequent SLAPP lawsuits seriously threaten local independent media's financial and personnel capacity. The current political system has made project co-financing meaningless, while intended to help local media cover local community topics. However, according to Marković, "Competitions for the co-financing of media content of public interest have been transformed into undisguised financing of local media suitable for local authorities."



Unfortunately, Serbian society is divided, and political officials are furthering that division to influence their supporters and discourage the opposition. The government's actions concerning corruption showed that information was used to undermine steps to combat dishonesty. CSOs continued their activities and media cooperation to take transformative actions. As a result, the indicator on civil society's use of quality information received this principle's highest score of 23. Two indicators—government's use of information and information's support of good governance and democratic rights—tied for the lowest score of 10.

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

A relatively small number of citizens use multiple sources of information. It is unknown how many people follow several types of media of different

ideological preferences. Research centers and a few independent professional media offer Serbia non-partisan sources of news. Research centers continued their breakthrough in 2022 by publishing study results—which are difficult to refute, so they are not welcomed by authorities. But their popularity among citizens is growing, especially on social networks, where access to them is not prohibited.

Citizens increasingly avoid public discussions on various topics—most often, they belong to circles of like-minded people. Lively public debates occur on certain topics; for example, the adoption of local urban plans or ecological projects. However, on a broader level, when strategic, developmental, or important political problems are at stake, public debate is absent.

As a rule, people debate issues on social networks. However, these exchanges devolve into insults and exchanging opinions that are not based on facts. "Debates started on social networks are, as a rule, heated and unconstructive; they often disqualify a person, and target dissenters instead of challenging their attitudes," said Isakov.

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

Political views and attitudes are formed mainly based on misinformation—not quality information. According to a 2022 CRTA poll, as many as four out of five Serbian citizens believe that the role of the media in shaping political attitudes is very or mostly important; 55 percent of citizens think that the media in Serbia are under significant political influence. As much as 39 percent of citizens respect credible experts the most. Many citizens (43 percent) think that NGOs protect the public interest and fight for positive changes in society, while 28 percent disagree. [5]

CRTA's 2022 report, "Political Attitudes of Serbian Citizens," found that 62 percent are still mostly informed about political and social issues through television, and 40 percent through internet portals. RTS is the most watched television station in Serbia, and Blic.rs is the most read online news site, according to the study. Slightly more than half of those surveyed, 56 percent, trust only pro-government television, 18 percent trust only TV outlets critical of the government, and 11 percent watch both. The study noted no major changes in citizen trust in pro-government and critical media. However, in less than seven days in June, more than 60,000 citizens signed a petition against assigning a national TV frequency to tabloid outlets Pink and Happy, showing dissatisfaction with these outlets' programming.

Citizens cannot engage with elected officials, due to Serbia's proportional electoral system at all levels of government. Rather than direct votes to elect representatives, the proportional electoral system means that citizens vote for a ballot named after the party leader and not for specific individuals. Such a proportional electoral system makes it impossible for citizens to recognize or communicate with the elected representatives before and after they are elected.

According to the 2022 "New Literacy" study by CeSID, USAID, and research firm Propulsion, Serbian citizens spend about 100 minutes a day on social networks, 57 minutes listening to the radio, and 28 minutes a day reading news. Many citizens do not distinguish propaganda from quality information. The study revealed that almost half of the respondents rarely or never check sources of information, and citizens have a higher trust in information they receive through personal contacts (76 percent). The majority of young people in Serbia obtain information through mobile phone apps, using Instagram the most. Four-fifths of them believe they know how to recognize fake news, and two-thirds said that fake news is problematic for society.

Panelists criticized the government for the way it handled the COVID-19 pandemic—from the beginning when the president mocked the dangers of COVID in a direct TV address, to his later dramatic warnings that there would not be enough burial places for those who died from the virus. Misinformation was spread on social networks, other media, and among citizens, especially anti-vaxxer campaigns, with limited government intervention to stop the disinformation. Panelists agreed that the government's approach to COVID was responsible for this year's

5 https://crta.rs/en/opininon-poll-political-attitudes-of-citizens-of-serbia-fall-2022/

resistance to MMR vaccinations. Now many citizens are skeptical of any vaccinations and are boycotting them.

The coronavirus pandemic experiences have shown that Serbians are very inclined to risk their own health, as well as the health of the people around them, after being exposed to misinformation they encounter in the public sphere.

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

CSOs gladly share their information, but media use of reliable information is polarized. Serbian government officials consider CSOs as "enemy" organizations and often use government-run media to attack them for criticizing the regime. In 2022, after numerous protests, a petition signed by 38,000 Serbs was submitted to parliament to ban lithium mining. Parliament did not act on the initiative until the end of the year, and public service media did not consider it important enough to cover. Such a successful grassroots initiative, with many citizens standing up for their rights, is extremely rare, yet the government and authorities ignored it.

> "Serbian government officials consider CSOs as "enemy" organizations and often use government-run media to attack them for criticizing the regime.

Civil society action is significantly less visible than the activities of political institutions and the government. More GONGOs openly support the regime, claiming to represent the "civil sector." They now extract a large amount of funding from the state budget, and their information is often irrelevant and nonfactual—they abuse, destabilize, and violate freedom of speech, freedom of organization, and activism, panelists charged.

Some CSOs, which employ quality investigative journalists, use their research results to reduce the spread of misinformation or malicious information. They are in the minority, but their influence is rising. CSOs disseminate research results that uncover corruption, and present previously unknown data to citizens about various issues and development, including reforms and political proposals. The problem is that their findings are not effectively distributed across the country, as dominant media do not broadcast them. Results are more visible on social networks.

However, readers abroad have access to this research and writing, so CSO representatives have received international awards. In 2022, Serbian investigative journalist Stevan Dojčinović from CSO KRIK received the U.S. State Department's Anti-Corruption Champions Award, dedicated to individuals who have shown leadership, courage, and influence in preventing, exposing and fighting corruption.

Citizen and CSO involvement in decision-making processes has improved somewhat now that the government has invited CSOs to join the process of preparing new legal provisions. In the panelists' view, this CSO involvement serves as a mere political card for the government, given that political rulers' ultimately final decisions. For example, in early 2022 the Serbian government adopted the long-awaited constitutional amendment to the Law on Referendum and People's Initiative. That law helped environmental organizations formally present their protests to authorities. Under pressure, the government canceled the Jadar lithium and boron mining project. However, immediately after the April 2022 election, a new government campaign began, claiming that abandoning lithium mining was the wrong decision and that it offers positive development opportunities for Serbia. This backtracking characterizes the government's attitude towards the civil sector, expert opinions, and citizen participation in making key decisions.

A similar occurrence surrounded the 2021 Law on the Police, which introduced reforms. But after the 2022 election, parliament revised the law, giving greater powers to the police, including the right to break into private apartments without a court order.

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

Serbian authorities have consultative mechanisms, but they are misused or ignored. Government ministers, municipalities, and city councils do not regularly hold press conferences. Journalists' questions are limited mostly to pro-government perspectives and questions are presented to back government positions. If a professional journalist succeeds in asking a question outside that format, an official will first deny any problems raised by the question, then discredit the journalist, the media outlet, and its owners.

Government officials usually explain decision making with a figurehead speaking on national television. Political discourse and debate occasionally contain references to evidence and facts, but most often do not. Political debate does not exist in traditional media (specifically television), since no members of the opposition are included in political programming. As a result, debate mostly occurs on social networks where everything is allowed. The average media consumer has no mechanism to distinguish fact from opinion.

> "Quality information is not enough to prevent abuses and violations of the law during elections in Serbia.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

Panelists agreed that corruption is a major problem in Serbia, and officials systematically ignore instances of corruption that the media uncover. Mostly minor corruption is dealt with by authorities, while major cases do not face any consequences. "The status of whistleblowers is very bad," noted journalist N.J., "There is absolutely no example of publicly announced cases of corruption producing any action by the authorities, other than attacks on the whistleblower, the media, and the journalists who published the [misdeeds]."

In practice, Serbian law offers no protections for whistleblowers. "The discovery of corruption, and violations of human and civil rights, still does not lead to a change in government practices," Isakov pointed out, "Corrupt officials are protected by government institutions that cover up wrongdoings, delay proceedings, and attack whistleblowers. The government defends its own at all costs, so investigations, indictments, and court processes drag on for months and years, according to the government's propaganda needs."

Panelists agreed that investigative journalists are the only ones looking into and uncovering crimes and corruption. They are actually doing the work of prosecutors, since the government normally ignores their discoveries. The award-winning editor of the KRIK, Stevan Dojčinović, created a public, searchable database on corruption, which has become the cornerstone for journalists, activists, prosecutors, and citizens for researching criminality.

Essentially, government prosecutors and the police ignore media reports on corruption and human rights violations, and they tend to focus their investigations on minor cases not involving highly ranked officials. Instead, international associations—such as European Federation of Journalists, Reporters Without Borders, and Article 19 Europe--read news reports and put pressure on the Serbian authorities for repercussions. Street protests and public gatherings also force authorities to act when human rights and civil liberties are threatened, especially when the international community gets involved.

Panelists noted that even during the 2022 elections, the government avoided public debate almost completely. Quality information is not enough to prevent abuses and violations of the law during elections in Serbia. The goal of the government in election campaigns is to ensure victory, which is largely achieved through disinformation campaigns. According to Professor Isakov, "Election debates were organized on public service TV, where opposition candidates were hindered while speaking with the goal of belittling and discrediting opposition representatives with personal attacks, including lies, shouting and disrespecting open dialogue in the studio."

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

Siniša Isakov, professor, *University of Novi Sad*, Novi Sad

Jana Jacić, editor, *BOOM 93*, Požarevac

N.J., Journalist

Nikola Lazić, editor-in-chief , *Bujanovačke* portal, Bujanovac

Stojan Marković, editor-in-chief, Cacanske Novine, Cacak

Jovanka Marović, editor-in-chief, Glas Šumadije, Kragujevac

Milivoje Mihajlović, assistant general manager, *RTS*, Belgrade

Dragan Petković, program director, *Južne vesti*, Niš

Vesna Radojević, manager, *Raskrinkavanje (Disclosure), KRIK Investigative Networ*k, Belgrade

Tamara Skrozza, journalist, *VREME*, Press Council member, Belgrade

Tamara Filipovic Stevanovic, general secretary, *Independent Journalist Association of Serbia*, Belgrade

Marko Tadić, social media manager, *Insajder TV*, Belgrade

CAUCASUS

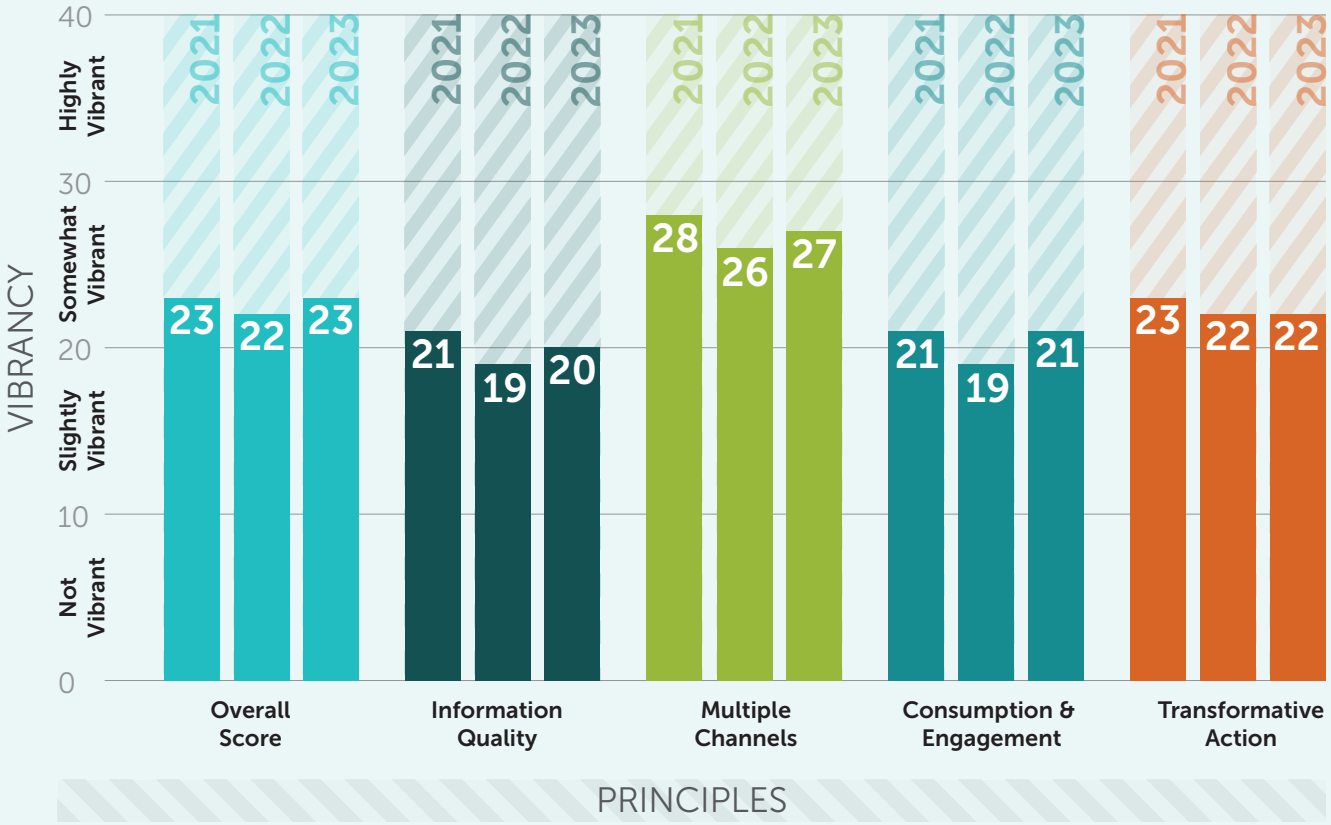
ARMENIA

Vibrant Information Barometer

2023

USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

IREX



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

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

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

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

Highly Vibrant
Somewhat Vibrant
Slightly Vibrant
Not Vibrant

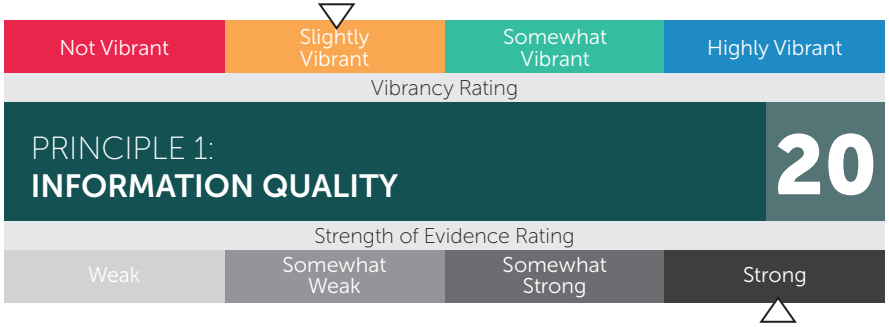
OVERALL SCORE
23

Armenia continued to experience a great deal of political and social turmoil during 2022. Azerbaijan's invasion of Armenia continued to raise political tensions amid peace talks and negotiations of a peace treaty. Generally speaking, an influx of Russian immigrants during the Ukrainian war kept Armenian media and society busy.

On the night of September 12, Azerbaijan launched large-caliber weapons, artillery, rocket systems, and drones, targeting cities along the southern part of Armenia's border with Azerbaijan. At least 208 Armenian soldiers were killed or went missing during the two-day attack on 36 towns, including the communities of Goris, Sisian, Kapan, Jermuk, Vardenis, Tegh, and Geghamasar. Approximately 192 houses, three hotels, two schools, a medical facility, and other vital infrastructure were completely or partially destroyed, along with two ambulances and four civilian vehicles. Freedom House's President Michael J. Abramowitz condemned the attacks in a September 14th statement, saying, "The Azerbaijani armed forces must immediately cease their deadly attacks on Armenian territory and commit to the ongoing peace process facilitated by the EU, the US, and Russia." Due to the border conflict, journalists were unsafe during 2022. During the September border crisis, a total of seven Armenian and foreign journalists and cameramen in Sotk village in the Gegharkunik marz [administrative region] were targeted, including correspondents of the Public TV Company of Armenia, Armenpress news agency, and the Radar Armenia news website.

A 2021 law criminalizing the act of insulting government officials, "On Making Amendments to the Republic of Armenia Civil Legislation," also known as the "grave insult" law, was abandoned following an uproar and pressure from local and international civil rights organizations. Additionally, for the first time in Armenia, journalists were targeted by Pegasus spyware. Developed by the Israeli cyber-arms company NSO Group, Pegasus can be covertly installed on mobile phones. Three such spyware cases were reported in 2022, and it is yet unclear who was behind this.

The quality of information has not significantly improved, and in general, it remains quite poor. However, the panelists agreed that perhaps because no major elections occurred, the level of misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech was lower in calendar year 2022 than in 2021. Those, nevertheless, are still major issues in the Armenian media. Most media are still heavily influenced by their mostly opaque ownership. Media literacy remains a major challenge for Armenia, despite work to increase its level that is done by CSOs, local, and international organizations. The existing fact-checking platforms, organizations, although gaining some momentum, are as yet insufficient to combat the current volume of fake information and manipulations. As has been the case for years, with a few exceptions, news and information sources remain largely partisan and biased.



This principle scored slightly better in 2022 than it did in 2021. Although Armenia had many internal and external political developments, including Azerbaijan's invasion of Armenia, no major elections occurred to stir up misinformation. The level of misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech has not changed since 2021, panelists concurred. Indicator 4, concerning inclusive and diverse news content, scored highest again, while Indicators 3 and 5, concerning hate speech and varied financial sources, scored the lowest, as in last year's study.

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

Gegham Baghdasaryan, president of Public Agenda NGO, said that varied news content exists and is an important indicator. Other panelists agreed that there are no major impediments to accessing professional and nonprofessional news sources.

Armenia lacks quality journalism training for providing ethical, evidence-based, and coherent news content. Some universities offer formal journalism training but with limited impact, and training for nonprofessional content producers is on an ad hoc basis. International media organizations provide training that is mostly short-term and dependent on donor funding, which represents a major impediment to building and nurturing a pool of potential and existing media professionals trained according to high-quality international standards. "There is the Media Factory, a project by Hetq.am [funded by USAID], which does an exceptional job, but it isn't a part of the educational system, and we don't know [if the funding will be available] in, say, five years from now," said Karen Harutyunyan, editor-in-chief of Civilnet.am. After the COVID health crisis, funding for journalism training by international donors dwindled, according to Nelli Babayan, a journalist with Aravot.am. However, now that the crisis is easing, some offline training has resumed with the hope of more in the coming year, said Suren Deheryan, chairman of Journalists for the Future NGO. Panelists agreed that Armenia has a significant need for journalism training, more than ever.

Donor-funded trainings mainly attract media outlet representatives who respect fact-based, unbiased, ethical reporting. The propaganda-disseminating outlets do not seek this training at all, maintained Babayan and journalist Gegham Baghdasaryan.

According to reporter Tirayr Muradyan of Hetq.am, not all trainings are high quality. "Sometimes I have the impression that these trainings are conducted by 'retirees,' [or nonprofessionals who use trivial content]," Muradyan said. He added that training offerings should conduct needs assessments first and then tailor classes accordingly.

Harutyunyan identified four broad categories of content producers: outlets owned by people close to the government; oppositional media associated with Armenia's second and third presidents; Russian outlets and their proxies; and a fourth narrow niche of independent outlets. "For the truly independent outlets that do not serve a political agenda [in the fourth category], the content producers [do] act in an ethical and accountable manner, respect facts, and strive to represent the truth," Harutyunyan said. "And although they are [in the] minority number-wise, I wouldn't say their impact is insignificant—[it] is far more than the space they occupy," he said. A wide range of outlets that spread information without fact-checking or use an unethical and unaccountable manner have large audiences, which has been the case for years with little change. Also, traditionally, the quality of information changes if major elections occur during a given year. Media members face hardly any professional ramifications for producing poor-quality content. "These ramifications work for only the ethical, responsible outlets [which might

stumble occasionally and genuinely seek to rectify the situation], but for irresponsible outlets that deliberately spread false information, there are no professional consequences," said political analyst and researcher Edgar Vardanyan of Boon.tv. "On the contrary, they get aggressive and assault back [if faced with consequences]," added Martirosyan.

The media's overall body of content covers a variety of topics—more political and social issues but less specialized and thematic reporting. Moreover, journalists hold government officials accountable. "I know from our experience that when you report on a state official's actions dealing with, for example, corruption risks, they provide feedback themselves or through their speakers or they invite you to a coffee, which you turn down," maintained Harutyunyan. "Unfortunately, there might not be any consequences, such as resignations or apologies, but we also have to define 'consequences'—there can be other forms of consequences, such as the marred reputation of a public figure," Harutyunyan added. Muradyan maintained that fair reporting on government officials does result in public discourse, and there are possibilities for further consequences. One example was the January 2022 resignation of President Armen Sarkissian, which directly resulted from an unpublished report and ongoing investigation by news platform Hetq.am. Sarkissian attributed his resignation to a lack of power and tools to implement governmental checks and balances. However, his resignation actually followed Hetq.am's investigation exposing that Sarkissian hid his dual citizenship in St. Kitts and Nevis, which is unlawful under Armenia's constitution. Fearing possible criminal prosecution, he resigned while abroad.

> **"For the truly independent outlets that do not serve a political agenda, the content producers do act in an ethical and accountable manner, respect facts, and strive to represent the truth," said Karen Harutyunyan, editor-in-chief of Civilnet.am.**

Overall, regional, national, and international news are available and accessible. But some long-standing hurdles still endure. "The significant part of Armenian media cover international topics through indirect sources—mostly Russian-language sources," Harutyunyan observed. He suggested that Public Radio of Armenia's international news is translated from Russian, and for the majority of outlets it is easier and less costly to translate media content from Russian than from other languages. CyberHub's Martirosyan suggested laziness might also play a factor, noting that it is easier to translate completed articles rather than conducting proper research and writing original content. In addition, few outlets can afford to keep full-time or freelance correspondents across Armenia, let alone in other countries. "We have a bureau in Goris, Syunik marz, and another one in Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh)," Harutyunyan of Civilnet.am said. The Goris bureau was started with donor funding which subsequently ended, and the news platform began the difficult process of finding other sources of income, he added. "Keeping a correspondent in [administrative regions] is a serious challenge for a media outlet in Armenia," Harutyunyan said.

News content is seldom editorially independent and depends on whether the outlet is a propaganda tool or a genuine media outlet adhering to high-quality professional standards, according to Harutyunyan. He said if he disagrees with a Civilnet.am journalist's story, but the journalist proves the story is accurate, as editor-in-chief, "I don't censor."

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

Fact-based, well-sourced, and objective information is a rarity rather than the norm. Professional and nonprofessional content producers commonly create and disseminate false or misleading information. Misinformation is prevalent partly because outlets do not fact-check or consult with multiple sources, especially when faced with tight deadlines. For example, Martirosyan observed that last year the Russian state-owned news agency, TASS, claimed 400 EU observers were being deployed to Armenia's border with Azerbaijan. However, [many outlets] passed along that the figure was 400, "[without] even bothering to check that [the correct number was] 40, not 400," he said.

Disinformation is more prolific and blatant in nonprofessional content disseminated through apps such as Telegram--an instant-messaging app with channels that broadcast public messages directly to cell phones--TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook. However, panelists agreed that the government does not create or disseminate false or misleading information through its official channels.

In general, journalists hold government accountable by identifying misinformation when it is disseminated. Fact-checking platforms CivilnetCheck and Fip.am regularly examine statements by public figures, exposing false claims and manipulations, which are common. Although these sites are not widely known to the public, many media outlets follow up on their fact-checking to publicly debunk false content.

There are seldom professional ramifications for creating or spreading false information. Fact-checking platforms have a small audience, so false information is easily spread without any consequences, according to Babayan. "I don't know of any cases when several responsible and ethical outlets … reproach the irresponsible outlets by saying, 'What you're doing is rubbish; let's work within the ethical standards,'" she added.

> "No matter how rigorous fact-checking is, the impact of misinformation often outweighs the impact of debunking it.

Harutyunyan observed that no matter how rigorous fact-checking is, the impact of misinformation often outweighs the impact of debunking it. "Debunking reaches around 20 percent of the audience of the original information, and often, even after [falsehoods are publicized], many still are prone to believe the misinformation," maintained Harutyunyan. He added, however, that journalists do need to attempt to proactively address disinformation, especially for certain topics that have higher misinformation risks. Traditionally, these topics include negotiations around Nagorno-Karabakh, controversial legislation, and the appointment of government officials.

For journalists, CSOs, and active citizens, fact-checking resources--such as Fip.am, Media.am, and CivilnetCheck--are handy tools. The panelists agreed that more fact-checking platforms and resources are needed to combat the ever-increasing volume of misinformation. In addition, because Armenian society is extremely polarized, people tend to watch TV outlets that reaffirm their ideas, regardless of professional news quality.

Media outlets and their social media normally have mechanisms in place to moderate content to reduce misinformation and hate speech. However, it is often difficult to track the bulk of malicious content generated in a comments section.

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

Foreign governments and their proxies actively create and disseminate misinformation and hate speech, with Azerbaijan, Russia, and Turkey being the most notable, panelists observed. "Circles close to the Kremlin intentionally and blatantly create and disseminate disinformation through their proxies in Armenia," Vardanyan commented, adding that Azerbaijan also spreads disinformation but without use of proxy outlets. Martirosyan noted that, "Azerbaijanis are more active but their impact is weaker [than the Kremlin's] because [the Kremlin's] influence comes through Armenian proxies."

During and after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, Azerbaijani state propaganda was rampant on social media and the country's national news sites, with some efforts targeting international audiences (including Armenians), according to the 2021 Freedom House study *Disinformation and Misinformation in Armenia.* Although Armenian fact-checkers rushed to investigate prominent stories from Azerbaijani sources to dispel rumors, Azerbaijani misinformation operations significantly impacted the Armenian public, the report stated. Some operations harassed social media users, including soldiers' families, and coordinated social media campaigns spread disinformation.

Russian mal-information twists real events to change the meaning to

suit their needs, manipulations that could be spotted right away if the audience could read English. For example, Telegram and other social media posted the headline, "EU provided € 31 million to integrate LGBT values in Armenia." The post was accompanied by a screenshot of the English text and a photo from the genuine EU Neighbours East website. However, the real headline from the EU Neighbours East site said, "EU provided € 31 million in 2021 to support civil society organizations."

Hate speech is more prolific on social media. However, professional content creators often reference nonprofessional content producers, the majority from Telegram channels. Muradyan suggested that public reproach can have more impact than the criticism of professional associations. "Based on my communication with different journalists working at different media outlets, I have come to a conclusion that even a reporter working at Public TV when he/she sees how [adverse reactions] his/her story is discussed in social media [it has a strong impact]," he said.

The panelists found it hard to gauge whether creators of mal-information or hate speech lose audience numbers as a result of their posts or whether, on the contrary, it increases their audiences. Both can occur in some instances. In general, the target audiences that tune in for a specific type, quality, or format of content remain loyal to their preferred content creators regardless of the content's misinformation.

Media outlets have self-regulatory mechanisms or processes in place for moderating content to reduce mal-information or hate speech. However, panelists noted that the outlets have difficulty deciding which comments should be removed. Vardanyan also notes that the journalism community finds it hard to decide what to do with comments or questions that contain serious criticisms but also some sort of insult. The issue is whether to remove the insult and keep the question or ignore the question altogether. This often occurs during live Facebook shows, when a host reads questions from users and addresses them to guests.

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

Traditional mainstream media inadequately cover viewpoints of all genders, particularly sexual minorities. The public still seems resistant to LGBT coverage and Public TV rarely covers it, according to Vardanyan of Boon.tv. But he said his outlet covers a wide range of diverse issues, including LGBT. "I can see there is a self-censorship issue with many major media outlets regarding a few topics, like LGBT," he said. "For a program I hosted dedicated to gender issues, I invited a guest speaker, and their first question was, 'Is it going to be open?,' which meant that other platforms they appeared on were censored," Vardanyan noted. "Unless there is a connected news event, few journalists dare cover LGBT issues, fearing adverse reactions would follow," suggested Babayan.

The panelists commented that currently at least one media source will cover any kind of fringe topic with increasing variety. Marginalized groups not represented in the mainstream media have more alternative methods and platforms to express their views. Ethnic minority issues are covered if a news event or development occurs, Babayan said. "It's not like a reporter or an editor decides, 'Let me go and see what's up' [with an ethnic minority]. But rather, a news event spurs that coverage, and it's also resourceful to get to those villages [where the news occurred]," she maintained. No actual taboos exist concerning covering diverse communities. "[But] I don't see reporters excited and eager to find out what diversity is out there and cover it," observed Vardanyan.

There are still more female than male professional content producers because of low pay in the field. Panelists note now many women are in leading positions in management or as editors and owners.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

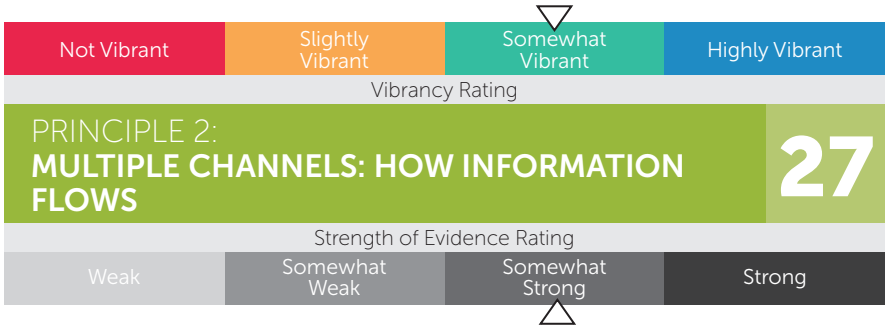
Professional content producers find it increasingly difficult to produce high-quality information because of limited funding streams. A great deal of advertising goes to social media, according to Suren Deheryan of Journalists for the Future, who added that media outlets have difficulty producing quality content without international funding. "Our

market is tiny, and the financial issue is a very serious one," Babayan agreed. "Sufficient financial resources exist to survive, but there are not [sufficient] resources to produce quality information," maintained G. Baghdasaryan.

Apolitical public and private funding sources are minimal, if they exist at all. Subscription-type models have not yet been developed in Armenia, and huge portions of local advertising budgets continue to go to international companies, such as Meta (for Facebook and Instagram) or Google. Journalist Anahit Baghdasaryan of Goris Press Club agreed that local advertising revenues mostly go to either media with national coverage or directly to social networks. Advertising placement is less politicized, and although some pro-government–associated business circles might choose not to advertise in oppositional media, it is less common now than years ago. According to the panelists, this aspect of the media market has improved.

Government subsidies, or "grants," are limited to regional print media, language outlets, or cultural literary publications. Thirty-one outlets altogether get just under AMD 71 million (approximately $183,000). The amount for each outlet varies from AMD 1 million (approximately $2,500) to around AMD 5 million ($12,870).

Journalists do not earn sufficient salaries and often seek outside funding to make a living wage, according to Muradyan. Some select media have donor-funded salaries that are adequate and slightly above average, and some politically affiliated outlets have some well-paid positions. But on average, journalists' salaries remain low, like in other sectors. "The private sector aggressively attracts communications specialists, and a successful journalist can be easily tempted [to work for the private sector], which is easier and earns a significantly higher salary," Deheryan maintained.



Up one point from last year's study, Principle 2 received high scores, due in part to high scores for Indicator 7, which reflects that information technology infrastructure meets most people's needs. Indicator 10, concerning independent media channels, scored the lowest in this principle, indicating that the majority of media organizations are still influenced by hidden ownership. In the VIBE studies for calendar years 2020 and 2021, the VIBE study's score for this principle decreased two points--from 28 to 26--indicating a challenge for free press in Armenia. This 2023 study marks something of a recovery in this principle with the removal of the "grave insults" law, a restrictive and regressive piece of legislation. More than 800 filed criminal cases related to this law will be dropped.

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

Legal protections for freedom of speech exist in Armenia. "First [after the 2018 revolution], the new government gave a "green light" to the media and freedom of speech. But later we saw restrictions of journalists' movements in the National Assembly," Muradyan observed.

In 2010, Armenia was a pioneer among former Soviet Union countries to decriminalize libel. This achievement, however, was marred by the major setback last year with the passage of the "grave insults" law, which called for a one- to three-month prison term for "seriously" insulting a government official. In addition, the act of cursing or insulting a person's dignity in an "extremely indecent" manner called for a fine of up to AMD

500,000 ($1,250); serious insult to public figures called for a fine of up to AMD 1 million ($2,500); and committing "grave insult" against the same person regularly required a fine of up to AMD 3 million ($7,500). In July 2022, the government dropped this restrictive provision in the new criminal code, which was less a demonstration of the government's good will and more a reaction to harsh and consistent condemnation of the law by local and international CSOs and media organizations. Another controversial amendment to the civil liability law for defamation and libel, also adopted during 2021, remains unchanged. For defamation, the penalty tripled from AMD 1 million ($2,500) to AMD 3 million ($7,500) and from AMD 2 million ($5,000) to AMD 6 million ($15,000) for libel. Opponents challenged the law in the Constitutional Court but could not change it. These restrictive pieces of legislation might not be used actively during relative political calm but could be used if political situations heat up, Muradyan noted.

> "TV ownership in Armenia remains obscure, and journalists have to dig deep to find connections with political parties, which results in biased coverage.

Self-censorship still endures for various reasons. For example, audience reaction might force reporters to self-censor, Harutyunyan maintains. "This [often occurs in] smaller communities, where reporters have many relatives and friends, so they might take into consideration the fact that if they cover a certain topic it might harm/touch his/her relative," A. Baghdasaryan observed. "Likewise, if a reporter writes something negative about Nikol Pashinyan [the Armenian prime minister], he or she is called all sorts of names by social media users, both fake and real," noted Babayan, adding that journalists do not take threats from social media users seriously and do not self-censor in response, despite not knowing if users are trolls or ordinary citizens.

During the first three quarters of 2022, Armenia saw 14 cases of physical violence against journalists; 41 cases of pressure on media outlets and personnel; and 89 violations of the right to receive and disseminate information, according to the October 25, 2022, "Quarterly Report," by the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression.

"There are laws that protect confidentiality of sources, but if [hackers can access a journalist's] Facebook account, they will," asserted Muradyan. "As a reporter, I don't have confidence of [protected] communication through my Messenger or other platforms," he added. Although the court can oblige a media outlet or a reporter to disclose sources, [Armenia] hasn't had such a precedent, Harutyunyan said.

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

The panelists agreed that information and communications technology infrastructure overall meets most people's needs. Telecommunications and internet infrastructure extends to all geographic regions, both urban and rural. According to panelists from the marzes, internet quality, speed, and price are generally acceptable. However, service trails behind Yerevan, the capital city, where consumers have more price and quality options. Residents outside the capital also have fewer options for broadcast TV and must subscribe to cable networks for better services.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

According to the 2021 Freedom House study *Disinformation and Misinformation in Armenia*, "The behavior of state officials sometimes exacerbates or triggers misinformation and speculation. The state apparatus is slow and inconsistent in responding to journalists' requests, and often fails to project clear, timely messages to both journalists and the public."

Armenians have tools to help access public governmental policy and decision-making information with right- to-information laws. The right to receive information may be restricted only by law for instances involving protecting the public interest or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. Everyone (including non-citizens and legal entities) has the right to file requests for information. The information is supposed to be

provided within five days after filing a request, or 30 days if additional work is required to obtain the information. A written notice should be provided within five days of the request with a notification if extra time is needed. However, the panelists agreed that requests often do not follow this timeline.

Compliance with the right-to-information law depends on what information is requested. Requests dealing with possible financial corruption often "bump into a wall," Muradyan maintained. Basic information not concerning crime is easier to get. Often, different state bodies violate the right-to-information access and response time, according to Baghdasaryan. "You have to call hundreds of times… before you can obtain the information. [But] some [agencies] work very well," she added. "[Some] spokespeople, even if they don't address the questions personally, redirect you to the responsible officers, who take care of your request," Babayan acknowledged.

> "Public TV doesn't cover religious, gender, and other marginalized groups in a diversified and due-diligent manner," Nelli Babayan, reporter at Aravot.am noted. It remains a propaganda machine for authorities.

Information requests to public officials often get no response after many repeated requests without explanation, Harutyunyan asserted. It is difficult to obtain information for urgent, timely stories because agencies require five or 30 working days. "There's also a tendency to answer clearly formulated questions with vague [or irrelevant] answers," he continued. Media outlets can apply to courts for information if agencies do not comply, but that is a time-consuming and costly burden.

Armenians have tools to help access governmental policy and decision-making information, but regular citizens rarely use them. Reporters and researchers use the tools more often. However, university journalism departments do not train students to use access tools, so many entry-level journalists lack necessary skills and must learn on the job, Harutyunyan observed.

Most panelists agreed that public officials providing information are not trustworthy. For example, "When a government official says economic growth is high, [citizens know that's not true] because in reality they see a different picture," Babayan observed.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Media ownership transparency has been a long-standing issue for Armenian media. According to the 2021 Freedom House report Disinformation and Misinformation in Armenia, "…the 2020 Law on Audiovisual Media requires broadcast outlets to provide greater reporting and financial transparency," but TV ownership in Armenia remains obscure, and journalists have to dig deep to find connections with political parties, which results in biased coverage. The Freedom House report also highlighted that the Republican Party of Armenia (HHK), the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaktsutyun), and the Prosperous Armenia Party own or are connected to a number of major private TV networks. Former President Robert Kocharyan is associated with several influential media resources; Prime Minister Pashinyan, a former journalist, retains ties to the press—including through the *Armenian Times* newspaper, where his wife serves as editor. "Ownership information is especially difficult to establish for online news outlets, which leaves consumers either unaware or susceptible to making assumptions based on their coverage," the Freedom House report states.

The number of legal entities required to submit a "real beneficiary" declaration was expanded to include all media organizations registered in Armenia, including ones providing broadcast media services. The law defines a "real beneficiary" as an individual who owns or oversees the organization. Declarations or updates are submitted during the first quarter of each year.

The panelists agreed that before Armenia's 2018 revolution, the National Commission on Radio and Television (NCTR), which allocates broadcasting frequencies, was not fair or transparent,

granting broadcasting licenses based on political affiliations. This left oppositional media with no chance of securing a broadcast license. "Now, [more oppositional TV outlets are available] than pro-government ones, which was not possible before. However, our bar is higher—we want to compare ourselves not with 2017 [Armenia], but with the Czech Republic," Harutyunyan maintained.

However, in the post-2018 operating environment, the panelists could not agree on how to grant broadcasting licenses in the most fair, transparent, and apolitical way. Because of competition, on December 2, 2022, the NCTR granted nationwide broadcasting licenses to four TV outlets—Armenia TV, ATV, Shant TV, and Kentron TV--leaving out Armenia Second TV (H2) and Yerkir Media. The head of NCTR dismissed allegations that Yerkir Media was left out because of its oppositional stance, stating that the decision was based solely on scoring results. "Even if Yerkir Media were the most pro-government TV outlet, it would be assessed in the same manner and by the same principles," the head of the NCTR claimed in a December 12, 2022, article in online news site Aravot.am.

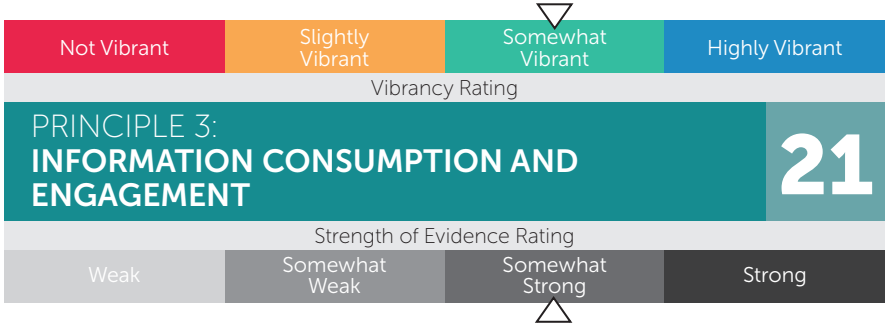
However, Harutyunyan questioned NCTR's granting a broadcasting license to FreeNews, a TV outlet associated with Alen Simonyan, president of Armenia's National Assembly. Muradyan asserted that the commission is not impartial and objective and that outlets were left out in a questionable manner, especially those strongly opposed to the government. Vardanyan, however, noted that Boon TV was granted a license, even though the platform criticized the government and its director posted criticisms on his social media profile, showing that authorities do not always influence frequency allocation.

Public service media provide news and information, along with informative, educational, and entertaining programming, which has improved over the years. However, most panelists agreed that Public TV still does not serve the public interests and needs of all citizens in a nonpartisan, editorially independent manner. "Public TV doesn't cover religious, gender, and other marginalized groups in a diversified and due-diligent manner," Babayan noted. It remains a propaganda machine for authorities. A diverse array of guests are presented, but hosts often humiliate opposition representatives while taking a milder approach toward cohorts, she added. As an example, Harutyunyan noted a case where Yerevan officials imported 100 new public transit buses, but Public TV did not cover the event because the authorities had an issue with Yerevan's mayor at the time.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

The majority of media organizations are heavily influenced by their ownership, and little has changed in this regard over a number of years. Many media outlets are supported by funding sources-- usually the owners and silent 'benefactors'—who dictate editorial stance. "The biggest problem is that we hardly have any media outlets as a business [having at its core a business model of selling news, information]," Harutyunyan asserted. Often owners are the editor-in-chief of an outlet, which is used as a mouthpiece.

Public TV and Public Radio are funded by the state budget. In 2022, Public TV received AMD 6.3 billion ($16 million), and Public Radio received AMD 925 billion ($2.4 million). Public TV is still allowed to air commercial advertising, making it perhaps the best-funded media outlet in Armenia. Panelists expressed concern that Public TV has remained overstaffed and pays high salaries, with its management seemingly disinclined to operate more efficiently. The Council of Europe's 2022 Media Sector Needs Assessment report on Armenia states that the public service media system lacks a critical set of guarantees to preserve its editorial independence as well as to fulfill its mandate. The public is losing trust in the system, which has served as a fertile ground for dis- and misinformation to flourish. Panelists expressed concern about the management and editorial content of public service media, particularly in regard to lines of inquiry that do not probe issues deeply.



Media literacy is still a challenge for Armenia, despite work by CSOs and local and international organizations. The fact-checking process is relatively new in the country, and although it is gaining momentum, existing processes are not sufficient to combat the current volume of fake information. As a result, the VIBE indicator on media literacy skills received low scores, while indicator 13, examining people's productive engagement with information, received the highest scores of this principle.

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

Cybersecurity expert Martirosyan observed that media professionals have opportunities to use digital security resources to protect themselves, but laws are incomplete and existing penalties for violating the law are inadequate. The maximum fine for a security breach is AMD 500,000 ($1,250), and the law has never been applied. De facto data leaks are unprecedented in Armenia—no one is held responsible, and the rules of mandatory disclosure to publicly announce data leaks of, for example, passport data, do not work. The panelists noted a major example of a security breach: Google searches yielded personal data from national e-health applications because developers failed to secure the data on the server. The bug was later fixed. However, even after this repair, the panelists noted that a wide range of staff can still access the same medical data, revealing a high risk of abuse. For example, staff can still easily check on an individual's medical background, Martirosyan noted.

> "The majority of Armenians cannot discern high-quality from poor-quality news and information.

Martirosyan's computer emergency response team (CERT) organization, Cyberhub.am, continues to provide information technology support and training to journalists, independent media, human rights defenders, activists, and CSOs. It also helps media outlets strengthen their digital protection practices and ensure websites are digitally secure.

A new wave of Armenian journalists are being targeted by Pegasus spyware. Three journalists were recently affected along with 30 other citizens from different professions. According to Martirosyan, the spyware managed to snatch 700 megabytes of data in just 20 minutes from one person and then hooked up to nearby devices through Bluetooth connections to snatch data from those, too. Most Armenians have poor digital and data literacy skills, including the basics of how digital technology works and how to keep themselves digitally secure, he added. Hardly any are aware of the algorithms that drive social media along with the mechanics of advertisement targeting and other ways in which personal information is used to target digital users.

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

The majority of Armenians cannot discern high-quality from poor-quality news and information. For example, a news post asking readers to "write the first letter of your name and win AMD 100,000" still garners thousands of responses, even though it is a scam, according to Martirosyan.

The 2022 *Caucasus Barometer for Armenia*, a study by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC), provides valuable insight into this issue. When asked, "How do you know if what you're reading on the internet, including social media, is accurate and reliable?" 35 percent of the respondents

answered, "I do not check whether it is accurate and reliable." Only eight percent look at the name of the publisher to see if it is a reputable source, and only 24 percent compare information with other sources. This further underscores that the majority of consumers are not aware of fact-checking platforms, and those who are often do not check them. "When we were conducting media literacy seminars and training, unfortunately people were not aware of these resources," confirmed A. Baghdasaryan.

School systems do not offer media literacy courses but are expected to include them in the future. Since 2017, the Media Initiatives Centre (MIC), a media support NGO, has had a contract for services with Armenia's Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports. After the government launched education reforms in 2020, MIC has been actively involved in developing and establishing benchmarks for new national standards for general education for the school system, including preschool, which include media and information literacy competencies. Martirosyan, who has been involved in developing the benchmarks, said media literacy will not be a separate discipline but will be spread out within different disciplines. For example, technical aspects will be included in information science and core content in the social sciences. He said benchmarks have been developed, and the next step will be incorporating them into textbooks, which may take a while.

Media and information literacy and critical-thinking training is not widely available for adults, and not many training offerings are available for consumers. Even well-educated consumers with PhDs are ill informed about media literacy. Martirosyan noted that people with lower educational levels are often more protected because they cannot figure out what a fake post may be asking of them; as a result, they do not act on scams. "Doctors, professors, even deans, call me about the 'Nigerian Prince' scams [and ask whether these emails can be trusted]. A week ago, I had a call from a director of a big company, a person who probably has five diplomas [university degrees], who asked me to look at an email from a 'banker in Canada' because he had some doubts," Martirosyan observed. Panelists, however, agreed that consumers from civil society groups have stronger media and information literacy skills than other consumers. "The biggest problem is that people perceive information on a 'like it/don't like it' basis; if they don't like it, it's a lie; if they like it, it's the truth," Martirosyan said.

> "Media and information literacy and critical-thinking training is not widely available for adults, and not many training offerings are available for consumers. Even well-educated consumers with PhDs are ill informed about media literacy.

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

There are no negative consequences for exercising freedom of speech and rights to information. Journalists and civil society activists use their freedom of speech and right to information, while the general public seldom does so by its own initiative. According to the 2022 Caucasus Barometer findings, 80 percent of respondents said they have the right to openly say what they think.

The panelists agreed that most Armenians do not actively engage with fact-based information on at least a weekly basis. Online platforms for public debate exist, but they are not widely known or used. Social media platforms—including Facebook, Instagram, and to some extent Twitter--are the main platforms known and/or used by people in general. However, many open forums are full of hate speech, mal-information, disinformation, and even calls to violence. Platforms may or may not be moderated; on Facebook, for example, reporting is an option only for violation of its policies.

Public debate takes place on radio call-in shows, and one of the most popular is a program called "Facebook Briefing" by Azatutyun.am (Radio Free Europe's Armenian service). Users send in questions for the host to ask a guest speaker. The questions are presented as comments in a designated section on Facebook. Questions containing misinformation, sarcasm, calls to violence, and hate speech are moderated.

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

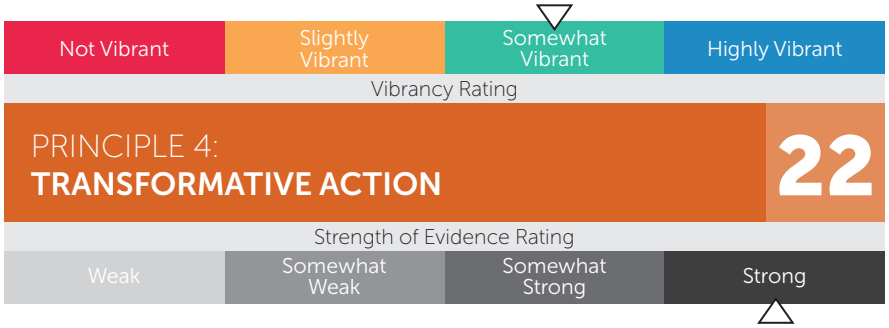
Quality media outlets seek to understand their potential audience's needs and interests. Obtaining qualitative research, however, is difficult because of the expense involved. Most media and content producers use data from Google Analytics and YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram feedback to figure out audience size, access, habits, and demographics. But panelists cautioned that these tools should be used with care. "An [unintelligent] piece of content might garner a lot of views but shouldn't be taken as a token of what your audience needs," Babayan said. Despite how easy to use these tools are, many media outlets do not use them. "Probably about 10 percent of the outlets make use of in-depth Google Analytics data, but some outlets don't even know who currently possesses their Google Analytics credentials," Martirosyan said.

When media outlet representatives were presented with findings from the 2022 Caucasus Barometer that showed the media were considered the least-trusted institution, they reacted with resentment rather than learning from the results and revising editorial policies to improve. "If you're a business that consumers don't like, you should look into why this happened. But our outlets don't want to do that," Babayan observed. However, A. Baghdasaryan noted that when her organization, Goris Press Club, had a grant to work with German news site DW, the project conducted audience research twice in a year. "The research was very helpful for us to identify the areas of audience needs and interests and to improve the content," she said.

Many outlets do not take much interest in their audience's needs because they have a politically motivated agenda, and their task is not to respond to their audience's needs and interests but rather to shape them. However, even these outlets must measure feedback to ensure their content is targeted and efficient. "They seek to understand the needs of the 'client' [the real beneficiaries of a media outlet], as opposed to the needs of the audience," Martirosyan asserted. Quality media outlets have fair and open processes for audiences to provide feedback, such as letters to the editor and moderated online comments sections, and these outlets strive to use these tools to the best of their abilities.

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

The panelists generally agreed that Armenia does not have community media, as classically defined. Similar types of media outlets emerge every now and then, but they disappear most likely because community members are inconsistently involved. Although this type of media is a minimal part of the media sphere, there are local independent, commercial newspapers and radio stations that, according to some panelists, effectively fulfill the functions of community media outlets.



As mentioned earlier, Armenia does have nonpartisan news and information sources, but they are rare. Misinformation, rather than quality information, shapes people's views and informs their actions, the panelists noted; this was reflected in low scores for the related indicator (17). In contrast, civil society groups, for the most part, use quality information to improve their communities, and this indicator (18) received high scores from the panelists.

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

Nonpartisan news and information sources exist and, in some cases, have comparatively large audiences, depending on specific topics that reach more viewers. For example, online news sites Azatutyun.am and Factor.am have relatively extensive audiences. Panelists noted that

other nonpartisan media outlets, including Aravot.am, Hetq.am, and Civilnet.am, have smaller audiences, but certain news events, videos, interviews, and other content can garner comparatively larger numbers of viewers. For example, Azatutyun.am currently has 763,000 subscribers on YouTube and 1.2 million followers on Facebook; Factor TV has 288,000 YouTube subscribers and 367,000 on Facebook; and CivilnetTV has 214,000 YouTube subscribers and 478,000 Facebook followers. On average, individual videos on these channels garner anywhere from 500 to around 43,000 views. "In reality, views are in bad shape. Video stories, programs, and discussions have a maximum of 18,000 views, [which is a lot of] work for just 18,000 views," Deheryan asserted, "It's a shame to have such few views on YouTube. But I also understand how difficult it is to get [up to] this number—even 5,000 is difficult to get, let alone numbers in the 100,000 range."

> "People's social and political views are influenced by quality information along with misinformation and mal-information. People are prone to be confused, misled, or brainwashed by misinformation. Both types are prevalent and equally split in Armenia, Edgar Vardanyan, political analyst and researcher, Boon.tv, asserted.

People exchange information through debate and discussions on radio and Facebook call-in shows, social media platforms, and comments sections of web-based media. These discussions are rarely used for debate, with readers instead using the comments sections to deviate from civilized discourse based on misinformation. Civilized discussions are rare, but they do exist in cases where there are no online trolls.

According to the panelists, most consumers do not usually read or view multiple types of media with varied viewpoints. Rather, they stick to those that resonate with already-established beliefs. Muradyan asserted, "It is very difficult to persuade a [devoted] Public TV viewer to watch [oppositional] TV5 and vice versa. Not many [watch both]."

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

The panelists agreed that people's social and political views are influenced by quality information along with misinformation and mal-information. People are prone to be confused, misled, or brainwashed by misinformation. Both types are prevalent and equally split in Armenia, Vardanyan asserted. Disinformation and manipulation especially occur during elections on both sides and influence voting results. "If the candidates were to present accurate, honest, fact-based information about their goals, and their feasibility [during their pre-elections campaigns], the election results would be different," Murdyan observed.

During the COVID-19 health crisis and although there were people who followed fact-based health and safety recommendations, people were also swayed by conspiracy theories, misinformation, and fake information from anti-vaxxers, rather than by scientific facts and health and safety recommendations, panelists noted. Widespread misinformation included using homemade liquor, garlic, baking soda, or ginger as an alternative to getting vaccinated, Martirosyan claimed.

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

Civil society works to reduce the spread of misinformation or mal-information. However, panelists agreed they are referring to CSOs that advocate democratic principles rather than NGOs that appear to be based on democratic principles, but their activities do not reflect them. So-called "pseudo CSOs" are, in fact, NGOs that were specifically set up to disseminate disinformation, Martirosyan

said. The panelists observed that Russian-backed CSOs are being set up to advocate and promote anti-Western narratives.

The panelists agreed that aside from the above-mentioned "pseudo CSOs," conventional CSOs mostly rely on quality news and information when explaining their mission or objectives and share quality information with the public as part of their mission. They do not disseminate misinformation or mal-information and actively work to reduce their spread.

However, the panelists agreed with Martirosyan that many former representatives of CSOs are now either in government or the parliament, and as a result, they do not voice specific topics—or they voice them only as statements without any form of protest. Muradyan confirmed that CSOs refer to high-quality investigative reports when they call for policy changes or corporate reforms, and he has observed CSOs using Hetq's investigative content. Muradyan also confirmed that quality media outlets actively engage with civil society to cover socially important issues. "When working on a given topic, we almost always try to find an NGO that has studied this or that topic, because they have already done some of the work, which makes the task easier," he said.

> "Government officials often do not explain their decisions, creating distrust and dissatisfaction among the public.

Civic participation in policy formation and legislative change is common across different sectors. Some recommendations are considered, while some are ignored altogether. In April 2022, Armenia's executive and legislative authorities signed a memorandum of cooperation with CSOs to modernize the nation's media sector development policy. The agreement called for reform of legislation regulating media activity in accordance with modern challenges and international best practices and norms. However, government officials then attempted to promote legislative changes without consulting the CSO groups.

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

The panelists agreed that the overall number of press conferences in Armenia dramatically declined in 2022. Previously, at least five government officials would hold ad hoc press conferences after cabinet meetings. During 2022, only the health minister and the minister of economy give a briefing after cabinet meetings and answer journalists' questions, Muradyan noted.

Political discourse or debate includes references to evidence and fact, alongside a great deal of mal-information, disinformation, and hate speech. Government officials often do not explain their decisions, creating distrust and dissatisfaction among the public. The 2022 Caucasus Barometer study found 54 percent of respondents were dissatisfied with how high-ranking officials in the Armenian government are appointed. Furthermore, 83 percent believed that sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that ordinary people, like the respondents themselves, cannot really understand what is going on. Seventy-seven percent think that public officials do not care much what ordinary people, like the respondents, think, and 66 percent think that ordinary people do not have any say in government actions.

Arbitrary decisions commonly occur. For example, officials claim that a decision was made after a public discussion, but in reality, the action was posted on the government's website for publication of legal acts, or on its e-draft set, with a few posts from fake users, Martirosyan observed. He said government decisions are made in a clandestine manner. Before the 2018 revolution, CSOs were more aggressive about making decisions more public, and the public needs to push CSOs to do more.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

A June 4, 2022, Civilnet.am story revealed that criminal charges were filed against Armenia's deputy head of the State Revenue Committee (SRC) on the grounds of illegal enrichment, submission of a false declaration, and concealment of data. The article, "SRC Vice President Artyom Smbatyan's mother-in-law is getting rich alongside her son-in-law's career," exposed that Smbatyan's mother-in-law bought a 130-square-meter apartment duplex in a residential building in downtown Yerevan for AMD 86.6 million, ($216,000). Another case of a media outlet exposing corruption was a Hetq investigation into former President Armen Sarkissian's dual citizenship in St. Kitts and Nevis, which he had hidden from the public, violating Armenia's constitution. As mentioned, the investigation led to Sarkissian's resignation.

The number of civil liberties and human rights violations by national or local governments depends more on the number of rallies and demonstrations that occur in Armenia, rather than by the spread of quality information or coverage by media outlets. For example, on Armenia's Independence Day, September 21, 2022, relatives of soldiers killed during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war gathered overnight and were protesting at the entrance to Yerablur military cemetery outside Yeravan to block Prime Minister Pashinyan from entering. They blamed Pashinyan for their sons' deaths, as well as close to 4,000 other Armenian soldiers killed in action. The riot police dragged the black-clad parents of the fallen soldiers, forced them into police vehicles, and drove them away just before Pashinyan's arrival. Overall, 37 citizens were detained. Credible reports show that some of the parents were physically injured during the operation.

A joint statement by 35 CSOs condemned the incident and demanded the resignation of the chief of police. "As a result of the operation, a number of rights of citizens guaranteed by the Constitution of Armenia, the European Convention on Human Rights, and the legislation of Armenia were violated. We, the undersigned nongovernmental organizations, declare that it is unacceptable for the Armenian police leadership to issue and execute orders to carry out illegal force actions against citizens. At the same time, we consider the lack of response and assessment by the RA National Assembly regarding the incident unacceptable, and even more so, the attempts by some representatives of the ruling faction to justify this criminal behavior of the police," the September 22, 2022, statement[1] from the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor said.

1 Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor. September 22, 2022. https://hcav.am/joint-statement-police-22-09-22/

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

Nelli Babayan, reporter, Aravot.am, Yerevan

Anahit Baghdasaryan, reporter, Mediapoint.am; program officer, Goris Press Club, Goris

Gegham Baghdasaryan, chair, Public Agenda Journalistic NGO, Yerevan

Melik Baghdasaryan, owner, Photolur, Yerevan

Suren Deheryan, chair, Journalists for the Future, Yerevan

Tamara Hakobyan, host, journalist, Radio Marshall, Yerevan

Karen Harutyunyan, editor-in-chief, Civilnet.am, Yerevan

Pap Hayrapetyan, editor-in-chief, *Sevan*, Sevan

Samvel Martirosyan, co-founder, IT security expert, CyberHub, Yerevan

Gayane Mkrtchyan, reporter, Jam-news.am, Iwpr.net, Yerevan

Tirayr Muradyan, reporter, Hetq.am Investigative Journalists NGO, Yerevan

Anahit Nahapetyan, freelance reporter, Artik

Edgar Vardanyan, political analyst and researcher, Boon.tv, Yerevan

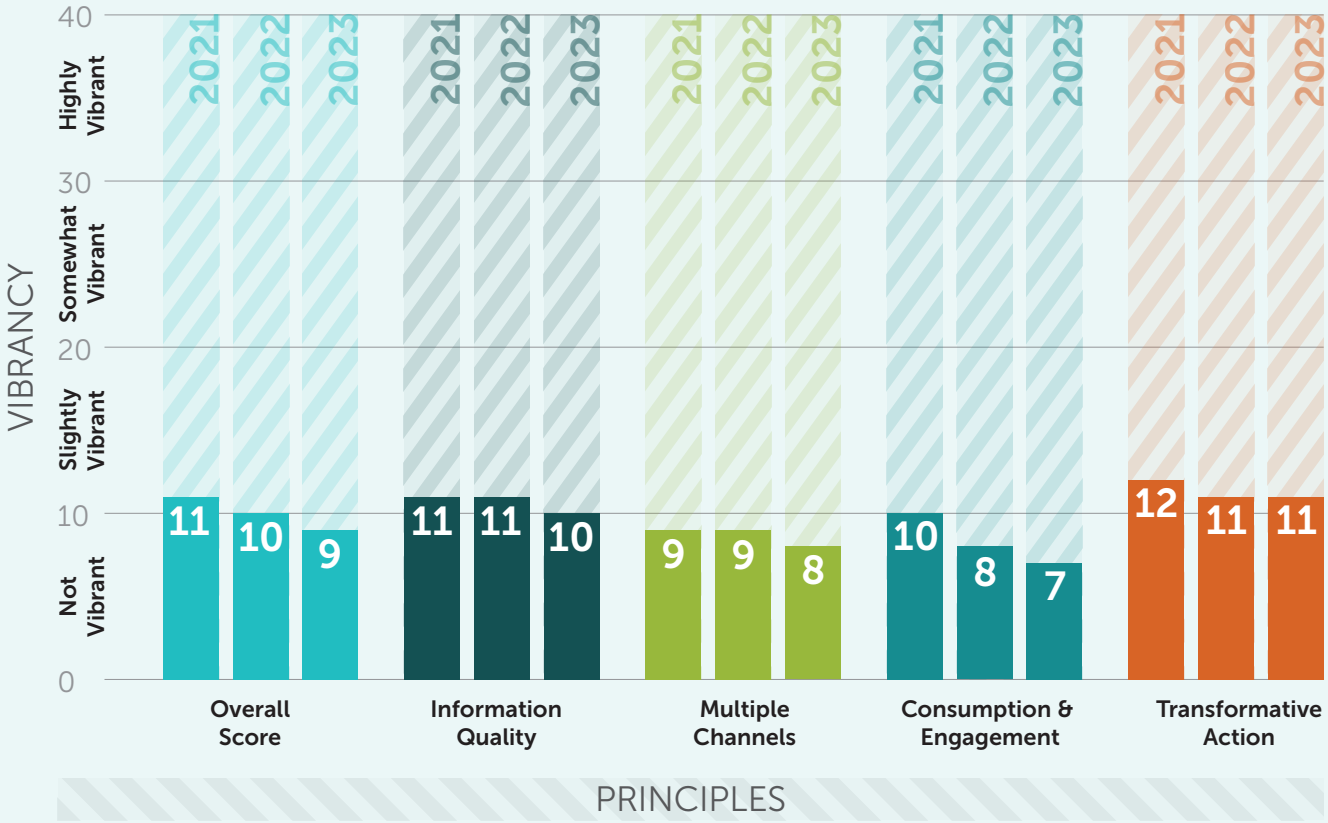
AZERBAIJAN

Vibrant Information Barometer 2023

Photo by Aziz Karimov

USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

IREX



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
9

As in previous VIBE reports, the Azerbaijan media and information sector saw no positive changes in 2022. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict on the border of Azerbaijan and Armenia continued throughout 2022, and the government used state media to spread propaganda about events in that area. The year was also marked by unrest due to inflation; political resignations; and individual arrests, including activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyev for political opposition actions.

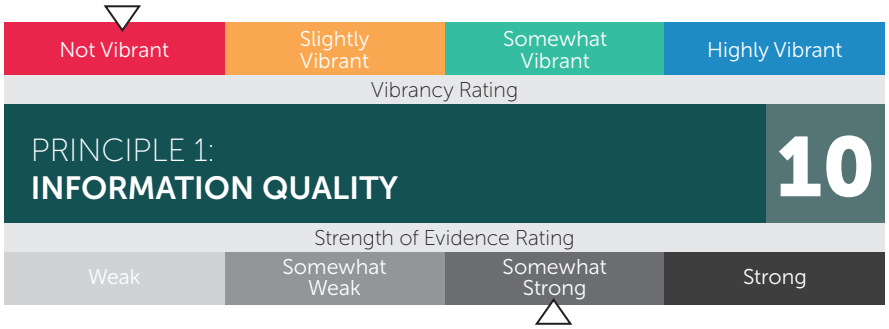
Media circumstances worsened because of a mandated journalist registry, part of the new Law on Media signed in February by Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev. As reported by Eurasianet, the law and registry are designed to control independent online broadcast outlets and journalists, further preventing them from accessing information or attending official events. As part of the registration procedure, reporters must give authorities personal details such as addresses, bank account information, and work contracts. Critics of the law said the government is more easily able to track and potentially detain journalists in Azerbaijan.

The government continues to block access to independent internet outlets and maintains a strong grip on the media, particularly in terms of coverage. VIBE panelists described the media sector as a dichotomy: small independent media, which include a few websites in Azerbaijan and some resources outside the country; and mainstream media inside the country, which include television, radio, print, and online. Independent media are small and constantly need funding and resources to survive. Still, they sufficiently rival government-ruled media, which have extensive resources because Azerbaijan is a rentier state run by a corrupt government.

Independent media outlets, which include some websites and several YouTube channels, face numerous financial problems because of government-controlled advertising. Consequently, many media rely on international organizations as their main sources of income—even though obtaining such grants is illegal in Azerbaijan. Those which receive grants live in constant fear of being jailed or punished if discovered. Some independent media websites and social media accounts were hacked during the year, and according to the panelists, many media workers believe the government was behind these acts.

The government continues to dictate to the mainstream media which topics to publish and which not to discuss. Independent media still try to address or follow up on sensitive issues, such as LGBTQ+ topics and ethnic minorities. Citizens who speak to independent journalists face pressure, creating an atmosphere of fear.

The new, repressive law influenced scores in numerous indicators. Principle 1 (Information Quality) scores dropped a point from last year's study, with panelists agreeing that the nation's few independent online news outlets are the only media producing quality content. Principles 2 (Multiple Channels) and 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) scored particularly low, only earning an 8 and 7 respectively, or "not vibrant." Principle 2 dropped a point from the 2022 VIBE report, due to diminishing rights to create and consume information and inadequate access to channels of information. Additionally, internet access is still minimal for Azerbaijanis living in rural areas. Principle 4 (Transformative Action) scored the highest with a 11, "slightly vibrant." While this score is one point below last year's study, panelists recognized an uptick in viewership of independent internet news outlets.



The score for this principle dropped one point from last year. Panelists noted that the first indicator on quality information on a variety of topics remains a challenge for Azerbaijanis, with the government still tightly controlling the kind of information disseminated to citizens. In addition, some panelists expressed fear that the Azerbaijani mainstream media, pro-government outlets, and government media will soon become autocratic. Every morning, journalists from state-sponsored media outlets receive WhatsApp messages from the President's office that dictate which topics they can or cannot address. Therefore, their content does not follow the main principles of journalism, and instead results in clear bias, unethical practices, and material full of propaganda.

Indicator 2 concerning content based on fact received low scores. Under great risk, only independent media ask questions to hold government representatives accountable. Azerbaijan does not have many fact-checking organizations, so independent journalists try to check facts and help people distinguish misinformation from the truth. Panelists said independent media outlets are exclusively online and represent the only opportunity for citizens to consume quality, ethical content. Radio, television, and print media remain staunchly nationalist and are dominated by pro-government or government media. These outlets serve the interest of the ruling elites by spreading government propaganda, especially on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. They attack independent media under government orders, calling these outlets "foreign agents" if they cover problematic social issues.

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

Panelists said that journalists and media outlets in the country face obstruction of media activities, limited opportunities for independent media to function, and government control. Official media and media outlets under government influence are basically tools of agitation, and their news programs are full of propaganda. Only a few independent media outlets, such as Turan Information Agency, can provide quality, professional content to their audiences. Azerbaijan does not have a single independent printing house for media publication.

The 2022 Freedom House report on Azerbaijan listed the nation as not free. "Constitutional guarantees for press freedom are routinely and systematically violated," the report states, "as the government works to maintain a tight grip on the information landscape. Defamation remains a criminal offense. Journalists—and their relatives—face harassment, violence, and intimidation by authorities. Legal amendments passed in 2017 extended government control over online media, allowing blocking of websites without a court order if they are deemed to contain content that poses a danger to the state or society. Independent news sites are regularly blocked or struck with cyberattacks."

As mentioned above, the government approved a new media law in February 2022 to regulate online and print media. According to the law, a person is considered a journalist if the individual has a labor contract, a tax identification number account, and tertiary education in the field of journalism. Many journalists and media outlets have already registered with the Media Development Agency, as required. However, some panelists expressed concern that this registration system resembles that of the State Security Service, which monitors public security in the country. If a media outlet is not registered within six months of a request, then the Media Development Agency may file a lawsuit to close the outlet. As a result of the law, 40 media outlets were refused accreditation and 20 journalists had their credentials removed.

Panelists disagreed over the quality of information produced by Azerbaijan's independent and state media. Some panelists held the view

that the country has no quality information. Others said that quality information is available on various topics from independent outlets; oppositional media; and even state media, which are directly financed from the state budget or through state-affiliated officials. However, the government's dictating news coverage topics remains a major concern.

Media entities that receive funding directly or indirectly from the state operate based government directives sent through the WhatsApp group of the presidential administration. Other government agencies also use WhatsApp groups to control the media. The number of independent media outlets remains relatively small, and the main source of income for independent media entities is largely based on grants from international organizations--which are becoming increasingly difficult to obtain since foreign financing of the media body in the country is prohibited by law.

The government's blockage policy for independent internet media restricts access to information. The websites of Meydan TV, AbzasMedia, *Azadlig* newspaper, and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty were blocked in the country in 2016, and they remained so in 2022.

While independent instructors teach international media standards, government training steers students toward maintaining the image of the authorities and states. Although the number of journalism-related training has increased, some journalists claim that the courses are poor quality. Trainers tend to be journalists and editors who spread fake information and give permission to print it, according to one panelist.

Officials tout the new Law on Media as progress, with its establishment of the Media Development Agency and the journalist registry. In reality, however, these entities create obstacles for independent media.

Some journalists on the panel who work in state media or media indirectly funded by the state believe that the media registry will support their livelihoods. They said they hope their stored information will allow the government to provide housing for financially strapped journalists as well as offer financial assistance at certain points. However, many panelists agreed that the registry is just a method to "shut up" journalists. The famous Azerbaijani saying "whoever gives the money, they sound the trumpet" was the common opinion of the journalists that participated in the VIBE study.

Many panelists pointed out that government-oriented media have enough resources to produce information. Independent media, on the other hand, face resource challenges. The independent media sector "does not limit itself if the topic is not domestic politics," according to one panelist.

The Azerbaijan government does not regulate social media, so these forums are relatively freer to create quality content. But posters can also be punished if government officials do not like the content produced. Azerbaijan's internet troll factory still functions in spreading misinformation and hate speech. Social media are the main destinations where citizens find factual news content.

The spread of hate speech about those with a different sexual orientation, and violence toward LGBTQ+ journalists, remain major concerns. Professional and non-professional content creators alike continue to promote intentional hate speech against these journalists. In an extreme case, Avaz Hafizli, a LGBTQ+ journalist and employee of Channel 13, was murdered in February 2022 by his cousin, Amrulla Gulaliyev. Hafizli became an open target due hate speech about him spread by non-professional content producers. However, some attacks have changed to slightly milder forms, with journalists facing being scratched, their clothes torn, etc., during protests.

Monitoring by QueeRadar, an Azerbaijani group that tracks hate speech, showed that as recently as 2021, 501 materials (news, articles, interviews) with words and terms related to LGBTQ were published online in 23 media bodies. While 37.5 percent of them were neutral content, 62.5 percent were anti-LGBTQ+ biased or inaccurate material. In comparison with 2020, the number of anti-LGBTQ+ articles clearly showed an increase of 89 articles.

As for quality information in the country, the Turan Information Agency has continued to produce quality and professional content, despite financial challenges. In addition, Toplum TV, an independent internet TV station, has expanded its investigative focus since journalist Khadija

Ismayil became editor-in-chief in May 2022. Ismayil is known for her investigative reporting, which has uncovered a wide range of corruption that benefited Azerbaijani officials and business leaders.

Journalists and media experts on the VIBE panel, representing independent as well as state media, said that state media have access to all information vetted and approved by the government for distribution. In Azerbaijan, journalists call this "ironed" information. Ironed information also includes what the government wants to hide from the public.

> **"Official media and media outlets under government influence are basically tools of agitation, and their news programs are full of propaganda.**

One panelist described the challenges of press freedoms in Azerbaijan: "Public television gathers children and performs a political song against French President Macron," he said. "Instead of protesting the use of children in politics, [citizens] write 'well done' under these social media videos. The media must realize its responsibility and work to inform and raise people's awareness [that this is inappropriate]." This panelist concluded that regulation is not the answer since that would be censorship. But some online regulation and fact-checking tools could help raise awareness, as some media bodies are overstepping their bounds.

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

Azerbaijan media are generally divided into three camps, according to the panelists. State media are propaganda machines that disseminate what is dictated by the state. Independent media that claim to be independent but are not always objective or impartial in reporting. Third are the few international media left in Azerbaijan that strive to be independent and professional and that offer local-language content. Approximately 10 independent media outlets operate online in the country.

Panelists had mixed opinions regarding the government's dissemination of false and inaccurate information. The Azerbaijan government does spread false information and misinformation, but it also keeps silent and fails to give statements or explanations during critical events. Authorities also do not hold accountable the outlets that spread misinformation. After the 44-day Second Karabakh War in 2020, independent media outlets had trouble delivering the truth and disseminating anti-war information while state media barraged the public with propaganda.

"There are minimal cases of news being clarified and confirmed by at least two sources in the country," according to one panelist. Panelists said that falsified and incorrect information is spread even by media that can be considered independent. However, some independent media outlets do question fake information and offer expert opinions in counteraction.

Azerbaijan media usually violate the presumption of innocence. The names, places of residence, and photos of persons suspected of committing crimes are widely circulated.

The government conceals public information and demands that journalists write request letters to obtain information. The new Law on Media considers other media bodies and journalists outside the government media as illegal workers, disallowing the media to monitor the government. However, reporters are able to publicize factual information with the estimates and opinions of experts.

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

Panelists agreed that pro-government and non-professional media spread negative information and hate speech against certain people. Professional independent media do not intentionally produce misinformation or hate speech, and they strive to publish balanced materials about those who engage in hate speech practitioners.

Panelists observed that during the Second Karabakh war in 2020 and

continuing during the 2022 clashes between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, anti-Armenian rhetoric has proved persistent in Azerbaijan, even in independent professional and non-professional media. People who express anti-war opinions become targets.

Azerbaijani laws, including the criminal code, prohibit hate speech based on religion and ethnicity, but these laws are not applied to those who engage in hate speech on orders from authorities. Also, this law does not mention LGBTQ+ or any other social group, so by default they are legally unprotected. In one notable example, after blogger Sevinj Huseynova published hate speech against the LGBTQ+ community, which was disseminated by some media, Channel 13 reporter Avaz Hafizli (who identified as gay) was killed by a relative in February 2022 because of his sexual orientation. Although social activists appealed to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Ministry of Foreign Affairs to take action against the blogger, they were told that the blogger's words cannot be considered hate speech since the LGBTQ+ community is not protected under the law.

> **"There are minimal cases of news being clarified and confirmed by at least two sources in the country," according to one panelist.**

Because topics concerning LGBTQ+ citizens are taboo in Azerbaijan's mainstream media, traditional media (especially TV and radio) try to ignore the subject whenever possible. Mainstream media rarely develop an independent story, but if a law-enforcement agency makes a statement, they will publish it without any changes. The BBC's Azerbaijan language service, which continuously monitors and disseminates these topics in the country, is committed to maintaining standards and continues to be an objective source.

Media organizations and platforms do not have self-regulatory mechanisms or processes in place to monitor content in a way that would reduce misinformation or hate speech.

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

Given that the majority of the country is made up of ethnic Azerbaijanis, panelists concluded that this group most likely does not face problems in getting news in Azerbaijani.

Panelists could not say whether ethnic minorities living in Azerbaijan get enough information in their own language. Certain platforms are offered to Russian-speaking people. Several regional online newspapers are in Talish, along with YouTube channels (such as Cenub TV) in the southern region. However, few people are aware of these channels, and Azerbaijan has no public or private TV content in Talish.

With regard to inclusive information covering different ethnic, racial, or religious affiliations, panelists said it is practically nonexistent in television programming and is very scarce and unbalanced in other media. Groups reflect their thoughts on alternative platforms such as YouTube and social networks. Some smaller interest groups have YouTube channels where they can express themselves—such as FemUtopia for feminists.

The Azerbaijani government continues to punish those who speak out against its policies. In December 2022, political activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyev was arrested on charges of "hooliganism," which many observers said was a pretext to quash his anti-government activism. He began a hunger strike in January 2023. State agencies then released his private correspondence on social media, which resulted in humiliating claims about Hajiyev posted by media outlets loyal to state officials.

"Although I am not worried about the news language of some of the newly formed media that I follow, in general, the news language in Azerbaijani media is mostly either soulless and complicated or very unnecessarily sentimental," one panelist noted, "In general, the working principle, manner of conduct, employment rules and methods of dealing with employees of existing editorial offices are carried out with the experience from the Soviet era."

Additionally, phrases used in relation to vulnerable groups often have a disturbing and hurtful tone. Panelists have observed a problem with

the perception of sensitivity. For example, phrases used to refer to persons with disabilities are often outdated and troubling. Despite the statements of activists and persons with disabilities, media outlets seem reluctant to change their language. For example, a well-known and well-resourced website in the country, when writing news about persons with disabilities, calls such persons physically disabled.[1]

The citizen journalist sector has gender parity. Women make up the majority of professional journalists, but most media company managers and owners are men.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

As in previous years, advertising was under political control in 2022. Placements come from the state budget or some state official, and advertising revenue comes from private advertising companies following government orders.

The revenue for the country's independent media comes from international organizations. Large companies within the country are owned by the Aliyev family, so they do not advertise in independent media. Instead, they buy advertising in media outlets that support their policies and disseminate their propaganda. Journalists in Azerbaijan have no other option but to be financed by international organizations if they wish to work independently.

"The advertising business in Azerbaijan is completely politicized," and is not transparent, according to one panelist.

In 2022, media outlets funded by the state budget or affiliated with some state officials usually had no financial problems, and they did not produce information or content based on international media principles.

Alternative professional media in Azerbaijan often report financial shortages due to difficulties obtaining foreign funding. Such bodies also try to overcome their financial shortages through Patreon subscriptions and, in general, the financial support of viewers or readers. Independent journalists receive only a small income from foreign media donors.

One issue with support for independent media is that providing money is difficult for international organizations, which often require data on independent media's clicks from their audiences to gauge reach of the content they support. "Moreover, there are specific topics such as sexual minorities, taboos, conflicts, etc., that you should write about only in order to obtain money from international organizations," one panelist observed, "I believe that this policy is a wrong approach."

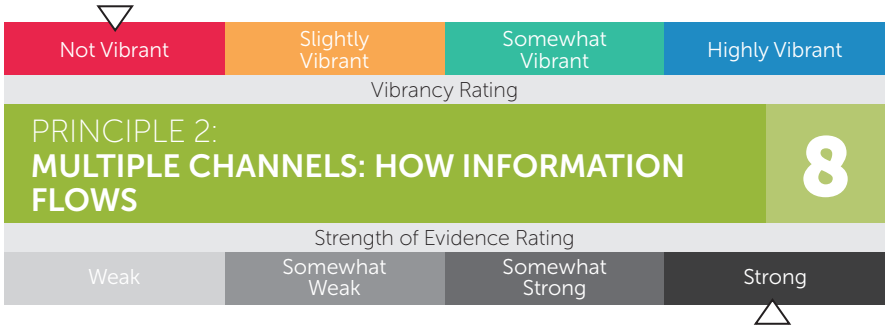
Panelists from government media as well as independent media believe that in general, journalists are not compensated well. While several media employees financed from the state budget have relatively high incomes, most salaries do not meet the requirements of the labor market. Moreover, even though their incomes are relatively good, they are not free to report on what they want and are subject to censorship. Journalists trying to report objectively about what is happening in the country face difficult financial prospects. Given that professional journalists have limited places to work, they struggle to find positions--or if they have one, they have to work other jobs to make ends meet.

Media subscriptions in Azerbaijan have not developed significantly. Turan Information Agency is seen as the only media outlet that can generate income through subscriptions.

Another panelist highlighted that evaluating the Azerbaijan's media and information sector this year was harder than last year, because the media situation is increasingly challenging. She said it is much more difficult to give scores because the new media law is now in force, requiring journalists to register with the government and accept monitoring. Most panelists agreed that the law directly restricts journalists' activities, saying that while previous laws did not work in practice they did protect journalist rights on paper and did not have the current law's requirements that hinder journalistic activities.

In general, panelists agreed that Azerbaijan has not improved financial issues surrounding the media. As a result, citizens' right to information is violated; public television does not produce quality content; independent broadcasters are not licensed; and under the new law, people with criminal convictions of any sort cannot start a media entity.

1 https://lent.az/xeber/iqtisadiyyat/fiziki-qusurlu-sexslerden-azeriqaza-muraciet-40553250



This principle score dropped one point from last year, due to many panelists' concerns over state pressures on journalists in 2022. The new media law and other legislative changes restored direct, legal, and state control over media activities. Indicator 6 on rights to create and share information scored particularly low, with panelists citing that many journalists have been physically attacked for their work. Information channels are not independent, and journalists are persecuted not only for their activities but also for their posts on social media. Their phones are monitored, and police either threaten or interrogate them. Harassment is constant and no journalist is immune. Indicator 8 on appropriate channels for government information also scored low because obtaining information from authorities remains difficult and fraught, with most citizens worried about retaliation if they dare question institutions and officials.

Indicators 9 and 10--on diverse channels for information flow and the independence of information channels, respectively--received the lowest scores of Principle 2, reflecting the government's hold on the country's media environment.

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

In 2022, many journalists experienced violence, had belongings destroyed, and were prevented from producing content. Except for one journalist who worked many years for government media, panelists thought the score for this indicator should be closer to zero.

In April, the Platform for the Protection of Journalism and Promotion of the Safety of Journalists of the Council of Europe released its annual report, "Protection of press freedom in times of tension and conflict."[2] The report stated that indirect government control over private media has not decreased in Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Russia, and that "the 'model' they designed is adopted in other member states such as Hungary and Poland." Although the Azerbaijani government declares that media freedom is ensured in the country, blocking independent media and the new Law on Media undermines that declaration, the report observed.

For example, the media law legislation contradicts Article 10 of the European Convention, which says, "everyone has the right to freedom of expression, including the freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers." The same concept is confirmed by Article 50 of the Azerbaijan's constitution, but the articles are not equitably implemented in the country.

In March, Jamil Mammadli, a regional freelance reporter covering stories from northern Azerbaijan, was found guilty of defamation and slander under Azerbaijan's criminal code. The executive head of the Guba District filed the case, claiming that Mammadli gave false information and tarnished the official's reputation. The journalist wrote about the official's embezzlement of funds that transferred 200 people's salaries by falsely naming them as employees. As a result, Mammadli was sentenced to one year and six months of correctional labor and was forced to transfer 20 percent of his earnings to the state budget every month during his imprisonment.

In July, journalist Abid Gafarov, the host of KIM.TV's YouTube channel, was found guilty under Articles 147 (slander) and 148 (insult) of the criminal code and arrested[3] when veterans of the second Karabakh war complained that he insulted them. Gafarov was sentenced to a year in prison. However, before his arrest, the journalist told reporters he was

2 https://rm.coe.int/platform-protection-of-journalists-annual-report-2022/1680a64fe1

3 https://qafqazinfo.az/news/detail/abid-qafarov-hebs-edildi-369709

really being punished for his investigations into the Tartar events.

In May and June, two other Azerbaijani journalists were either threatened or encountered police violence for their reporting. In May, another journalist, Aytan Mammadova, was attacked by an unknown person in the entrance of her building. “He told me not to write about the court case. He threatened my daughter, but he didn’t mention which court case he threatened me about,” the journalist expressed in an interview with the media. Journalist Aytan Mammadova has been covering the trial of Ilkin Suleymanov for several years, a suspect in the murder of 10-year-old Narmin Guliyeva, who was killed in the western region of Azerbaijan. In June, journalist Nargiz Absalamova encountered police harassment in Baku and her license was confiscated. According to her, the incident happened in Baku, near a city subway station.

Journalists are often targeted in other ways for their work. In July, the Prosecutor General’s Office warned several website managers and citizens that some social media users were spreading false information to damage the Azerbaijani army’s reputation, create artificial agitation among citizens, and overshadow the efforts to strengthen the state’s defense capabilities. Those who committed such actions were invited to the Prosecutor General’s Office, were intimidated by authorities, and warned not to allow such negative situations in the future.

> “In 2022, many journalists experienced violence, had belongings destroyed, and were prevented from producing content.

Currently, the media registry’s process continues. At least 20 media staff and journalists were refused entry into the registry. Moreover, panelists noted that these rejections are not legal. “After the formation of the registry, pressures on media and freedom of expression will be more noticeable,” panelists said. Obstacles at every step for those who are not in the registry will probably be one of the most noteworthy issues in the coming year, they added.

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

Although cities have no issues accessing the internet and broadcasting, access remains a very serious problem in remote villages or underdeveloped regions. Either telephone lines do not exist or electricity is not constant and only provided for a few hours a day. Moreover, many consumers in isolated parts of the country also cannot afford to install an internet line. Panelists said journalists find it impossible to use mobile communication services while reporting in the regions.

The availability and speed of internet services and the state of telecommunications vary from region to region. One regional journalist noticed that “compared to previous years, there is a slight increase in internet speed. But in general, Azerbaijani citizens are not provided with quality internet service for the price they pay.” Moreover, fast, reliable internet in the country is unavailable. In 2022, the Ministry of Digital Development and Transport announced that 70 percent of the population connects to the network with ADSL technology, not broadband.

In the event of an outage in telecommunications infrastructure (such as television), people in cities area can access other information systems or devices, such as the internet or radio, but not everyone outside major cities has such options. Many remote villages can only receive information through local TV channels.

In recent years, using the internet on mobile phones has become widespread, so people are able to access the internet and media services from outside city centers. However, many citizens are unaware of what the real news is, so they tend to believe whatever information they read. Lack of or poor internet service prevents consumers from accessing independent media.

The government often blocks media access during political upheaval. During the escalation between Azerbaijan and Armenia in September

2022, the Azerbaijani government completely restricted access to TikTok. During the Second Karabakh War in 2020, authorities restricted the internet and blocked access to social networks so that citizens were only able to use social media and the internet with a VPN.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

The press services of state institutions do not usually provide accurate information, and citizens do not trust whatever information the authorities provide. For instance, in December 2021, Azerbaijani political activist Tofig Yagublu left a police station with bruises around his eyes, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs announced they did not beat him; rather, they contended, he injured himself.

In Azerbaijan, journalists have difficulty obtaining official answers from state institutions. In particular, it is impossible to find figures on state budget spending. The salaries of the country's ministers and the prime minister are treated as state secrets.

One panelist gave an example of attempting to secure information. This panelist's colleague sent an official request to a government body, which should have been answered within two weeks at most. One of the government bodies wrote a reply to the colleague, saying "we have received your request" after the two weeks had passed. After an additional two weeks, officials sent an answer that did not contain any satisfactory information, the panelist noted.

> "The government gives journalists free apartments, forming the image of a "journalist who stands by the state," but, this benefit forces them to self-censor.

Panelists posited that this case is typical. However, some state institutions, such as the Ministry of Labor and Social Defense and the Association for Management of Medical Territorial Units, are open to journalist queries.

Azerbaijani citizens do have mechanisms and tools to access public policy and decision-making information. These include announcements by government bodies, such as the first readings of bills posted on the Azerbaijan National Assembly *(Milli Majlis)* website. However, most Azerbaijanis are unaware of this website, and many who are aware are not interested in its information. In the panelists' view, Azerbaijani citizens have lost confidence in their ability to influence the country's politics. The apathy is evident in low participation in elections, as reported by local international organizations and social networks. Finally, there is a lack of trust in government spokespeople.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

In 2005, Azerbaijan established a public television station, Ictimai TV (ITV), to meet its Council of Europe admission commitment. But the channel does not function according to its name and mission. Its programs are similar to those found in state television or government-controlled television stations.

As a rule, ITV does not highlight the major problems in society, such as corruption, abuse of power, and the low quality of public education. Some time ago, it briefly touched on social problems, but then shifted to the current status quo of offering programming that avoids looking at social issues. "Sabaha Saxlamayaq" is the only ITV program that broadcasts relatively harmless opposition viewpoints. Panelists agreed that the rest of the debates organized on ITV support the government's ideology and spread its propaganda. Additionally, citizens from all kinds of groups and their opinions are not represented on ITV.

The government strictly controls the allocation of TV and radio frequencies, and the process has no transparency. Therefore, no independent television channel has been established in the last 21 years. Panelists said that the new media law's requirements will further aggravate the situation. Although three new FM radio stations opened in the country in 2022, none of them air serious talk shows or debates. Laws allow the real owners of these media outlets to remain hidden from the public. No independent and foreign

media in the country can obtain a license for satellite broadcasting.

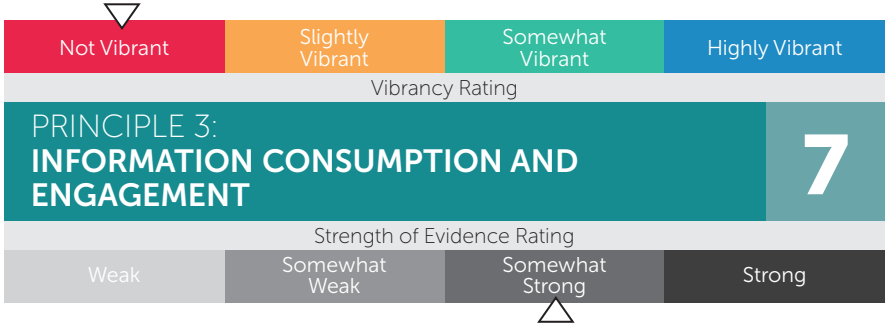
Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Mainstream media outlets are clearly influenced by their funders or owners, and panelists claimed that funding of these outlets is comes from government and government-friendly entities. Editorial offices have no creative freedom. Media that do not repeat the government's viewpoints cannot benefit from subsidies or funds. The independent and oppositional media collect the information they can from opposition party members in addition to the government. These media try to circulate more detailed, comprehensive, balanced, and unbiased information.

The government gives journalists free apartments, forming the image of a "journalist who stands by the state," but, this benefit forces them to self-censor.

Media outlets funded by foreign donors must put their activities in a certain framework because donors allocate more money to certain topics such as women's rights, human rights, and vulnerable groups. In the panelists' view, the media should be able to cover everything that is of interest to society. However, grant-funded media are forced to focus on particular topics, while other topics are neglected.

Before the COVID emergency, citizens had dynamic public forums for discussion. Since having to move to the internet, public debates are now only held online, and panelists question how effective they are. The government closed activist and blogger Bakhtiyar Hajiyev's Caspian Platform, where many different discussions were held, after Hajiyev's arrest in December 2022.



The 2023 Principle 3 score declined one point from what it received in last year's study. Panelists agreed that a major issue is citizens having no digital security, and thus gave a low score to Indicator 11 on privacy protection and security. The score for Indicator 12 on media literacy was the lowest in this principle: consumers have no resources to learn basic digital and information literacy, and do not have the skills or tools necessary to understand digital technology or how to digitally protect themselves. Media literacy training is not offered in universities or editorial offices. Freedom of assembly and expression is not protected in the country. In Azerbaijan, either a news site or a social network can be a victim of cybercrimes.

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

Digital security is not protected in Azerbaijan, and media can fall victim to cyber-attacks and surveillance at any time. An obvious example is the "Pegasus case" in 2021, when the government tracked journalists and activists using Pegasus spyware. Investigations showed that citizens' personal phones had been illegally tapped since 2019. In particular, the government tapped the phones of ordinary people who communicate with social and political activists and journalists. Personal correspondence of feminist activist Narmin Shahmarzade was intercepted and shared. A few days after activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyev's December arrest, the government released audio recordings of his personal correspondence. Authorities took no legal action in either case.

The government can easily hack any websites with content that certain circles do not appreciate. Social media pages are commonly hijacked through various methods and phishing. The latest case of such a breach occurred in September with the Facebook page of Toplum TV, an Azerbaijani internet television station. The page was hacked, posts were deleted, and viewers were unfollowed.

No resources exist on basic digital and information literacy and skills. A small segment of citizens who have been using the internet for years have some access to basic information, such as how digital technology works and how to protect their data and privacy. However, the general public lacks awareness of the algorithms that control social media, ad targeting mechanisms, and other ways in which personal data is used to target digital users.

> **“Digital security is not protected in Azerbaijan, and media can fall victim to cyber-attacks and surveillance at any time.**

In Azerbaijan, news sites and social networks are also victims of cyber-attacks. In 2022 and previous years, Turan.az, Radio Liberty, Meydan TV, and other news websites were attacked, and news was deleted.

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

Media literacy is one of the lowest-scoring indicators in this year’s VIBE study: Panelists argued that Azerbaijan has no media literacy at all. In their view, the government is completely uninterested in increasing media literacy in the country. As a result, people believe that what they hear on television is the absolute truth. They do not question what they consume, because they do not understand the important role media play in civil society, panelists commented.

One panelist noted that most Azerbaijanis have no concept of what a journalist does. Many think media investigators have the power solve people’s problems and do not realize that journalists make the public aware of what the problems are, but they have limited inherent power to actuate change.

Panelists agreed that Azerbaijan is in desperate need of fact-checking sites with a large audience, so people can be taught about media literacy. “A question arises here, will people be interested in such sites?” one of the panelists asked. Azerbaijan’s only fact-checking website is “Fact Check,” and media experts and journalists denounce this as not enough for an entire nation.

The educational state of media, information literacy, and critical thinking is virtually nonexistent, and the situation is getting worse, panelists said. Azerbaijanis mostly do not use tools or websites to check facts, correct errors, or detect misinformation. A small number of citizens who follow technological innovations do check facts.

News of disinformation and propaganda are spread almost every day in Azerbaijan. People have little ability to distinguish between true and false news. Schools do not teach media literacy, television does not explain it, and universities do not care or know what will happen if they offer courses on the topic.

As a result, most Azerbaijanis do not fully understand the importance of the role of media in providing information, presenting facts, researching a topic, or being critical. “Even though some programs include a little questioning of the political events, the absolute majority of the population prefers the programs that prioritize family and household issues,” said one panelist who works for pro-government media, “This is clearly proven by the 80 percent or higher ratings for those programs.”

Many editorial offices do not have staff that specialize in the field of media to talk about media literacy topics. Journalists that write about crime are also asked to write about politics or culture as well. In addition, since the pro-government media are the majority and are controlled by the president’s administration, these outlets can convey false news to the audience as real news.

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

Some journalists and public representatives use their freedom of speech and right to information, but many are threatened or detained if they do. As in previous years, in 2022 the government used police force to stall peaceful rallies from opposition forces, feminist activists, animal rights groups, and independent journalists.

> **“Schools do not teach media literacy, television does not explain it, and universities do not care or know what will happen if they offer courses on the topic.**

Citizens are hesitant to consume information about corruption cases related to the president and his family, to share this information on social networks, and to express their opinions. For example, Azerbaijani activist Mahir Babayev made a video appeal to President Ilham Aliyev asking when the national child allowance will be paid. As a result, authorities arrested and detained him for 30 days, and he subsequently received a 30-day administrative prison sentence for filming a political satire video about the president of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev.[4]

In Baku, some citizens can express their opinions, albeit with difficulty. People in the districts and villages are generally afraid to express negative opinions to journalists, because authorities from local executive power departments or the village municipality will pressure that person the next morning or create bureaucratic obstacles.

Previously, Baku had two special places for holding public discussions, but they were later closed. Ordinary people conduct public discussions amongst themselves in cafes and teahouses, but only in small groups.

Citizens have no public discussion platforms, and media outlets cannot function as such. Panelists described the recent launch of a campaign by a group of independent journalists, who were protesting the new media law and demanding the right to hold public debates as part of this campaign. The journalists spent several days looking for a home to sponsor hearings, and only one publishing house agreed to give office space for this type of activity. The journalists noted that during the search, they received objections from many public outlets that feared repercussions.

Pro-government media have labeled journalists supporting the anti-media law campaign as foreign or Iranian spies or supporters of Ruben Vardanyan, a former state minister of the separatist Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. Additionally, pro-government media have started initiatives to prevent public hearings, so journalist activists need to keep the locations and dates of public forums covert.

The use of public discussion platforms, such as town halls; academic debates on government or politics; and call-in shows remains as low as in previous years. Exchanges such as academic debates or call-in shows are impossible in city halls or other official institutional buildings. The country has only a few small spaces, physical buildings, or public places where independent-minded people can gather and exchange ideas. One internet spot was the Caspian Platform, where Hajiyev led many different discussions until it was closed in 2022, upon Hajiyev’s arrest. Conferences and discussions are now only held online, and panelists questioned the effectiveness of these forums.

“We want those discussions to be brought to the masses, to be discussed by them, but this is not possible in today’s conditions,” expressed one journalist-editor on the panel.

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

Relations between independent media and NGOs or independent institutions are reasonable. “Although the media were not very interested in their audience before,” one panelist observed, “the young media that have emerged in recent years understand that in order to succeed in social media, you need to know the audience.”

4 https://abzas.org/2022/9/gnc-faln-ilham-liyevl-bagfc0af774-f/

Some independent media outlets value comments and feedback on videos or articles. Often they can create new content using those comments. An example of this is the BBC Azerbaijan Service, which collects public comments to better prepare programs that gain viewers.

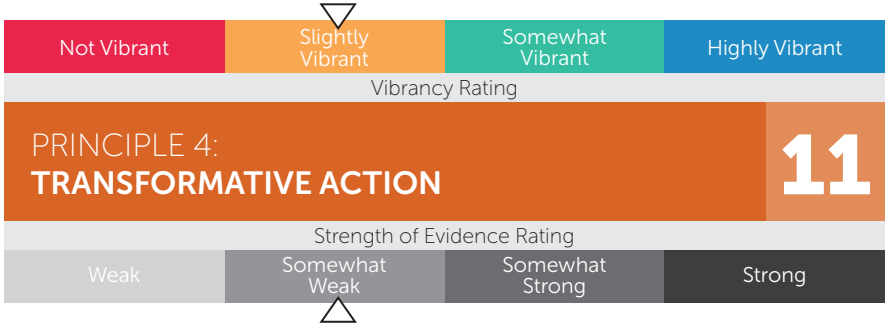
Indicator 15: Community media provide information relevant for community engagement.

Azerbaijan has small number of community media outlets, including QueeRadar, Femmekan, QiyVaar, Minority Azerbaijan, and the ethnic minority newspaper *Tolishi Sedo*. Although most of them are not considered professional media, they mainly conduct activities through social media, and their content is rich. The programs are educational and draw attention to problems. "I think what they do is important and essential," one panelist stated.

One journalist on the panel noted that community media in Azerbaijan used to receive grants and were able to operate independently. "But after 2015, many of them went out of business because the government made it difficult to receive grants from abroad," she explained, "There was Southern News, Mingachevir Lights, a media center in Ganja, and so on. Instead of these, media bodies of other communities appeared, mainly as platforms for activists working on gender issues, producing professional content that adequately represent their interests, and are sufficiently supported by that community." She summarized, "There aren't many of these outfits—but the quality of their work is high."

The complete destruction of community media in Azerbaijan's far-flung regions has silenced voices and issues from those regions. One panelist argued that community media outlets in Azerbaijan "only prepare programs that have no news value. You can't see serious discussions or news on public issues here."

Independent community media are believed not to disseminate information aimed at harming individuals, groups, people, or th.e public interest, according to the panelists.



The 2023 VIBE survey participants noted that the situation with this principle roughly equaled 2022, although the score rose one point from last year's report due to online independent news outlets gaining a bit more of an audience. Civil society members still cannot fully present major issues in the country, so they are not able to use any tools to improve communities. Indicator 17 on using quality information to inform actions scored low, given how people form their views more with misinformation than with quality information, and how their political and social knowledge varies. Panelists observed no particularly positive change in consumers' ability to differentiate between quality news and misinformation, so this indicator remains at a low level.

Indicator 20 on good governance and democratic rights received the lowest score in this principle

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

VIBE panelists noted that the conditions around this indicator were essentially the same as last year. They emphasized the value of some impartial news and information sources in the country, although they are few compared to pro-government, propaganda-based media. Since neutral, factual sources are on the internet, panelists thought that these types of media outlets have a sufficient audience. For many years, media-literate individuals, who are in the minority in Azerbaijan, engaged in open and constructive discussions through quality news and

information. Panelists agreed that citizens who do not hear about real events on local television mostly read, share, and discuss news using social media and online outlets.

"Around 10 years ago, there were more discussions and debates," one panelist said, "People now tend to create discussions on social media, but if we analyze the quality and context of those talks, most times they are nonsense."

In the absence of in-person forums and discussions, social media platforms offer the only opportunities for citizens to freely participate in exchanging information alongside people with whom they disagree. These forums include Facebook and YouTube comments sections. Authorities still use their troll "army" to shatter the trust in independent journalists and attack their critics on social media.

Audiences' primary sources of information are the mainstream media from Azerbaijan, Russia, and Turkey.

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

Disinformation on political and other topics remains high, and many people in the provinces and in Baku do not consume news critically. Most citizens think national television channels and the officials on them tell the unassailable truth, while the facts show the opposite, panelists lamented.

> "Authorities still use their troll "army" to shatter the trust in independent journalists and attack their critics on social media.

Given that alternative independent media have been cornered, Azerbaijanis are highly likely to be easily misled on political and social issues. Additionally, the absence of any democratic processes for more than two decades has caused widespread political apathy. Quality information hardly influences the outcome of nationwide elections, panelists commented.

Since people have little access to real news, they prefer government-generated disinformation on TV, according to the panelists. Whether TV reports on an election or any event, TV and government media can alter it very easily.

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

Panelists agreed that since many NGO activities in the country were recently called into question, their work with the media and transmission of their information to the media has become a secondary issue.

"Some NGOs are [act like] they are working for civil society," one panelist noted, "The issues they talk about are not based on any research. They are mainly used as a means of pressure on others in the hands of the government. Just like now they are standing on the Lachin Road and getting cold," he said, referring to a road leading to the contentious Nagorno-Karabakh territory where activists have held protests.

Very few organizations are engaged in NGO activities in the country. Years ago, several NGOs operated in different fields, but now just a couple of NGOs function among all fields.

"Now the issue is not the relationship and work of these NGOs with the media, but whether they exist or not," said one panelist. "Today, NGOs have declined to the point of non-existence in Azerbaijan, she noted, "The few remaining organizations work very hard, and we see it and it's mainly young initiative groups and platforms that work transparently. They encourage citizens to participate in government decisions. In addition, they provide an analysis of current events and reports. But the government creates obstacles for their registration and free activity in the country."

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

State bodies invite only "friendly" pro-government or government media outlets to press conferences; they are closed to independent media.

A photojournalist on the panel recounted his experiences. "For example, although I received official approval from the UEFA Championship League to shoot the international football match between Chelsea and Arsenal held in Azerbaijan in 2020, my accreditation was canceled by the government," he said, "After receiving official accreditation for two years for the competition, they refused to approve me for the third year, claiming I was with 'oppositional media.'"

In 2022, officials ordered Toplum TV journalist Farid Ismayilov to leave a press conference organized by the Ministry of Defense, after September tensions between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

> "State bodies invite only "friendly" pro-government or government media outlets to press conferences; they are closed to independent media.

The spread of disinformation and propaganda is a daily issue in the country. Self-respecting and independent media entities do not report the news without verification. "But it seems to me there are dozens of websites that spread untrue information," noted one panelist, "and they have hundreds of thousands of followers who are not worried that the information they provide could cause a problem for someone's life and safety."

This panelist also said that these website operators do not have any grounding in journalism, so they do not think some sentences they have written, or will write, create responsibility for them. Since the judicial system in Azerbaijan does not work properly, even if website writers are sued for defamation, they will somehow win in court, according to this panelist.

Independent outlets Meydan TV, Abzas media, Toplum TV, and Mikroskop Media attempt to get comments from experts and officials, but often cannot. A group of Azerbaijani journalists are trying to discourage viewers from believing everything the government says, but these attempts, too, have not been successful. One panelist pointed out that since the Azerbaijani government has tied the hands of the media with the new media registry, authorities are now suggesting banning some social media platforms as well.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

The government has not penalized any officials as a result of fact-based media investigations, and instead has sometimes granted them promotions. Of course, some officials were deprived of their duties and punished. According to the panelists, those removals happened not because the persons engaged in corruption and violated the law, but because they did not play by the rules of the president.

Independent fact-checkers constantly expose untruths. However, if a journalist uncovers corruption and shares it in any media outlet, problems and pressures await. Citizens want to express their problems, but they are afraid. Alternatively, when the media cover an issue someone has discussed, the interviewee later denies what they said because officials exert pressure on that person to stop talking.

Panelists lamented that the government has not taken adequate steps to remedy issues arising from journalistic investigations last year, even though the Abzas.net site has conducted a whole series.

"Unfortunately, due to the lack of a free and fair judicial system in the country, court decisions regarding the restoration of violated human rights are at a low level," said one panelist, "Although it doesn't happen frequently, the repeated dissemination of quality information on a topic goes some way to preventing or reducing human rights violations by national or local governments. But I think it is possible that quality information can prevent or reduce violations of freedom rights by national or local administrations, even if it is small."

All panelists agreed that even quality information in Azerbaijan cannot help the nation conduct free and fair elections at the local or national level. They concurred that every election day, the same situation is repeated in the country, where pro-government candidates are elected.

Because of the restrictive media environment, panelists in the Azerbaijan study will remain anonymous. An Azerbaijani journalist developed this chapter after a series of structured interviews with colleagues who have first-hand knowledge of the media and information sector.

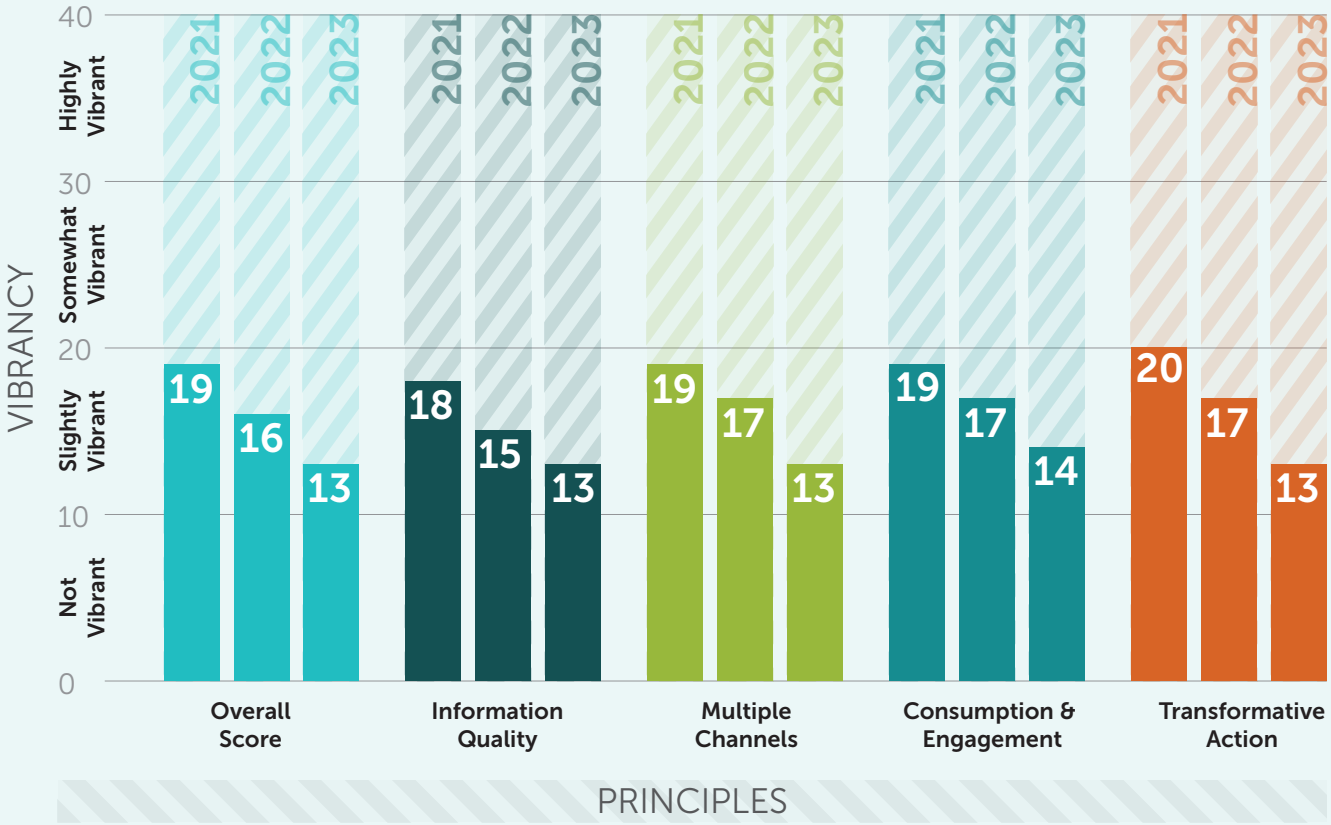
GEORGIA

Vibrant Information Barometer

2023

USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

IREX



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

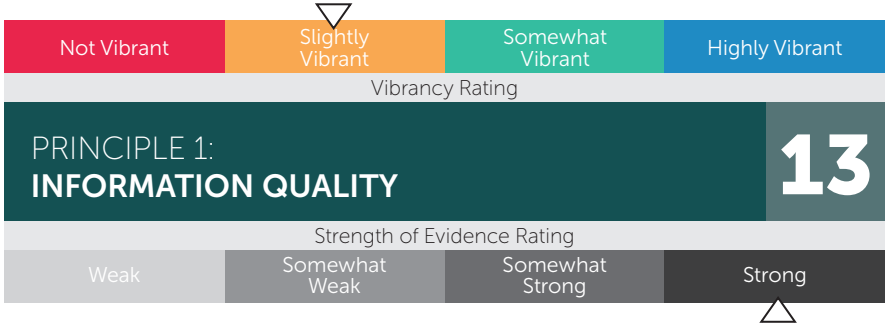
OVERALL SCORE
13

Monumental events, including Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Georgia's European Union (EU) candidate application, the imprisonment of an opposition media director, and allegations of the Georgian government's drift from the West, shook Georgia's media sphere in 2022, overshadowing the COVID-19 infodemic that dominated the country's media and information sector in 2021. The arrest of Nika Gvaramia, director of pro-opposition Mtavari Arkhi, which media and civil society representatives saw as politically motivated, landed a major blow to Georgia's media world. The owners of the country's two critical media outlets also faced pending court cases. Political polarization over the country's response to Russia's war in Ukraine also threatened the information landscape. Some panelists said 2022 marked a shift away from the West—the first year that Russian disinformation and anti-Western narratives flowed through mainstream, pro-government media, enabled by the ruling Georgian Dream Party's "soft" rhetoric toward Russia.

Georgia's EU candidacy application ended with the EU granting Georgia "European Perspective" status, while Ukraine and Moldova won coveted EU candidate status. The European Commission stated that Georgia will be granted the status on condition it fulfills its recommendations and addresses a dozen issues aimed at guaranteeing a free, pluralistic, and independent media environment, tackling political polarization, encouraging the involvement of civil society in decision-making, and others—a decision the government protested as unfair. Concerned by the pro-Russian and anti-Western tone of the government's response, tens of thousands of citizens took to the streets in peaceful protest action, proclaiming their pro-Western aspirations.

Near the year's end, the parliament adopted an amended Law on Broadcasting that enhanced the Georgian National Communications Commission's (GNCC) authority, entitling it to regulate hate speech, among other changes that civil society organizations (CSOs) criticized fiercely.

Despite these threats, the information system remains slightly vibrant on the VIBE scale, even as the overall score dropped three points from last year to 13. Scores across all four principles fell. In Principles 1 (information quality) the lowest scores were received by indicators on mal-information/hate speech and on resources for content production, due to the Georgian government and also Russia's role in spreading harmful information, and severe financial hardships faced by independent and critical media. Principle 2 (multiple channels of information) fell due to worsening media freedom situation after Gvaramia's imprisonment, as well as changes to media legislation. Principle 3 (information consumption) received the highest score among the four principles mostly due to the panelists' positive evaluation of the community media. However, the lowest scores in Principle 3 are tied to indicators on media literacy and on safe use of the internet due to worsening of legislation on secret surveillance, along with ineffective and politicized media literacy efforts by the government. In Principle 4 (transformative action), panelists gave the lowest score to indicators on government's use of quality information to make public policy decisions and to individuals use of quality information to inform their actions; the highest score in this principle was received by the indicator on civil society's use of quality information.



Both professional and amateur content producers churn out large amounts of information, but the results lack diversity and depth. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, meanwhile, ramped up the flow of disinformation and misinformation, pouring through social networks and even through mainstream media. Critical media work under immense government pressure, risking severe financial repercussions, undermining their performance, and undercutting the industry's sustainability. As a result, this principle's score fell from 15 last year to 13 this year, with Indicator 3 (on mal-information and hate speech) and Indicator 5 (on resources for content production) drawing the lowest scores.

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

The infrastructure needed to operate media—multiplexes, printing houses, the internet, social networks—exists, and the related technology is more or less adequate. Nino Nakashidze, Mtavari Arkhi's deputy executive director, said that high-quality equipment can be procured, but all media do not enjoy equal access. *Indigo*'s director, Nata Dzvelishvili, said the ability to keep up with modern technology depends on whatever funds can be spared after meeting basic needs.

Journalism studies at most universities do not provide adequate practical training and skill-based education; some panelists representing media outlets complained of poor multimedia skills among interns. "The demand is for multimedia skills," said Nino Jangirashvili, director of TV Kavkasia, adding that the knowledge and preparedness of journalists fall short of modern needs. Panelists also underscored a shortage of needs-based courses or training available for professional media, such as tailored training on digital safety and media business models. However, media outlets cannot afford training customized to their needs. Lika Zakashvili, editor of the online Publika.ge, raised another issue that affects many small, chronically understaffed online media, which cannot fully use trainings, as one person typically bears responsibility for many roles—e.g., social media management, digital security, administration, and fundraising.

Not every content producer, professional and nonprofessional, acts in an ethical and accountable manner. The largest national mainstream broadcasters that have the most influence on public opinion are politicized. This, panel members said, affects the quality of journalism produced by these media. Mamuka Andguladze, media program manager at Transparency International Georgia, said that only a handful of media abide by ethical and professional standards—and they are not the most influential outlets. The panelists agreed that media are less inclined to provide fact-based content and are more oriented toward opinionated journalism than ever. In recent years "it has become extremely difficult for an average citizen to tell the difference between facts and opinions. While facts might still be there, they are so twisted, mixed with opinions, and transformed that audiences are deprived of receiving quality information," noted Nino Danelia, a media professor at Ilia State University. Kamila Mamedova, director and editor of Radio Marneuli, said that many media fail to prioritize news, filling space instead with social media posts.

Furthermore, media tend to publish content designed to attract more clicks. Dzvelishvili said that it is not uncommon for some online media to share information "copied and pasted" from social media without verification. Jangirashvili said that some critical broadcasters have adopted a "doom and gloom" tone, associating alarmism with increased attention from audiences; she said journalists fail to show they grasp the meaning of quality journalism.

Gela Mtivlishvili, director and editor of Information Centers Network,

added that some podcasters, YouTubers, and social media influencers "are devoid of ethics" and are profit driven.

A United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and EU-commissioned media monitoring report concluded that similar to the preelection period in 2021, frequent ethics violations and manipulation of television news marred the post-election period. The report singles out the Georgian public broadcaster, Imedi TV, and Rustavi 2 for editorial policies biased in favor of the ruling Georgian Dream Party, and Mtavari Arkhi as biased in favor of the United National Movement and former president Mikheil Saakashvili.

> **"The panelists agreed that media are less inclined to provide fact-based content and are more oriented toward opinionated journalism than ever.**

Russia's invasion of Ukraine contributed to the degradation of information quality in Georgia. Many media outlets failed to provide accurate and verified information about the war, the panelists agreed; some journalists and social media users relied on flawed sources. The political polarization over the country's stance on the war became a breeding ground for polarized and populist narratives, reflected by the national broadcasters.

The panelists agreed that despite numerous challenges, critical national outlets, some regional media, and independent online media hold the government accountable. However, as Andguladze observed, "Even when a good investigation or story appears, there is still no reaction from the government." A few small, independent online outlets, however, continue to produce fact-based, well-sourced content on a variety of topics, including Netgazeti.ge, Batumelebi.ge, On.ge, the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Georgian Service, and Publika.ge.

Georgian media cover local, national, regional, and international news. Regional and local news are predominantly covered by regional and local media, while national media focus primarily on national events. There is a lack of journalists who specialize in various topics—e.g., military affairs.

Journalists are held responsible for unethical and unprofessional reporting—for example, through self-regulation units of broadcasters—but journalists are not always responsive to the measures, according to some panelists. Others disagreed, claiming that only a handful of media outlets react to professional and ethical breaches, while others blame the low quality of information on the public's failure to hold the media accountable. Apart from the broadcasters' self-regulatory units and some online media, the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics reviews complaints about media and journalists submitted by individuals. Between December 2021 and November 2022, the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics[1] reviewed 89 complaints, of which 38 came from citizens and 21 from private companies; nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), politicians, and state bodies filed the rest. Most of the violations—56 cases—related to the Charter's first principle: accuracy.

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

The panelists expressed concern over a surge in misinformation and disinformation online and offline after Russia invaded Ukraine, while some political analysts, media, and NGOs saw government policies and rhetoric in connection to Russia's war take an anti-Western, anti-Ukrainian, pro-Kremlin turn. "If before, there was an attempt to influence public opinion in a covert way, now we see that there is no need for them [the government officials] to hide, and their narratives can be shared openly in the media," said Nino Dolidze, chair of the International Society for Fair Elections (ISFED). Some panelists said ruling party members seed waves of pro-Kremlin narratives, such as the allegation that the West and some Ukrainian officials wanted Georgia to open a "second front" in the war with Russia—marking the first time Russian disinformation was explicitly aired on pro-government media. Some panelists also mentioned the possible implications of a newly-formed "People's

1 *Annual Report*, Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics. 2022.

Power" movement, whose members are still officially MPs of Georgian Dream party, and whose anti-Western narratives were systematically aired by pro-government media.

Georgia's 2022 application for EU candidate status also proved revealing; the process sparked a wave of disinformation narratives from the government and pro-government media. Georgia's government called the decision to grant the country "European Perspective" status, with the prospect of becoming a candidate in the future upon fulfilling the EU's recommendations, unfair. Leading members of ruling Georgian Dream party hinted that EU sympathy for Ukraine amid Russia's invasion influenced the decision—and some panelists feel that media critical of the government did not do enough to counter the flood of disinformation. Natia Kuprashvili, chair of the Journalism Resource Center, noted that no other media offered any substantial counternarrative asking, for example, why there was no war in Moldova, which also received EU candidate status.

> "Russia's invasion of Ukraine contributed to the degradation of information quality in Georgia.

Mistakes and inaccuracies—by both professional media and nonprofessional content producers grew commonplace in reporting about the war in Ukraine. In the first months of the war, Jangirashvili recalled that a journalist on a talk show aired on a mainstream national television channel that is critical of the government's shared unverified facts in an alarmed tone. Even though the truth soon became known, the presenter did not correct and notify the public. Kuprashvili agreed that Georgian media fell short of reporting during the crisis, as it turned out that "they are not prepared and do not have sufficient skills to provide quality information to the public in such circumstances." Zakashvili added. For example, when media mistakenly reported about recapturing of Kherson [a city in Ukraine], even though Kherson was retaken later, the mistake harmed us—as it was further used by the pro-Russian media, which twisted it to discredit the media and pro-Western values."

Tamar Kintsurashvili, of the Media Development Foundation (which cooperates with Facebook to track false information along with another Georgian NGO, GRASS) said that in 2021–2022, after Myth Detector flagged 38 Facebook posts, the authors corrected their initial posts and informed the audience. In 26 out of 38 cases, media outlets created the posts.

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

Russia has actively sought to censor and eliminate information that would undermine its war on Ukraine. Soon after invading Ukraine and as reported by RFE/RL in September 2022, Roskomnadzor, Russia's communication and media authority, contacted several Georgian media outlets that also produce content in Russian, threatening to block them if they did not remove stories pertaining to the war. Russia did, in fact, block a number of Georgian news media, including ru.netgazeti.ge, JamNews.ge, sovanews.ge, accentnews.ge, and interpressnews.ge.

Efforts by Russia and its proxies to influence the Georgian public intensified during the war. The panelists highlighted the damaging influence of a far-right, Russia-affiliated national broadcaster, Alt-Info, which spread Russian war propaganda and Russian disinformation about the war in Ukraine and whose affiliates harassed journalists on multiple occasions. A study by Democracy Research Institute (DRI)[2] about Alt-Info revealed false messages that the channel spread about the war, such as: Russia does not attack civilians and does not bomb populated areas; Russia's military superiority is obvious, and Ukraine will be defeated; the sanctions imposed on Russia by the West are ineffective; Ukraine itself trades with Russia, therefore, its accusations against Georgia are inadmissible; and the West wants to open a "second front" in Georgia.

The ISFED, which carries out monitoring on social media, announced that Facebook had deleted the pages and groups linked with Alt-Info. The Media Advocacy Coalition appealed to the government and cable

2 *What the Observation of Pro-Russian Media Discourse Showed – DRI Report, Mediachecker.* May 11, 2022. https://www.mediachecker.ge/ka/mediagaremo/article/91869-ra-achvena-prorusuli-mediasashualebebis-diskursze-dakvirvebam-dri-is-angarishi.

operators to suspend Alt-Info, and several cable operators canceled transmission of the channel.

Political motivation often drives the spread of harmful content such as smear campaigns against individuals and manipulative content, and social media networks and the comments sections of some online media are awash with discrediting and hateful posts. For example, on December 14, the Special Penitentiary Service posted video footage on its Facebook page showing different periods of former President Mikheil Saakashvili's imprisonment. The post indicated that the video was released because of "high public interest" and "clearly demonstrated that Saakashvili's actions were faked and aimed to obstruct administration of justice and mislead the wider public and international partners." The footage was released amid calls on the government from some opposition parties, NGOs, and members of the public to allow the ailing detainee to travel abroad for treatment. The footage showed different periods in the medical institution where Saakashvili underwent treatment, including incidents with medical personnel.

According to Danelia, the release of this footage aimed to inflict personal damage on Saakashvili. After evaluating the footage, the public defender's office concluded that as the footage did not show the most current videos of Saakashvili, "public interest in the current condition of the prisoner cannot be satisfied by disclosing the footage of the past period." More importantly, the public defender's evaluation of the video did not provide evidence that the patient was faking his condition. Myth Detector's social media monitoring[3] showed that as soon as the footage was released, a malicious campaign started on social media to discredit Saakashvili.

Once the government perceives a whiff of public disenchantment, an organized media campaign appears. Jangirashvili recalled a series of Imedi TV stories about several influential NGOs, titled "Clan of Wealthy NGOs." She said that the stories, although they might contain true facts, amount to mal-information. Those panelists whose organizations are involved in monitoring disinformation, propaganda, and mal-information in media said that every major event in the country ends up as part of the discreditation campaign on social media, too. For example, Myth Detector reported that some pro-governmental, anti-opposition, anti-liberal Facebook pages started a Facebook campaign criticizing Gvaramia, whose imprisonment local and international watchdogs deemed politically motivated. The campaign exalted the court decisions as an expression of the rule of law and circulated a photo of Gvaramia, altered in a homophobic way.

The information shared on Sinamdvileshi (In Reality), a Georgian Dream–run Facebook page, labels the opinions of civil activists, critical media, and opposition politicians as "false" content. "Such methods confuse the audiences and mix up the values that we should be adhering to. . . . In the process, democratic institutes get discredited," Kintsurashvili said.

Nakashidze and Jangirashvili said that fact-based, original, high-quality reporting is one way to respond to mal-information and disinformation—but a lack of human resources and funding limits media from responding more substantively to such incidents.

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

While mainstream media focus mostly on the coverage of national and political events, regional and small online media better reflect the experiences and views of people of various ethnic and religious backgrounds, according to the panelists. Saba Tsitsikashvili, editor of the regional Qartli.ge, complained that large national media often ask for his online publication's help in covering certain events, but then fail to recognize their contribution or even mention their name.

Niche media that produce content for marginalized and minority communities exist on various platforms. "These platforms are more or less developed. But usually, the communities are organized in echo chambers. . . . These diverse themes rarely reach mainstream audiences," said Danelia, adding that public media, which is supposed to provide

3 Kistauri, A. "The Mobilization of Trolls and Anonymous Facebook Accounts against Former President Saakashvili," Myth Detector. December 21, 2022. https://mythdetector.ge/en/the-mobilization-of-trolls-and-anonymous-facebook-accounts-against-former-president-saakashvili/.

diverse audiences with the content of their interest, fails in that respect. Nakashidze observed that Mtavari Arkhi tried to recruit a journalist from the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, where ethnic Armenians live, but they were unsuccessful, as social and family traditions served as barriers. Panelists said, however, that the media is one of those few spheres in the country where gender equality is more or less ensured.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

The year 2022 proved to be one of the media's most difficult in terms of scarce financial resources; panelists cited the market's inability to recover to a pre-pandemic level, declining and vague donor priorities, the public broadcaster's favored access to advertising, and a law restricting the advertising of gambling businesses in media as key factors. Regional broadcasters lost as much as 70 percent of their annual income as a result, Kuprashvili said.

For most media, advertising revenues have not regained pre-pandemic levels. Nakashidze claimed that some pro-government media joined forces and bargained with large businesses, offering them service for the lowest possible prices and convincing them not to advertise on Mtavari Arkhi. After the imprisonment of its director, Mtavari Arkhi established the Media Freedom Fund to collect funds to support the station, but the channel's financial situation suffered severely for most of the year.

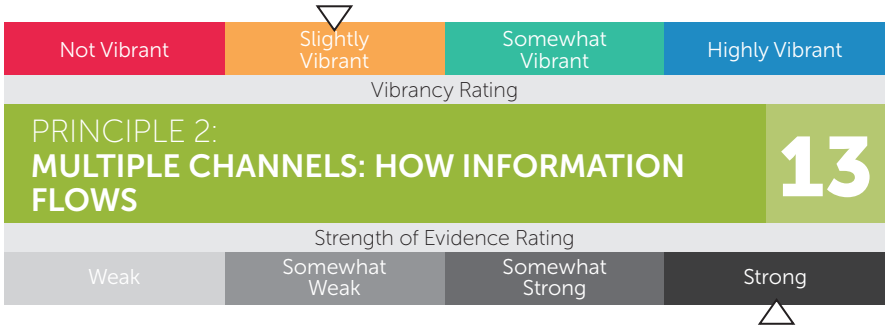
In another development that follows a global trend, businesses advertise on social media directly, eschewing media outlets, although precise data about advertising on different social networks is not available. Facebook's Ad Library allows for tracing sponsored posts about political and social issues in Georgia since August 4, 2020. Some panelists said that Georgian businesses try to reach Georgian audiences through foreign media pages, and Russian ownership of local businesses is an obstacle for independent media in some regions. Tsitsikashvili, whose media operates in the city of Gori in Shida Kartli, said that most businesses in Gori maintain connections with Russia.

Media and some NGOs that produce investigative content rely heavily on foreign donor support. The panelists said that international donor organizations did not prioritize media in 2022, allocating little or no funds for the struggling sector. Furthermore, most donors limit their funding to certain topics, curtailing the media's freedom to report on the topics most relevant to Georgian audiences. Nevertheless, the panelists agreed that donor organizations play an important role in strengthening Georgia's democratic institutions and are vital sources of funding for independent media in the country.

Some panelists also complained about donor requirements to collect audience and click metrics as the main indicators for success. "For me, for the representative of a media that does not produce daily news, the content's impact may be apparent much later . . . the result can be that someone starts projects by taking into account the video stories our journalists produced even maybe a year later . . . but I can't show this in the reports," Dzvelishvili said. Mtivlishvili also questioned the measurement of success by likes and clicks, asking if some "yellow" media accrue a high number of clicks, does it mean they have the same impact as quality media?

Zakashvili spoke of the hardships faced by modern media outlets, whose content production and distribution costs have risen to the point that there is a need for a greater number of employees to handle all the different tasks, which most small media outlets cannot afford. Panelists also highlighted a disparity in the salaries paid to journalists doing the same job in different media organizations. Journalists working in some national television media earn much higher salaries than regional journalists and those working for small online outlets—making it difficult to attract and retain employees and putting media organizations in unequal competition.

Georgia's public broadcaster is slated to receive GEL 101.19 million ($38.1 million) from public funds in 2023, an almost GEL 20 million ($8 million) increase from its 2022 funding level. It also began taking a substantial portion of advertising money after the enforcement of the amendments to the Law on Broadcasting broadened its access to advertising in 2017, some panelists noted. Regional broadcasters, locked in unequal competition with the public broadcaster and other national broadcasters, feel the effects of this law most acutely, Kuprashvili said.



Media freedom hit a low point in Georgia in 2022, following events including the arrest of Gvaramia—a move the panelists, as well as local and international watchdogs, called politically motivated. The amendments to the Law on Broadcasting, which brought hate speech under the authority of GNCC and expanded the regulator's control over the broadcasters, constituted another blow. The legal and financial pressure on critical and independent media outlets and journalists are aimed at throttling free media in the country, the panelists believed. As a result, Indicator 6 (on the right to create, share and consume information), as well as Indicator 10 (on the independence of information channels), received the lowest scores in this principle.

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

On May 16, 2022, Gvaramia was sentenced to a lengthy prison term after he was found guilty of abuse of power, and the court of appeals upheld the verdict in a decision that Transparency International Georgia and other groups condemned as politically motivated. The panelists consider Gvaramia's imprisonment Georgia's worst act against the freedom of press and expression last year—a clear illustration of the deterioration of the media landscape.

The newly adopted amendments to the broadcasting law also illustrate substantial deterioration in legal protections for press freedom. "We used to claim to have laws protecting freedom of speech, but that is no longer the case," Jangirashvili said. In December, Georgia's parliament approved the amendments, giving the GNCC the authority to regulate hate speech. The panelists worry that, as GNCC is presumed to be under the influence of Georgian Dream, its interpretation of hate speech could limit critical voices. According to CSOs, the amendments threaten media by taking away the authority of broadcast self-regulatory bodies to handle ethics complaints—allowing complainants to take matters directly to the regulator.

The amendments purportedly aimed to bring Georgian legal norms in line with the EU Audiovisual Media Service Directive. However, before the third hearing, the EU postponed the hearing and adoption process on the Georgian legislation until May 31, 2023, although Georgian Dream ministers did not take this into consideration. The legislative process drew criticism from civil society, media organizations, and international experts; even though these stakeholders supported the harmonization process, they expressed concerns regarding the expansion of regulatory authority, which they feared might lead to more restrictions on critical media outlets. With the support of the Media Advocacy Coalition, media outlets developed and presented an alternative to the amendments. Parliament, however, adopted the amendments without considering the stakeholders' concerns. "They definitely need it to fight against the critical media," Andguladze said, referring to the recent practice of adopting laws, including controversial 2015 and 2021 amendments to the Law on Advertising, that ignore stakeholders' concerns.

The European Commission opinion recommending that Georgia "undertake stronger efforts to guarantee a free, professional, pluralistic and independent media environment, notably by ensuring that criminal procedures brought against media owners fulfill the highest legal standards, and by launching impartial, effective and timely investigations in cases of threats against safety of journalists and other media professionals," confirms the gravity of the state of media freedom in Georgia. The full set of recommendations highlighted 12 problems that Georgia must address to achieve candidate status, including political polarization, the functioning of state institutions, the judicial system's independence, civil society's involvement in decision-making, de-oligarchization, and others. In another sign of Georgia's declining media freedom, it dropped to 89th place in the 2022 Reporters Without

Borders World Press Freedom Index, falling 28 places from last year.[4]

The government's use of the justice system to legally and financially oppress critical media intensified dramatically in 2022, with an unprecedented number of lawsuits—mostly initiated by government officials, their family members, or their donors—against journalists and critical media outlets. Transparency International Georgia tracked 28 lawsuits filed against three opposition media outlets—Mtavari TV, Formula TV, and TV Pirveli[5]—and in the majority of completed cases, the plaintiffs won. "The government's strategy is to litigate those who they dislike . . . the increased number of court trials and lawsuits is to stop us," Zakashvili said.

The government also intensified its use of heavy fines to financially weaken opposition channels. The GNCC fined Mtavari TV GEL 118,688 ($45,000) for airing political advertisements based on a complaint filed by the ruling party.[6] The panelists also criticized an altered judicial practice that shifts the burden of proof from media outlets to journalists; Tbilisi's mayor, Kakhi Kaladze, won a lawsuit against Pirveli TV journalist and talk show host Maia Mamulashvili, who had to pay a fine. "Such a wave of pressure on critical media is a sign of kleptocratic rule, when they try to silence journalists working on topics of corruption by filing defamation lawsuits against them," according to Transparency International Georgia.

> "We used to claim to have laws protecting freedom of speech, but that is no longer the case," Jangirashvili said.

Government officials' mistreatment, intimidation, and verbal harassment of journalists have become commonplace, which in turn encourages extremist groups to attack and harass journalists and media, the panelists said. A number of journalists suffered physical attacks while on the job in 2022, mostly at the hands of far-right groups, including Alt-Info; some journalists received death threats.[7]

"Journalists abstain from putting their names on critical material; they are afraid to be physically identified; fear of being identified has intensified after the July 5 events," Zakashvili said, referring to violent attacks on journalists covering the annulled Tbilisi Pride event in 2021 that injured over 50 journalists and media representatives.[8] The panelists said that they refrain from sending LGBTQ journalists and crew members to cover certain stories. "When you see you are beaten, the government kicks you out, Kobakhidze harasses you, then trolls attack you . . . then people leave this profession, and some leave the country," Jangirashvili said.

The climate for media sources worsened sharply; people are afraid to speak up out of fear of retribution like losing their jobs or state social assistance. Zakashvili recalled the difficulties she faced while working on school director elections. Despite understanding the importance of electing directors for their professionalism, not their party affiliation, her sources abstained from commenting—even to trusted media. "I have been working on education issues for ten years, they know how I work . . . they say we trust you, but still cannot talk to you," Zakashvili said. An incident regarding anonymously leaked files in 2021, allegedly recorded by the State Security Service, instilled fear in people; they feel they cannot express their opinion freely under an environment of state surveillance, where the confidentiality of sources cannot be protected.

4 *World Press Freedom Index,* Reporters Without Borders. 2022. https://rsf.org/en/index.

5 "TI Georgia: Court Decisions Against Media a Dangerous Trend," Civil.ge. December 3, 2022. https://civil.ge/archives/517499.

6 "Communications Commission Fines Mtavari Arkhi, Warns TV Pirveli, Formula," Civil.ge. August 24, 2022. https://civil.ge/archives/505649

7 Giorgashvili, G. "11 factors that worsened the Georgian media environment in 2022. Mediachecker. December 26, 2022. https://www.mediachecker.ge/ka/mediagaremo/article/93476-11-faqtori-ramac-2022-shi-qarthuli-mediagaremo-gaauaresa

8 Transparency International Georgia. "Statement of Civil Society Organizations on the possible involvement of State Security Service in the events of July 5-6." (June 14, 2022). https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/statement-civil-society-organizations-possible-involvement-state-security-service-events-july-5

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

Household internet access crept up slightly in 2022, reaching 88.4 percent, per the National Statistics Office of Georgia.[9] People can access information through various channels and technologies, although urban areas enjoy better reach. Economic factors, like increased inflation amid Russia's war in Ukraine and internet and mobile service price hikes, affect viewership nationwide—but especially in regions where fixed broadband internet services are scarce.

Georgia's internet affordability ranked 61st out of 117 countries according to the Digital Quality of Life Index (DQL), 2022.[10] Comparing internet access costs, Georgians pay 93 times more for mobile internet costs and 11 times more for fixed broadband compared to Israel, the reported home of the world's most affordable internet.

Georgia scored among "free" countries in the *Freedom House's Internet Freedom 2022 Report*,[11] indicating overall improvements in internet freedom during the coverage period while at the same time reporting on several obstacles, including infrastructural hurdles, that limit access—especially in regions where fiber-optic cable internet is not available. Panelists have seen little progress in the development of the government's promised fiber-optic network, announced in 2015 and renewed in 2020 in a bid to ensure the entire population's access to high-speed internet, during the last year. The DQL Index reports a slight increase in the country's electronic infrastructure (up 3 percent, to 58th place), but a significant decrease in the quality of internet (falling to 95th place) in 2022.[12] The same source ranks Georgia's e-governance 81st in the world, behind neighboring Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Media content is not widely available to people with disabilities; few channels provide programs with sign language, for example, effectively excluding that population from the information space, Mamedova noted. A number of quality broadcast media outlets provide programming created for ethnic groups in their native languages, but they cannot compete with larger Russian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani channels that span the country and enjoy popularity.

The panelists cited the diminished print and radio presence to explain their low scores on the diversification of information channels. "The war in Ukraine shows the importance of retaining different platforms to ensure citizens' access to information. FM radios are disappearing . . . because of low profitability . . . a tendency likely to worsen next year. This will bring problems in terms of information security. Printing newspapers became more important in Ukraine . . . here, nobody cares about the diversification of information channels," Kuprashvili said.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

Access to Information is guaranteed by law, but implementation of the laws deteriorated in 2022. Nondisclosure of public information, violation of the terms of its delivery, and not allowing critical media to attend official press conferences and briefings all became common, hindering journalists' professional activity, the panelists say. "I have not seen a heavier year in these terms," says Mtivlishvili, who filed 57 administrative complaints and 14 lawsuits in 2022 over attempts to obtain information that should be publicly available—but state agencies block information on key issues that might trigger society's criticism. For example, Mtivlishvili said that state agencies did not provide Mtisambebi.ge with information on the transfer of Racha forestland to a Russian oligarch's partner, or on hydroelectric power station licenses to Russians amid the war in Ukraine. "The Ministry of Culture does not even inform us about their events; we are uninformed about what happens and when," Zakashvili said. Telara Gelantia, a BMG journalist and talk show host, was restricted from attending government sessions—blocked for asking

9 *Indicators of Using Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in Households,* National Statistics Office of Georgia. September 1, 2022. https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/106/information-and-communication-technologies-usage-in-households.

10 "Georgia Ranks 67th in the World by Digital Quality of Life," BMG. September 26, 2022. https://bm.ge/en/article/georgia-ranks-67th-in-the-world-by-digital-quality-of-life/117205.

11 *Freedom on the Net,* 2022, Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/country/georgia/freedom-net/2022.

12 *Digital Quality of Life Index,* Surfshark. https://surfshark.com/dql2022?country=GE.

"too many questions," she said. Georgia's public defender criticized state agencies' tendency to bar certain media representatives from attending briefings or other activities. Government officials also treat pro-government media representatives differently—granting them first, sometimes exclusive, access to public information. The panelists also noted that government representatives never participate in the programs of the critical media, while opposition party representatives abstain from appearing on pro-government channels—further hampering media's role in informing society and holding the government accountable.

> "Government officials' mistreatment, intimidation, and verbal harassment of journalists have become commonplace, which in turn encourages extremist groups to attack and harass journalists and media, the panelists said.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Laws and regulations facilitate the operation of a range of distribution channels in the country, but a few privately owned, large-scale companies dominate the market, limiting competition. According to Andguladze, as the concentration of the telecommunications market grows, some big players, like TeliaSonera, left or, like Veon Georgia, supposedly plan to leave the market. Those that stay merge, expand, and turn into competition-killing monopolies. "An entire infrastructure is monopolized, and that causes prices to rise," Kuprashvili commented. According to the GNCC, two companies, Magticom and Silknet, own three-fourths of the fixed broadband internet market, at 48.2 percent and 30.7 percent, respectively. Three private companies that own 100 percent of the market share—Silknet (36 percent), Magticom (34.2 percent), and Veon Georgia (29.8 percent)—dominate the mobile internet market.[13]

Logistically, media licensing procedures remain relatively easy, but the panelists question the transparency and fairness of spectrum allocation in certain cases, citing the ownership of Imedi and Maestro TV. Ina Gudavadze, a widow of the billionaire and Imedi TV founder Badri Patarkatshishvili, owns 100 percent of Imedi TV shares and 25 percent of Maestro TV shares, violating the Law on Broadcasting, which stipulates that a single person has a right to own no more than one over-the-air television channel in a single coverage area. In response, the GNCC, which is responsible for spectrum allocations and eliminating market concentration, refers to 2015 legislative changes permitting a licensed broadcaster to air five channels of a single owner—an interpretation the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association has challenged. The GNCC interprets and executes laws according to its agenda, panelist alleged. They also criticized the regulator for permitting a member of the parliament, Viktor Japaridze, to purchase Post TV's control package in October of 2022—after ruling that another member, Nato Chkheidze, violated the rules when he attempted to do the same in 2016. The law bars offshore registered businesses from owning broadcast licenses in Georgia, but this clause of the law is often violated, according to the panelists. "We have laws on transparency of media ownership, but they guarantee neither transparency nor implementation of the law," Andguladze said.

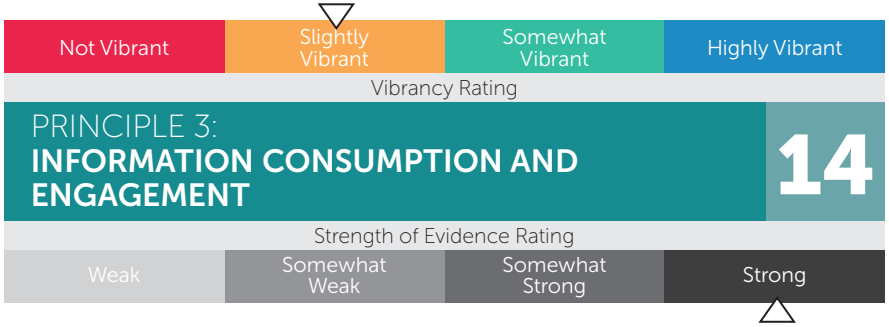
Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Most broadcast media owners influence their editorial policies. Still, some smaller media organizations enjoy freedom in their editorial choices. "There are very few media outlets that have free funds to create content," Kuprashvili said. Some panelists noted that opposition channels also show biases under the influence of ownership. Commercial interests in advertising revenues also impact the editorial and programming choices of media, though some manage to separate editorial and advertising politics. Most panelists believe that government subsidies and advertising contracts always go to pro-government media organizations.

13 *Analytical Portal,* Georgian National Communications Commission. https://analytics.comcom.ge/ka/?modal=sub.

The public broadcaster offers a number of quality educational programs, the panelists acknowledge; however, they gave low scores to the channel overall, criticizing it for low-quality news programs. "Does the public broadcaster produce news or investigative programming? Is it a watchdog? This is a problem of the public broadcaster," Andguladze said. "It could set a journalistic standard, but fails to perform this function," added Jangirashvili. With the public broadcaster's substantial funding, it could bring significant change in the market, which is quite hostile to independent media organizations, the panelists feel. "Despite being acclaimed for educational programs, the public broadcaster's talk shows are not free from political bias . . . they unmistakably replicate the narratives of government officials," Zakashvili said.

A number of leadership changes within the public broadcaster in 2022 raised concerns in civil society circles. The election of Vasil Maglaperidze, a former high-ranking ruling party official, as a chair of the board of directors invites a high risk of political censorship for the broadcaster's editorial policy, the panelists said. The host and journalists of "Akhali Kvira" ("New Week"), who were fired by the channel, reported on political censorship and the existence of so-called blacklists of topics and guests at the channel. Imeda Darsalia, a former program host, named the "blacklisted" topics and experts. Adjara Public TV's new management keeps the course loyal to the government's editorial and staffing policy as well, the panelists said; a dozen lawsuits filed by journalists fired by the channel director, Giorgi Kokhreidze, since 2019 are still underway. Toward the end of 2022, the Court of Appeal rejected the request of Natia Kapanadze, a former Adjara Public Broadcaster director who was impeached in 2019, to annul the court decision.



The panelists agreed that the population lacks the skills to assess the quality of the media they consume. The internet and social media are freely available for anyone to register, and social networks are widely used. However, privacy and digital safety concerns persist. This principle's overall score fell three points to 14 when compared with last year's study, with the indicator on media literacy faring the worst.

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

Legislation, such as the Law on Personal Data Protection, offers some protective measures and regulations for data privacy and digital security. However, CSOs sharply criticized the amended version of Georgia's Law on Information Security, adopted in 2021, for failing to ensure proper protection for personal and commercial information by granting unconstrained access to a Secret Security Services affiliate. The adoption of amendments to the Criminal Procedure Code regarding secret surveillance in 2022—which extended the list of crimes eligible for investigation by covert measures, prolonged the overall maximum duration of these measures, and reduced notification obligation—also proved significant. Local and international experts criticized the amended legislation, naming the rights of citizens and overall inadequacy of surveillance measures as key concerns, and called on officials to block its adoption. In 2022, Soso Gogashvili, a former high-ranking official and whistleblower responsible for the leak of some secretly recorded files in 2021, was detained and charged with tampering with personal data, abuse of authority, and illegal possession of

firearms. Notably, the official's name is allegedly connected to a number of systematic crimes and violations of the rights of some citizens in the past, according to Transparency International Georgia and several other NGOs. The watchdogs agree that the facts call for a complete investigation but underscored the importance of protecting Gogashvili's rights and safety as a whistleblower.

Trainings for professional and nonprofessional content producers on digital safety tools exist, along with cyberattack prevention tools. Some media outlets and journalists demonstrate a strong awareness of digital safety, but it is not widely practiced. One reason is that understaffed media do not always have personnel responsible for these issues. Kuprashvili complained that after far-right activist Beka Vardosanidze threatened to organize an attack on their website, TokTV (a Russian-language station founded by the Journalism Resource Centre), the site went down for a few days. Afterward, she took steps to protect the website against future attacks—but the protective system blocked regular users too. "We are being systematically attacked, and we need to systematically protect and update our systems," she noted. Mtivlishvili added that journalists lack knowledge about such basics as protecting their personal data, even email, and how to safely use various messaging apps.

> "No national study assesses the Georgian public's media literacy, but panelists agreed it is very low.

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

By law, the GNCC is mandated to lead media literacy policy in the country, although the organization, viewed as a politicized, pro-government actor, lacks public trust. No national study assesses the Georgian public's media literacy, but panelists agreed it is very low. Additionally, Georgia ranked last in a 2022 European Policies Initiative (EUPI) and Open Society Institute (OSI) study[14] measuring the potential resistance of 41 European societies in Europe to "fake news" and related phenomena. Similarly, a small-scale Media Development Foundation study in 2022[15] assessing the Georgian public's media consumption habits and vulnerability to disinformation showed that the majority of respondents rarely or never verify information; a little over 30 percent said they check facts regularly.

In 2022, the GNCC, Georgia's Ministry of Education and Science, and UNICEF started a joint project to introduce media literacy in formal education with financial support from USAID.[16] Moreover, the GNCC, CSOs, and some universities--supported by various organizations such as the US Embassy Georgia, the EU Delegation, and Deutsche Welle--also offer media literacy trainings to school teachers and students, as well as the wider public. Danelia mentioned that CSO efforts in this outnumber state-sponsored organizations and stressed that the lack of cooperation among different actors limits their capacity to tackle the challenges. In a country heavily stricken by disinformation, there is no holistic approach to encourage everyone to cooperate to achieve a common goal," Danelia said. Very often, she added, the government itself organizes disinformation campaigns.

Media literacy questions are part of teacher certification exams, which stirs a high demand for trainings—but a shortage of trainers makes it hard to meet the need, according to Kintsurashvili (whose organization, the Media Development Foundation, offers trainings to schoolteachers, students, and the wider public). In 2022, ISFED offered media literacy trainings to people aged 55 and older across the country. Mamedova added that the training available for minority-populated regions of Georgia is insufficient. The GNCC-founded Media Academy runs a media criticism platform (Mediacritic.ge) that is, by definition, a media literacy

14 Lessenski, Marin. How It Started, *How It Is Going: Media Literacy Index 2022*, Open Society Institute and European Policies Initiative. October 2022. https://osis.bg/wpcontent/uploads/2022/10/HowItStarted_MediaLiteracyIndex2022_ENG_.pdf.

15 Kintsurashvili, Tamar. *Media Literacy and Disinformation Perception Survey,* Media Development Foundation. 2022. https://www.mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view-library/233/.

16 UNICEF. "The Communication Commission, the Ministry of Education and Science and UNICEF start Integrating Media Literacy into Formal Education." July 13, 2022. https://www.unicef.org/georgia/press-releases/communication-commission-ministry-education-and-science-and-unicef-start-integrating.

tool—but CSOs and independent experts have long criticized it as government propaganda.

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

Journalists, civil society activists, and the public have platforms to exercise their freedom of expression offline and online, which they do. However, critical journalists and civil activists run the risk of consequences, like losing access to government press briefings.

Public councils mandated to engage citizens in public debates on a variety of matters exist at the city and regional levels, but panelists say they are highly inefficient. Local government does not even talk to their own electorate, Kuprashvili commented. Mtivlishvili said that his team investigated 64 municipalities from 2015, following the passage of legislation to advance new forms of public participation, such as petitions and general assemblies; just 14 municipalities carried out any of these activities.

> “Some media outlets and journalists demonstrate a strong awareness of digital safety, but it is not widely practiced.

Citizens can more freely exercise their freedom of expression on social networks, where discussions often feature unproductive insults and diatribes. Some panelists complained about the negative influence of trolls and bots, while others questioned the plausibility of productive debate on social media. “Polarization has blurred the middle line, I believe; everyone comes with preconceived perceptions . . . not everyone is a troll, but the expectation that someone will evaluate neutrally has disappeared,” Chikhladze said.

Mamedova noted that it is not uncommon for government officials in the region to censor social media posts from their local community. She recalled a case when someone from the Marneuli region shared a post criticizing a City Assembly member for using the Palace of Rituals as storage. She said before the journalist from her station (Radio Marneuli) managed to interview the citizen, someone from the City Assembly convinced them to remove the post.

Social media algorithms can easily take down any content deemed inappropriate. Saba Chikhladze, an RFE/RL digital editor, said that sometimes algorithms report content—and even entire pages—without obvious reason. “And when you ask them, there is no answer, and it is hard to explain its logic as it changes constantly,” Chikhladze added. Danelia said that a media outlet can lose its entire archive and audience that it had worked for years to build up when social media pages disappear or are restricted. “And when these media lose audiences, this might become a problem with donors, or in attracting advertising,” Danelia said.

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

Media study online audiences using a number of resources, such as Google and social media analytics. Mariam Shavgulidze, producer of political talk shows at Rustavi 2 TV, said that audience studies commissioned by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), and other organizations also help media organizations learn about audience needs. Two audience measurement companies—Nielsen’s licensee TVMR and Kantar Media’s licensee Tri Media Intelligence—offer audience data for national television broadcasters, although for years, media industry representatives have criticized Kantar Media Group for serving the political interest of the ruling party.

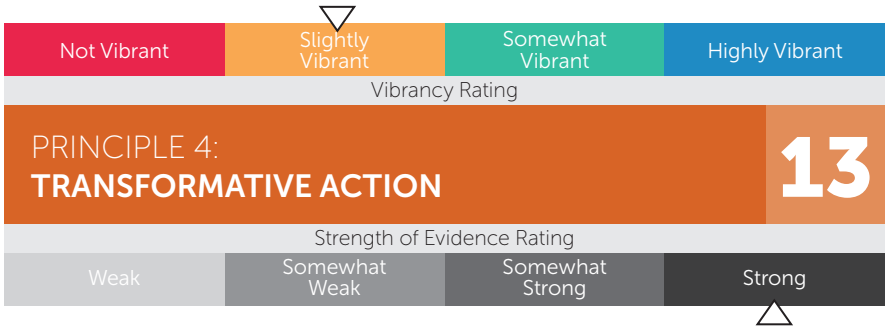
From December 2022, Kantar Media started measuring the audience of national broadcasters in regions it did not have access to before, which panelists said could erase the visibility of regional media and lead advertisers to favor pro-government Imedi. Kuprashvili said that if regional media were indirectly measured before, from now on, there will be no data about their audience. “This decision was taken because of the fear that the share of regional media would have increased. . . As a result, from what I know, Imedi TV’s audience shares have increased by 60 percent. . . . For me, this is a political decision. . . . Otherwise, how would

one explain why and how they measure regional audiences without regional media?" Kuprashvili noted. Nakashidze added that the fact that there are two such audience measurement companies already affect the market negatively, as the different numbers confuse advertisers.

A small amount of qualitative research that allows the media to understand its audience's needs is carried out mostly at the expense of individual outlets. Print media are not measured, and only a few radio stations manage to carry out audience studies periodically.

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

Four radio stations formally registered as community broadcasters operate with a mandate that differs from public and private media. Some panelists argued that other media outlets in the regions operate with similar values and priorities, without formal community media designation. Mtivlishvili, whose organization manages several media, including community Radio Way in Pankisi Gorge, said that Mtisambebi.ge, the only media website focusing on the high mountain regions of Georgia, promotes community interests. Tsitsikashvili said that Qartli.ge produces content for the local ethnic Ossetian population and meets the community media criteria.



The panelists criticized the government policy of holding the media and civil society sector outside the public policy decision-making process and agreed that societal and media polarization has deepened amid Russia's war in Ukraine, providing little ground for healthy discourse. Indicator 19, on the government's use of quality information to make public policy decisions, scored lowest of all.

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

Television remains Georgia's top source of news, although social media shows steady gains in popularity. According to an IRI September 2022 study, 70 percent of the population watch Georgian television for international news; 8 percent depend on Georgian internet news sites, and 41 percent prefer social media, especially Facebook (98 percent), for news.[17] Nearly half of all adults read online news sites, newspapers, or news magazines, and almost the entire population, 95.9 percent, uses the internet for social networks.[18] Just 2 and 1 percent of IRI survey respondents, respectively, named Georgian print media and radio stations as news sources.

Studies reveal that the public shows little trust in television, especially national broadcast media, which are highly polarized. According to the IRI study, only 56 percent of the respondents trust Georgian television channels for information about the current international situation; 19 percent expressed no trust at all in any channels of information. The panelists believe that intensified media polarization and politicization amid Russia's war in Ukraine has further deprived the society of quality news and fact-based discussion, as both pro-government and pro-opposition channels distribute highly biased content. Shavgulidze said that "people watch Imedi TV [a pro-government channel], then Mtavari TV [pro-opposition channel] to understand what is happening in reality." Andguladze added that "even those topics over which we [society] more or less have a consensus, for example, Ukraine, are politicized."

17 *Public Opinion Survey Residents of Georgia.* IRI, September 2022. https://www.iri.org/resources/public-opinion-survey-residents-of-georgia-september-2022/.

18 National Statistics Office of Georgia. https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/106/information-and-communication-technologies-usage-in-households.

Extremely offensive language is used across social media platforms, and even those who show concerns about polarization in private conversations follow that trend in public discussions—which does not foster healthy societal discourse.

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

> "The panelists believe that intensified media polarization and politicization amid Russia's war in Ukraine has further deprived the society of quality news and fact-based discussion, as both pro-government and pro-opposition channels distribute highly biased content.

When it comes to vitally important issues, like Georgia's EU and NATO aspirations, it is unlikely that the society will fall under the influence of propaganda, the panelists said. They pointed to the idea that Western actors tried to involve Georgia in the war and that Georgia failed to receive EU candidate status because the country "did not open a second front." Yet a Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC)/NDI 2022 survey showed that the vast majority of respondents did not agree with that notion.[19] This points to people's ability to critically evaluate the information they receive on important issues. Furthermore, the fact that in Summer 2022, hundreds of thousands of Georgians from across the country took to the streets in peaceful action to affirm their Western aspirations shows that in critical moments people will not act in a way that is detrimental to public good.

However, panelists noted that some people tend to harbor prejudices on certain topics and accept information without criticism, especially across online and social media platforms. With disinformation and misinformation rampant on social media, the Georgian public faces serious challenges in checking all the information they receive. A small-scale, non-representative survey on media literacy habits and disinformation perceptions by the Media Development Foundation[20] showed that part of the respondents--mainly from Akhalkalaki which is mostly inhabited by ethnic Armenians who have limited access to information in Georgian due to poor Georgian language skills--considered much of the Kremlin's disinformation on the war in Ukraine to be reliable.

Despite the horrifying impact of COVID-19 on people's lives and health since 2020, the same study showed that some respondents were vulnerable to false claims and conspiracies around the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccinations, believing that the COVID-19 statistics were fabricated and that COVID-19 does not exist. Still, according to Georgia's National Center for Decease Control, almost 1.3 million citizens were fully vaccinated by the end of April 2022. [21]

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

The panelists underlined the importance of the role assigned to CSOs and civil society in building healthy democratic processes in the country by raising society's awareness of critical issues, accommodating communities, conducting training and research, and engaging with government entities. However, the panelists admit that the impact of these organizations on democratic processes has weakened amid the government's attempts to discredit the civil society sector, including via some government-sponsored nongovernmental organizations (GONGOs) that work to undermine the sector's reputation.

While Georgian CSOs play an important role in supporting quality journalism and upholding media freedom, they are not homogeneous—much like the media sector—with some powerful and productive CSOs

19 Pertaia, Luka. "Did Propaganda Work to 'Get into the War'? – Interview with the Co-author of the Survey," Netgazeti. September 8, 2022. https://netgazeti.ge/life/629005/.

20 Kintsurashvili, Tamar. "Media literacy and disinformation perception survey", MDF. 2022. https://www.mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view-library/233

21 COVID Georgia Live Blog: Wrapped Up After Two Years. Civil.Ge, 2022, https://civil.ge/archives/342486

delivering great benefits, and others failing to bring any positive change, according to the panelists. "Watchdogs, service providers, think tanks, and so on, organizations have different goals and aims. Nowadays, the most productive are service providers, for instance, [those who] work on women's empowerment in communities, on providing people with disabilities with relevant skills, or assisting victims of violence," said Nakashidze.

Tamta Mikeladze, the Social Justice Center's equality policy program director, said—and most panelists agreed—that "the quality of some CSOs' work has fallen, and ideological lines of the organizations are weak; some have political affiliations, and the quality of some studies and reports has declined." The key problem, according to Andguladze, is CSOs' loss of focus. Other panelists pointed to communication issues within the sector as a problem: "Some organizations are closed to the media; they do not use media platforms to reach the communities," Kuprashvili added, noting that some NGOs use only their information pages.

> "When it comes to vitally important issues, like Georgia's EU and NATO aspirations, it is unlikely that the society will fall under the influence of propaganda, the panelists said.

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

The government's already weak cooperation with the media and civil society sector deteriorated further in 2022, including: blocking information to pro-opposition and critical media, not notifying them about press briefings, talking selectively with only pro-government media, not appearing in talk shows aired on media that is critical of the government, and not participating in public debates.

Journalists now commonly endure verbal harassment by officials, who borrow pages from Putin's playbook to discredit critical media outlets, labeling them "war party" supporters—referring to their affiliation with the political opposition—and CSOs as "grant eaters." "Even those state bodies that used to cooperate with us stopped. They do not invite some organizations . . . especially those close to politics or with access to diplomatic circles," said Mikeladze, representing the civil society sector. Mamedova noted that local members of parliament never use media platforms to inform communities and raise awareness about critical issues. The People Power movement, part of the parliamentary majority, came up with an initiative to prepare a draft law to regulate CSO financing, claiming that "the current practice of funding NGOs from abroad poses a threat to Georgia's sovereignty."[22]

The government's adoption of the Law on Broadcasting amendments without considering stakeholder concerns provides another accountability failure example, the panelists said. The parliament did consider the alternative bill prepared by a group of NGOs and media representatives, and it appointed a third hearing based on its commitment to fulfill EU directives. However, it disregarded the EU demand for inclusiveness in the process of policy making. As a result, the panel said that the EU's requirement for making legislative changes by reaching consensus with the stakeholders was not met in the process of harmonizing the broadcast law with European standards.

Political discourse and debate rarely include references to evidence and facts. This is especially true of the ruling party representatives whose rhetoric is based on discrediting and destroying its opponents.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights

The panel said that holding the government accountable has become more difficult for media and civil society actors, as the ruling party tends to neglect criticism, avoid cooperation, and ignore recommendations of the sector and international organizations. Mtivlishvili admitted to a decline in the government's responsiveness to the violations revealed by

22 "Anti-Western 'People Power' Wants to Curb Foreign CSO Funding," Civil.ge. November 18, 2022. https://civil.ge/archives/515348.

media and said their reactions depend on the themes. "When it comes to bribery or corruption on a local level, they [the local government] react, but not on a higher [national] level," added Nakashidze. The IRI study mentioned above shows that the population's perceptions of NGOs' impact on the government's policymaking remained almost unchanged in 2022; the panelists added that declining accountability of the government puts more responsibility on civil society and media.

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

Mamuka Andguladze, program manager, Transparency International Georgia; professor, Caucasus University, Tbilisi

Nino Danelia, media professor, Ilia State University, Tbilisi

Nino Dolidze, executive director, International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy

Nata Dzvelishvili, director, Indigo Publishing; lecturer, Georgian Institute of Public Affairs, Tbilisi

Nino Nakashidze, deputy general director, Mtavari Arkhi, Tbilisi

Nino Jangirashvili, director, Kavkasia TV, Tbilisi

Tamta Mikeladze, equality policy program director at Social Justice Center, Tbilisi

Tamar Kintsurashvili, executive director, Media Development Foundation; associate professor, Ilia State University, Tbilisi

Natia Kuprashvili, chair, Journalism Resource Center; associate professor, Tbilisi State University; executive director, Georgian Alliance of Regional Broadcasters, Tbilisi

Saba Tsitsikashvili, founder and chief editor, Qartli.ge, Shida Kartli

Kamila Mamedova, director and editor, Community Radio Marneuli, Marneuli

Saba Chikhladze, chief digital editor, Radio Free Europe, Tbilisi

Gela Mtivlishvili, director, Information Centers Network; editor, Mtisambebi.ge and Reginfo.ge, Kakheti

Lika Zakashvili, co-founder and editor, publika.ge, Tbilisi

Mariam Shavgulidze, chief talk shows producer, Rustavi 2 TV, Tbilisi

RUSSIA & WESTERN EURASIA

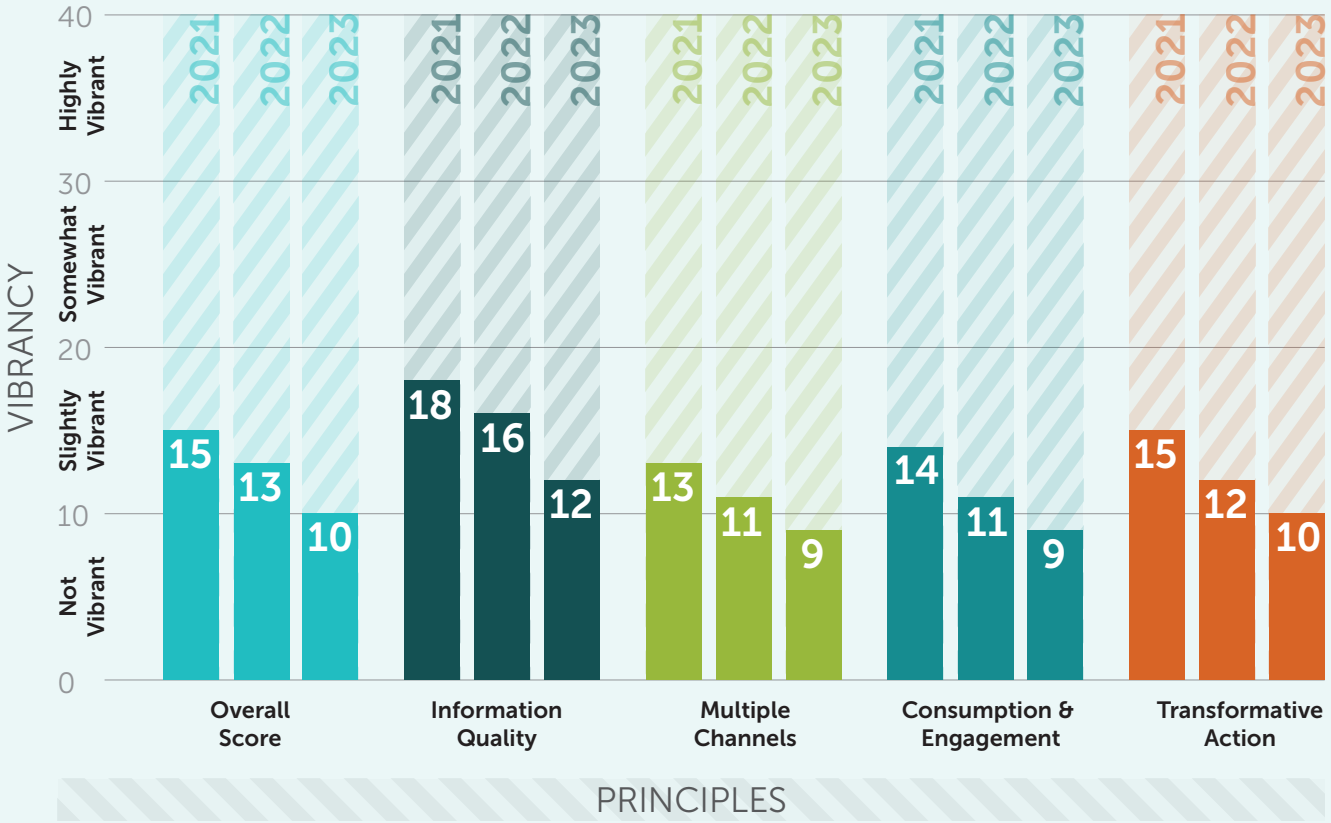
BELARUS

Vibrant Information Barometer

2023

USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

IREX



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
10

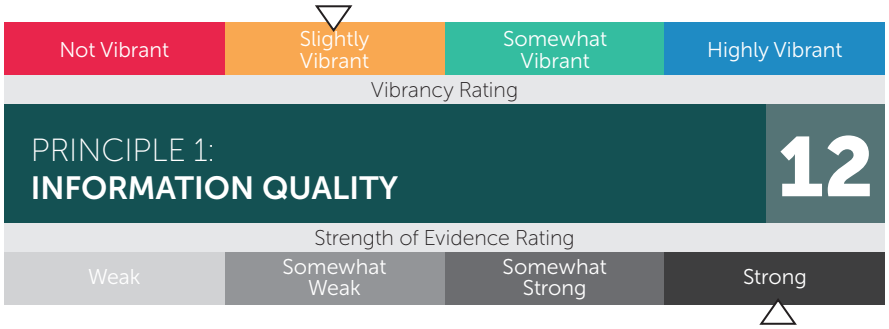
Repressions against journalists and media in Belarus intensified in 2022, with the Belarusian government supporting the Government of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and introducing more restrictions. The Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), which operates in exile since being banned in-country, registered 11 new criminal cases against journalists and other media workers in 2022, and by the end of the year 33 journalists were imprisoned. The emigration of dozens of media professionals continued, prompted by governmental repressions and restrictions in the informational space.

The reform of the law allowing the expansion of the definition of extremism resulted in more citizens accused of alleged "extremist" activities for online speech. Out of more than 5,000 cases of "extremist crimes" registered in Belarus in the first 11 months of 2022, three quarters were related to online posts, usually related to the post-election protests of 2020. The government classified nine independent media outlets either as "extremist organizations" or spreading "extremist content." The court sentences against journalists got harsher.

The Belarusian government's support of the Kremlin's 's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has resulted in greater restrictions in Belarus's internet space. The Belarusian government fully or partially blocked more than 3,000 web resources in 2022, which is 40 per cent of all websites blocked in the last eight years. Another blow to the audiences of media that provided impartial coverage of the war in Ukraine was Roskomnadzor's (the Russian government's Information Technology and Mass Media Agency) censorship for Russia-based audiences.

While Belarus's VIBE scores have declined across the board since the 2022 VIBE study, Principle 1 (Information Quality) received the highest scores from the panelists, buoyed by indicators around quality of information and fact-based reporting, mostly attributable to exiled and non-state actors. Panelists gave lower scores to indicators around harmful information and sufficient resources, reflecting the Kremlin's role in spreading mal-information, especially on the war in Ukraine, as well as the financial pressures faced by nonstate media. Principles 2 (Multiple Channels) and 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) tied for the lowest scores of the 2023 study for Belarus, with indicators looking at the deteriorating independence of information channels, the effective disappearance of space for access to information, and low media literacy penetration and skills. In Principle 4, higher scores were seen in indicators looking at civil society's responsible usage of information and news producers' willingness to share information across ideological lines.

Among factors that influence the information sphere in Belarus the most, panelists mentioned state censorship, collaboration of Russian and Belarusian governments in the information and communications technology (ICT) sphere, financial, legal, and psycho-social challenges for both exiled and in-country media, and a growing gap between Belarusians in exile and those who cannot or do not wish to leave the country.



Panelists scored indicators examining quality and fact-based information the highest within this principle. Despite increasing censorship, blocking websites, and pushing independent media into exile, independent actors can keep going and cover news for their Belarusian audiences, mostly from abroad for national outlets and in-country for several regional publishers. The overall score for this principle is significantly lower than in 2022 (experiencing a four-point drop), as the repressions that started after the 2020 presidential election never receded and only intensified with the Government of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine that was supported by the Belarusian regime. At the same time, pervasive governmental and pro-Kremlin propaganda as well as hate speech were widely available and imposed on the Belarusian population, while income streams for nonstate media were even more scarce than before. Thus, indicators looking at information that does not intend to harm and sufficient resources scored lower.

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

Quality information is produced and disseminated first and foremost by nonstate media, mostly online. The government's strong repression of the independent media sector has negatively impacted content availability; however, content quality improved as outlets were able to reorient their newsgathering strategies when forced into exile. Dozens of media outlets and their social media platforms were added to the government's list of media with--in the authorities' eyes--extremist content or, in some cases, labeled extremist organizations. Web users and other media quoting their stories are held legally liable for content from these so-called extremist organizations, even when they repost materials preceding the dates when media was declared extremist. This, combined with the persistent blocking of web resources by the Ministry of Information, negatively affects Belarusians' access to fact-based quality information.

The government heavily regulates the broadcast industry and does not allow any independent broadcaster to get a license in Belarus. The print market has shrunk, reflecting global trends and due to post-presidential election repressions against independent publishers. Panelists agreed that the infrastructure for independent publishing is "nonexistent," as the government has not eased pressure on nonstate media that were blocked or denied printing facilities.

The quality of journalism education has further deteriorated, following the decline in academic freedoms all over the country. According to a PEN Belarus report on cultural worker rights violations in 2022, teachers and professors of humanitarian sciences were detained, fined, and arrested in Belarus on a mass scale, with many of them later being forced to quit their jobs. In early 2023, the Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration Ihar Lutski claimed that the faculty of journalism of Belarusian State University "prepares not just journalists but fighters on the informational front." As a result, Belarus's authoritarian president, Aleksander Lukashenko, appointed a faculty supervisory board consisting of state officials and the dean of the faculty.

While opportunities for informal education still exist, they are less accessible to people inside Belarus, whose mobility has significantly reduced since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Belarus's border with Ukraine is closed, while only a few crossings are in place on its borders with Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. "The Belarusian government's decisions to expel EU diplomats and consular workers negatively affects embassies' ability to issue Schengen or national visas. This means that for any Belarusians, including existing or aspiring journalists, it became more difficult to leave the country," a panelist noted. The only remaining direct flights that allow Belarusians

affordable visa-free travel, excluding Russia, are flights to Georgia. The Belarusian Association of Journalists and Belarusian Press Club, which together with Free Press Unlimited operate an internationally funded coworking and study facility MediaPort in Warsaw, provide a variety of online and in-person courses. The latter takes place mostly in Lithuania or Poland. "Regional media that stay in Belarus say that they feel the gap in training and would appreciate tailor-made mentoring schemes in country as well as short-term foreign fellowships," an expert said.

The overall restrictive nature of the Belarusian regime makes it more difficult to improve journalism education in-country. According to LawTrend, since 2020 at least 1,173 NGOs in Belarus were either forced to shut down or were liquidated by the government. As activities by unregistered organizations have been criminalized, this reduction in NGOs means that there are not enough organizations to spearhead informal journalism educational initiatives in the country.

> **"The quality of journalism education has further deteriorated, following the decline in academic freedoms all over the country.**

The proliferation of fabricated information, especially in state media, continues. State-aligned outlets spread false information and propaganda about political opponents, independent media, and the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, there is no ethical oversight body that can support self-regulation in nonstate media. According to one of the panel experts, "Editors-in-chief of main nonstate media regularly meet in Warsaw and Vilnius to discuss ethical issues in person." These meetings are mediated by the Belarusian Association of Journalists or the Belarusian Press Club.

Available research data shows that Belarusians are less likely to engage with "classic" political reporting, and the chilling effect of interaction with "extremist" content has negatively impacted potential engagement. However, the Kremlin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine created a new type of demand for news, as state-owned media do not cover the war impartially. Those media that can provide fact-based and first-hand information from Ukraine, or republish independent Ukrainian media, confirmed they had a boost in traffic in the first months of 2022. That, however, changed by the second half of the year with people's fatigue and the normalization of war in their environment.

Belarus did not have a massive military mobilization campaign, so unlike Russia, people did not fear of being conscripted into the army. The influx of Russian draft dodgers was picked up by several media outlets, but as they are mostly choosing to move to South Caucasus and Central Asia countries, their impact on Belarus was not as significant.

Covering Belarusian and Russian troop movements proved to be dangerous. Instead of mainstream media, this data is collected mostly by a Telegram channel Belaruski Hajun which uses crowdsourcing for live feed reports. The channel has been included by the government into the list of "extremist organizations" in 2022.

The ongoing repression does not allow independent Belarusian media to significantly diversify their content. The war in Ukraine was an unbeaten leader in the coverage in the first half of 2022. However, Belarusian journalists who sought shelter in Ukraine in 2020-2021 needed to leave Ukraine due to unfavorable legal and economic treatment (such as frozen bank accounts, the Ukrainian government's refusal to issue residence permits to Belarusian nationals), thwarting any possibility of Belarusian journalists covering the conflict from inside Ukraine. The bias against Belarusians who had to leave Ukraine (compared with Ukrainian passport holders) was a hot topic for exiled outlets. "Journalists had to move [from Ukraine] again and restructure their work completely, which of course also influenced their editorial policies," one panelist noted. The largest media outlet that had to relocate from Ukraine to the EU was Zerkalo, a news outlet that became heir to TUT.BY (largest internet news portal in Belarus that was shut down by authorities in 2021).

Inside Belarus, the increased number of banned media outlets meant narrowing access to news and commentary sources for non-governmental outlets, while pro-governmental spread largely Kremlin narratives.

News content from state media follows the line of the state and increasingly Russian propaganda, while remaining nonstate news outlets working in Belarus attempt to maintain editorial independence. Still, there are cases of self-censorship from those journalists and media outlets who decided to stay in-country.

With more outlets being forced to move abroad and with research showing the fatigue of the Belarusian audiences when it comes to coverage of non-stop political repressions, more experiments with formats were undertaken. Media outlets started looking for ways to promote alternatives to the government's views through apolitical formats such as cooking, history, and culture content. For those outlets and journalists in exile, coverage expanded to include problems and success stories of Belarusians who had to leave their country. For example, MOST media outlet in Polish Bialystok, founded in 2021, found its niche in video interviews with Belarusians who successfully run businesses in Poland. At the same time, the burden of covering national news inside Belarus was increasingly on the shoulders of local news outlets which took longest to move their operations abroad. As not all of them were included into "extremist" lists, these outlets used the opportunity to attract audiences who want to interact safely[1] with allowed content by republishing national news.

By the second half of 2022, the war in Ukraine had become more contextualized for Belarusians by most independent content providers. The conflict was covered from the political angle (lack of contact between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy with Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya) and the military angle (movement of troops on Belarusian territory, Belarusians' undercover guerilla actions, and Belarusians fighting for Ukraine as part of Ukrainian army).

> **"Creating and disseminating false and misleading information became even more widespread among state-owned media when the invasion of Ukraine started.**

1 A presidential decree dated October 18, 2022, significantly simplified special services access to the content of online resources. Accordingly, telecommunication service providers and owners of internet resources will be required to register in a special information system for electronic interaction with special services within a three-month period. They will also be expected to set up resources for law enforcement to have unhindered online access to their content.

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

The access of independent journalists to information from state sources, already limited in 2021, narrowed further in 2022. The outlets which had more access were new brands that did not immediately make it on the list of extremist content or groups. "Usually, a new title has around three months before the authorities react and include them in one of the lists. This is too little to build a new significant audience, but if the brand is supported by well-known journalists, people still follow it," a panelist said.

Fact-based, well-sourced, and objective information, especially in the context of the Belarusian government's support of the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine, was an exception and was mostly seen in nonstate media but violated by state outlets. Because of the lack of access to information or in a struggle to win clicks, however, even nonstate media often had to present their assumptions as facts.

Creating and disseminating false and misleading information became even more widespread among state-owned media when the invasion of Ukraine started. The focus shifted from the migrant crisis that dominated the agenda in 2021 to Kremlin narratives about Ukrainians and Ukraine. According to an analysis of Sputnik Belarus (a Russian government-owned Belarusian outlet promoting Kremlin narratives) by iSANS, the main messages were: questioning Ukrainian statehood, promoting Russia's alleged military successes in Ukraine, and accusing the United States and NATO countries in general of using Ukraine as a proxy to fight Russia.

Professional independent content providers tried to quote Ukrainian sources, but those were not always reliable. For example, at the beginning of the invasion, Ukrainian and Belarusian media widely reported that that the defenders of Zmeinyi Island (a Ukrainian island in the Black Sea, known in English as Snake Island) who bravely fought

a Russian ship were all killed. However, it appeared later they were taken prisoners and survived. "It was difficult to decide whom to trust. Ukrainian news agencies, especially at the beginning of the year, often provided emotionally charged and unreliable information, and it was not possible to use it to disprove the statements of Russians. Only after some time, using our own sources in Ukraine and reliable media, we were able to get a more balanced view," an editor on the panel said.

Non-professional content producers became targets of repressions for their TikTok or YouTube shows. The grounds for repressions varied from posting commentary on the socio-political situation in Belarus to mocking Belarusian President Lukashenko's phrase about "unbeatable proof" of Ukraine's plans to attack Belarus "from four directions." In some cases, arrests happened based on videos from 2020 that "contained appeals to participate in protests."

State agencies fully supported the Kremlin's false narratives about the war in Ukraine, and they transmitted that support in the state-aligned media. According to iSANS, they called Ukraine a "Nazi state," accused it of hostile plans regarding Belarus, and buried information about advancement of Ukrainian forces. iSANS also reported that Belarusians fighting in the Ukranian army were labeled "traitors" aiming for power in Belarus.

As in 2021, there were no cases when spreading non-factual or malign information was punished in Belarus. Fact-checking is available, but the challenge of war coverage without direct access to sources has made it more difficult. "We do not have enough tools to analyze each video that comes from Ukraine, so reposting them is always a risk," one panelist observed. At the same time, some Belarusian media outlets have joined international investigative journalism consortia that have strengthened fact-checking: The Belarusian Investigative Center is member of Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting network (OCCRP).

Panelists mentioned that moderating media content is a way to protect themselves and their readers from the authorities' persecution rather than an instrument to reduce misinformation.

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

With Belarus acting as co-aggressor in the Ukraine invasion, the Government of Russia doubled down on its efforts to promote of its version of events. Belarusian state propagandists support Kremlin statements that clearly are meant to do harm. The Belarusian regime's narrative has become explicitly pro-Russian.

The Belarusian government is less involved in hate speech directly, but the media outlets affiliated with it (such as the SB.BY portal and newspaper belonging to the presidential administration) do not mince words. "Those Ukrainian Nazis, or Bandera followers, or those who were brought up in Bandera values… those are the ones ruling Ukraine, those are new Nazis, Ukronazis. They have to be eliminated," SB.BY posted shortly after the start of the invasion.

Government officials and media aligned with them are not pressured to apologize or resign based on the harmful content they generated or disseminated. "The aggressive rhetoric became a new norm. Things that would have shocked in 2020 or 2021 have been repeated so many times that they now go unnoticed," a panel expert noted. Global technology companies continue to selectively react to state propaganda. For example, one of Belarus's most noted propagandists, 26-year-old Grigory Azarenok, finally had his YouTube account removed in July 2022—but only after three warnings.

The language of political bloggers and other nonprofessional content producers is more moderate when compared with their content in the immediate aftermath of the 2020 elections. However, hate speech aimed at the Belarusian opposition is more frequent. The re-emergence of exiled politician Zianon Pazniak, who holds conservative patriotic views, has resulted in the formation of an online group of his supporters. He directly accuses the leader of the Belarusian opposition Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya of being a pro-Russian agent and promises legal proceedings against her if Lukashenko leaves office. "Criticism [of Tsikhanouskaya] often bears misogynist features. Mostly male politicians and bloggers say that she is too weak, unprepared for politics, prefers

being seen as doing something rather than actually doing it, and is not a proper leader in war time. This in turn depreciates the importance of women who played a leading role in 2020 protests," a panelist said.

There were no known cases of nonprofessional content creators losing credibility or standing for their content among their core audiences in 2022.

Self-regulatory mechanisms to reduce hate speech exist both on social media and on websites. Media disable comments to avoid responsibility for their content, which is actionable under Belarusian law, or to protect their Belarus-based readers and help reduce mal-information and hate speech. Readers inform the platforms about behaviors they find suspicious by using Facebook's feedback tools against pro-state propagandists.

The practice of the pro-governmental Telegram channels to humiliate and deter citizens from expressing their views is widespread. These channels republish videos of forced admissions of guilt by protesters and add hateful commentary that are initially filmed by the police. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the background of those videos often features letter Z, symbolizing Russia's campaign.

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

Media publish in the Russian and Belarusian languages, while nonprofessional content creators--who mostly used Russian before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine--have shifted to using the Belarusian language more often[2] to demonstrate to Ukrainians and the rest of the world that they are not aligned with the Kremlin's efforts in Ukraine. Platforms for news dissemination are limited, with YouTube maintaining its popularity among nonstate media since it is harder to block and because the government cannot easily identify the names of viewers of its content.

Belarus's information sphere contains a wide range of opinions and ideological views, but it is difficult to access them all in one place, especially since many well-known media outlets were formally banned by the government in 2022. "In the end, people are looking for information on YouTube and follow personalities, not media, which narrows down their variety of information sources," said an expert.

LGBTQ+ topics, already rarely featured in Belarusian independent media, declined even further after the start of the invasion. At the same time, hate speech directed at this community grew. Journalists for Tolerance, which aims at uniting media professionals attempting to cover LGBTQ+ topics responsibly, admitted in their 2022 research that "almost every second publication [that mentioned LGBTQ+ issues] in the Belarusian media contained hate speech." Their monitoring included a mix of websites (mostly governmental or pro-governmental media) and Telegram channels (mostly independent media or non-professional content providers).

Ethnic and religious minorities are not prominently covered in either independent or state media. State media mostly focuses on the waves of Ukrainian refugees who are seen as receiving preferential treatment by EU member states, and they accused the EU of a "new form of racism - splitting migrants into right and wrong ones." This statement alludes to the ongoing flows of Middle Eastern and North African migrants from Belarus to Poland who are often turned away and do not get the same treatment as Ukrainians fleeing the war. While Poland and other EU border states were indeed criticized for unequal treatment of different ethnic groups, the Belarusian regime sponsored those migrants' trips in 2021 in an attempt to distract the EU's attention from the buildup of Russian military forces near Ukraine.

Underrepresented or vulnerable groups are formally represented in the professional media sector, but the coverage is often overly formal and lacks depth. "In a story by Malanka Media about the people with disabilities, a disabled person was only given voice once," a panel expert said. In October 2022, Mediazona (a Belarusian franchise of the Russian independent outlet) published a review of the treatment of disabled people in Belarusian penal colonies and prisons within the context of patients' rights violations.

2 For example, https://www.tiktok.com/@olia_metelitsa/video/7088976377071832325?lang=en

Political opposition is the largest marginalized group that uses alternative methods to express its views. It operates a variety of online platforms, including websites, YouTube channels, Telegram channels, or TikTok. Other groups could use those channels, but they often lack funding, human resources, or political support to become noticed by Belarusian society.

Gender balance is yet to be achieved in content and in the management structure of media organizations, including nonstate outlets. In 2022, gender researcher Olga Shparaga published an article about "invisible" women in the social and political sphere of Belarus, but it did not get a wide coverage by Belarusian independent outlets. "There were attempts to question the decision of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya not to include women in the first iteration of the transitional government, and joint efforts of media and civil society helped correct that decision. But this has not resulted in a sustained campaign advocating for more female empowerment," noted one panelist.

The nonprofessional content producers' scene became slightly more gender balanced with female experts, such as political scientist Katsiaryna Shmatsina, who launched her own YouTube show. Journalists Katsiaryna Pytleva and Sasha Ramanava also launched an informal YouTube show called "Woman Wants." The show discusses stereotypes around women's relations with finances, alcohol, family, or sexual life and suggests alternatives to traditional views on those issues.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Since many nonstate media newsrooms had to flee Belarus and re-establish themselves abroad, their reliance on international donor funding increased while they were searching for alternative sources of commercial income. Some of them, such as news agency BelaPAN (rebranded as Pozirk), were able to restore contracts with their business clients, and others began monetizing their YouTube content.

In attempt to funnel funds to state media, a new governmental decree in early 2022 taxed advertising and internet usage for any remaining Belarus-based nonstate media; however, the amount of donor support to nonstate media did not significantly grow, the panel experts noted. "Nonstate media lost the possibility to distribute printed materials, and their advertisers and other sources of funding in Belarus withdrew because those media were added to extremists lists or blocked and thus deprioritized by the search engines," a panelist explained.

Public funding continues to be available, largely for state media. Private funding in-country that used to support some of the nonstate media has significantly declined with businesses being afraid to fund blocked websites. International donor funding continues to be available for nonstate media. This support had grown in 2020 and 2021 to compensate for the country's increasingly repressive environment, but it did significantly increase in 2022, due to the necessity to prioritize foreign aid to Ukraine.

Patreon, a membership subscription-based platform for content creators, provides an alternative source of income for individual authors and media entities such as Zerkalo, Euroradio, and The Village. On top of that, Google has supported several Belarusian nonstate media organizations, including Euroradio, with grants to promote their content on Google News. In 2022, Zerkalo attempted to sell its branded merchandize.

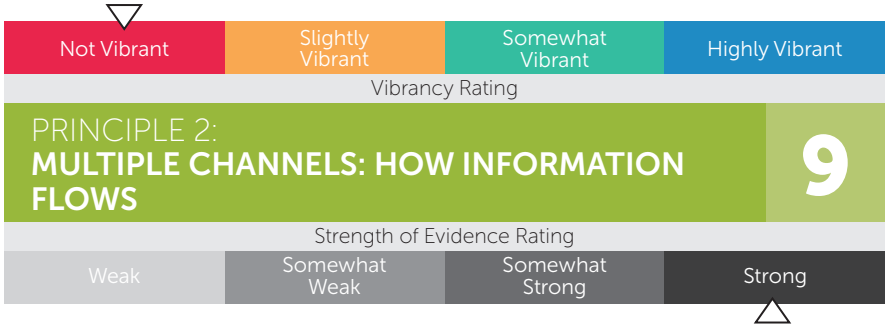
According to the Association of Advertisers of Belarus, in 2022 the overall volume of advertising in Belarus was estimated to be $65 million, 25 percent lower than in 2021. The only advertising sector experiencing growth is online. The share of TV advertising dropped significantly from 35 percent to 23 percent due to the withdrawal of international advertisers related to war in Ukraine and possible sanctions against Belarusian enterprises and state entities. Those advertisers included Procter & Gamble, Mars, Jacobs Douwe Egberts, Ferrero, Nestle, Abbott Healthcare Products, L'Oreal, Bayer and BP.

The distribution of state subsidies for advertising contracts significantly distorts the market. The state is entitled to publish "social advertising," which is free-of-charge advertising on social issues or issues of "public

significance" that can be posted only by the government according to the Law on Advertising.

For nonstate media, operational conditions have worsened compared to 2020 and 2021, leading to lower salaries and lower quality of life for independent journalists. "Journalists who decide to stay in the profession have to move increasingly undercover or consider getting another job in order to feed themselves and their families. In these conditions, one should not expect that they can engage in long-term [investigative] projects," an expert said.

Advertising placement is extremely politicized, with the state using a variety of instruments to ensure available advertising is placed in state-owned media, such as openly discouraging businesses placing advertisements in independent outlets and including an increasing number of nonstate sources into the list of "extremist" content producers or groups. "Any company, state or non-state, will have serious problems if they attempt placing ads in a nonstate outlet," one panelist commented.



Principle 2's average score would have been even lower if not for Belarus's advanced ICT infrastructure. As a result, panelists scored the indicator examining adequate access to channels of information comparatively highly, driven by the country's ICT infrastructure and affordability of internet access. However, panelists gave single-digit scores to indicators looking at rights to create, share, and consume information, diverse channels for information flow, and independence of information channels. The panel saw increased online censorship and the government's constant attempts to control access to information as impeding the access to content that this technical infrastructure supports. The panelists also observed a profound lack of equality in access to information between nonstate and governmental media.

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

Panel experts agreed that laws guaranteeing freedom of press or expression are hypothetical in Belarus. "The state ideology, combined with the practice of persecuting people with any alternative points of view, override any norms or principles of the Constitution," a panelist said. "I could have given zero on all points, as the laws are not followed anymore in Belarus," another expert added.

Internet providers are obliged to block any content that is considered extremist or otherwise illegal. In 2022 alone, the Belarusian Association of Journalists reported that the government had deemed more than 1,500 sources and links "extremist." This list includes social media accounts and webpages of established nonstate media, along with politicians, experts, and bloggers. Those who do not want to risk getting onto the list have to resort to self-censorship. Most Belarus-based outlets quote content of their so-called extremist colleagues without hyperlinks to the original sources. "In my view, most of the content producers practice self-censorship: either for career prospects--or for the security of themselves, their families, and their colleagues--or in order to keep operating inside the country," a panelist claimed.

Journalists continue to be harassed for doing their jobs in a variety of ways, including search and confiscation of their equipment, bullying online and via telephone, and public hate speech by state media actors. In 2022, new long-term sentences were given to journalists and editors, as well as media managers. For example, former Belsat TV employee Iryna Slaunikava got five years in prison in August 2022 for alleged violations of the public order and for creating an extremist group. On October 6, 2022, the court sentenced media manager Andrei Aliaksandrau to 14 years in prison, former BelaPAN agency director Dzmitry Navazhylau to 6 years and BelaPAN editor-in-chief and director

Iryna Leushyna to four years under a variety of trumped-up charges.

With the level of state repression quite high in Belarus, panelists noted other forms of retribution for speaking or writing about potentially controversial or sensitive topics, such as non-extension of work contracts at state enterprises.

This overriding restrictive atmosphere means that any laws that protect sources exist only on paper and are not implemented or enforced. Even laws not directly related to the media sector are leveraged to persecute journalists and Belarusian citizens for both news coverage and openly expressing opinions.

In 2022, the laws on extremism applied to even more media workers and entities than before. On June 14, 2022, the Supreme Court of Belarus confirmed that, based on a decision of the Minsk Economic Court, TUT.BY (which used to be the largest online news and information portal in the country) is an extremist organization. The court ordered the company to be dissolved, and its company employees are under criminal investigation. Ihar Lutski, former Minister of Information, explained in a public statement that: "There took place a direct encroachment on the sovereignty and independence of our country. The funding of these non-state media was carried out from abroad, and it was also coordinated from abroad. The current verdict on TUT.BY is a vivid example of that. They have been recognized as extremist!"

> "Journalists continue to be harassed for doing their jobs in a variety of ways, including search and confiscation of their equipment, bullying online and via telephone, and public hate speech by state media actors.

According to Viasna, a human rights organization, more than 11,000 criminal cases involving "extremism" were opened between August 9, 2020, and July 1, 2022. However, according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, by August 2022, 79 percent of those wanted for "extremist crimes" left Belarus.

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

According to Freedom House's Freedom of the Net 2022 report, Belarus's technical infrastructure supports access to information, and the cost of internet is relatively affordable. As of May 2022, the median mobile broadband download speed was 10.1 Megabits per second (Mbps), and the median fixed broadband download speed was 47.9 Mbps. A 100 Mpbs package combined with the TV access costs $8 per month while unlimited mobile internet combined with free calls by the provider A1 costs $10 - $15 per month.

The state ICT provider Beltelecom is a monopoly, but it allows for socially vulnerable groups to have unlimited access to the internet for one-third of the cost. These reduced rates are available to families with disabled children under 18, families with three or more children, or the older population who lived through World War II.

Other ways of accessing information, such as TV and radio, are available for people who are less literate, but the government does not allow any independent radio or TV stations to broadcast inside the country. After jailing prominent Polish-language journalists and activists Andrzej Poczobut and Andżelika Borys, there is even less available information in the Polish language. Additionally, the Belarusian government does not permit any Ukrainian sociopolitical TV channels or media to broadcast within the country, especially in light of the government's support to the Kremlin's war in Ukraine. "Infrastructure exists and it spans across the whole country, but limited access to information, including for national minorities, does not allow a significant part of the population to get necessary information," a VIBE panelist said.

Belarus completed its analog to digital transmission process in 2018, ensuring digital radio and TV services in all parts of the country. However, since some households did not reconnect to state broadcast media,

the government is trying to stimulate reconnection by offering special programs. The program announced in 2016 that provided people with visual disabilities free radio receivers experienced significant delays, and digital TV boxes were not subsidized.

The prices for access to TV and internet are affordable for Belarusian households. The minimum wage in 2022 was BYN 483 per month (approximately $191), while the average pre-tax monthly salary by December 2022 was BYN 1915 (approximately $758). Beltelecom's interactive TV platform ZALA has more than 2.5 million subscribers out of a total of 4.3 million Belarusian households.

There are few barriers for specific subgroups to access existing channels of information; instead, the government blocks or bars certain information at a national scale. However, prisoners and people in pretrial detention are a large exception, as they are deprived from the possibility to subscribe to independent news, even ones that are still available in-country.

Access to information is heavily limited due to the governmental blocking of websites and overall repressions against media and information. "While many Belarusians learned to use VPNs, it still is not widespread, especially among older or rural populations," a VIBE panelist observed.

> "The nonstate media dependence on donor money has increased, but there is no evidence it could lead to self-censorship," a panelist said.

There are alternate systems in place to distribute information in the case of a disruption to the telecommunications grid.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

The right to information remains extremely limited. There is a constitutional provision limiting the right of citizens to access information that does not concern them personally, and there are additional regulations on access to information that are well below international standards. At the same time, the government ensures that people are informed about punishment for civic activism. One panelist observed, "In 2022, there has been more information both on state websites and social media about the most outrageous laws that introduce punishment for dissidents."

Mechanisms to access or influence government policy or decision-making processes continued to be inaccessible in 2022, since no independent platforms for sending petitions were set up to replace petitions.by or change.org that the government declared extremist and blocked in 2021. At the same time, ministries and state institutions have sections of their websites that allow electronic appeals, petitions, or requests for information. However, one panelist said that "replies to information requests may come on time but be very formalistic. People mostly know about the possibility to ask state institutions about their activities, but they often are afraid to do so." Political prisoners, and prisoners in general, still only have limited, if any, access to independent news and information.

Government agencies have press secretaries and press centers but getting accredited to attend press conferences is difficult for nonstate media. "They rather serve as filters of information and make sure that exclusive news is shared first and foremost with state media," one panelist noted. "In 2022, important data related to health, economy, or justice, became state secrets. State institutions regularly provide unverified or blatantly false information," another panelist added.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Laws regulating domestic and foreign ownership of media are in place, and there are no laws that govern the concentration of ownership in media companies.

Only some state-run competitions that regulate access to the broadcasting market—such as broadcast licenses--are known to the

public, and when the contests happen, there is no clear explanation or established criteria to support who is selected. For example, radio frequencies are distributed through open competition, but they are never given to commercial broadcasters that would pursue a different editorial angle than the government's line in their current affairs coverage.

No special laws require transparency in media ownership. Moreover, the government monopolizes all channels of media distribution.

While nominally Belarus has more than 1,000 nonstate media, there is no independent broadcaster registered in-country. Belarusian exiled broadcaster European Radio for Belarus (Euroradio) and its content has been declared extremist by the government, while the only external Belarusian TV channel, Belsat, was also labeled an "extremist group." Establishing a media outlet requires registration with the government, and there are strict qualifications the editor-in-chief of a registered media outlet must have.

All experts agreed that there is no public service media in Belarus.

Internet service providers have not changed their approach since 2020 when the country's connection was cut for several days. They follow the government's rules regarding restricting access to content.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Ownership influences the editorial content of both state and nonstate media outlets. State media exclusively provide the government's point of view. Nonstate media that were declared extremist have mostly re-registered abroad and continue their operations. "The nonstate media dependence on donor money has increased, but there is no evidence it could lead to self-censorship," a panelist said.

Panelists confirmed that the government discourages state and private companies from placing advertisements in nonstate outlets. At the same time, the remaining nonstate media that operate legally in Belarus are able to improve their financial positions compared to their exiled or banned counterparts. One panelist commented, "Those of our partners who managed to keep their businesses in Minsk and the Belarusian regions inform us about the relative growth of advertising revenues compared to early 2021, when there were more independent media in-country. The war in Ukraine and the withdrawal of large advertisers from the Belarusian market impacted mostly state TV channels, but not the media we work with."

State media receive most of government subsidies to the media sector. Moreover, in 2022, a special "advertising tax" was introduced that allows state media to receive 10 to 20 percent of all online and display advertising with limited exceptions, as well as 1 percent of the tax on internet traffic. "On top of lavish state investment, private companies have to sponsor state-leaning Belarusian media. This is unprecedented," one panel expert said.

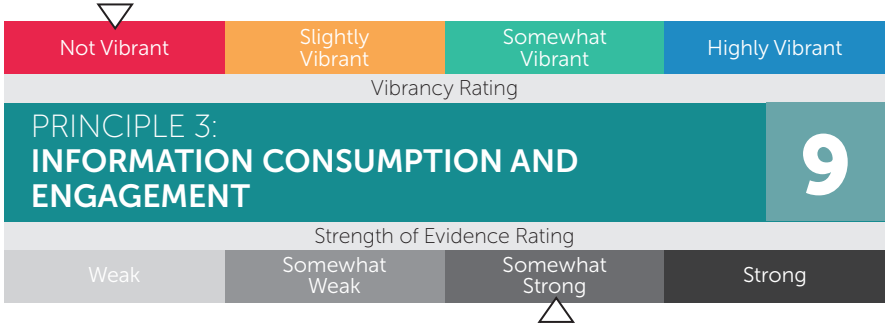
The distinction between newsroom operations and business management is still lacking. Because of shortages in human resources caused by repressions and resulting economic disadvantages, one person often serves as editor-in-chief and business director at the same independent media outlet. This is especially true for smaller regional media, even the ones that moved into exile. For national outlets--such as Nasha Niva, Belsat or Euroradio--these roles are separate.

Government agencies overseeing frequency allocation or telecommunications are not neutral. The market entry and tax structure for media remain unfair compared with other types of companies, and independent media faces more disadvantages than state media. Unlike other businesses, media newsrooms cannot have their offices in residential homes, and individual entrepreneurs are not allowed to publish any media, including online outlets. An editor-in-chief of a media outlet who applies for registration is required to have at least five years of media management experience. A broadcast media editor-in-chief must pass a special exam on broadcast law knowledge, the technical demands of radio and television broadcasting, and advertising law for his or her outlet to receive a broadcast license. Such licenses are not given to independent broadcasters, like Euroradio, Radio Racja, or the television channel Belsat TV (all of which are run from Poland). Moreover, all those entities were declared extremist in 2021 or 2022, which will

further delay any attempts to legalize within Belarus.

Arbitrary rules are applied to limit independent media's access to information as compared to the access afforded to state outlets. For example, the state-owned national news agency BELTA exclusively disseminates information about state institutions. Belarus-based media that receive comments from state actors typically refrain from covering political news (e.g., Onliner portal).

The members of regulatory bodies do not act apolitically, and they allow themselves to make political statements. For example, the Interagency Commission on Informational Security includes editors of state-owned media who openly denounce independent media and support the government on-air and online. This same commission is allowed to limit access to information to any media outlet they arbitrarily deem as harmful to state security.



In Principle 3, panelists experts gave relatively high scores to the indicators on protection and security tools and on engagement with audience needs. The indicator on media literacy scored the lowest, and the indicator on community most received "not applicable" from the panelists.

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

Belarus's law on personal data protection ensures the security of citizens' personal data, but it is ignored by law enforcement along with pro-state media or Telegram channels. 'In 2022, we saw nearly daily posts on social media by state institutions or their allies that revealed personal data, correspondence, or bank information of people they consider criminals for their civic activism," an expert said.

The list of agencies that can classify information is long in Belarus. According to the "List of State Bodies and Other Organizations Entitled to Classify Information as State Secrets" (enforced by a presidential decree dated February 25, 2011), there are around 60 organizations that can designate information as a state secret, including the Belarusian State Concern of Food Industry, the State Inspection of Protection of Flora and Fauna, and the National State TV and Radio Company.

Digital security training and tools for Belarusian media are mostly available online. With more outlets having to relocate abroad, accessing face-to-face training became better than in 2021. "Now, the main focus is on protecting correspondents and sources inside the country, and we have to keep in mind their safety even when we are not under pressure ourselves," an expert said.

Media use dynamic tools and services like CloudFare to combat distributed denial of service (DDOS) attacks. Use of VPNs is growing, and among the most popular VPN applications are Psyphon, ExpressVPN, Surfshark, Proton, and NordVPN.

There is little evidence to indicate Belarusians have a deep understanding of how social media algorithms work or other ways tech platforms use personal information. Most of the videos of detained Belarusians who shared comments online show how easy the governmental services can identify their accounts on Telegram or other social media, but most of the data came from 2020 and is a bit dated.

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

Media literacy is included as an extracurricular activity at schools, but it is not actively promoted by the government. Instead, the government promotes pseudo-factchecking done by pro-state media actors. For

instance, the state-run ONT TV channel has the program "Antifake" which in fact promotes fake news. For instance, a July 2022 program accused Poland of "teaching children to shoot and hate Russia" and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's team of "plans for armed seizure of power." It also claimed that people were never tortured in Minsk's Akrestsina pre-trial detention center, despite hundreds of testimonies to the contrary that were recorded by human rights defenders.

Media and information literacy and critical thinking trainings used to be offered by nongovernmental organizations, most of which had to shut down in 2021 or 2022 as part of the government's comprehensive crackdown on civil society.

There is little evidence of people using special tools for fact-checking or debunking disinformation. The polling available shows self-proclaimed high levels of media literacy, but people often cite intuition as their way to check the trustworthiness of the content.

> **"Often media outlets and journalists warn their audiences inside Belarus to refrain from comments, likes, or shares to avoid potential arrest later.**

The November 2022 Chatham House poll claims that "consumers of independent media are much less likely to trust information from state media," which could be a sign of strong commitment of this group to high quality news.

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

Freedom of speech and the right to information were severely repressed in 2022. With more than 30 journalists and bloggers behind bars by the end of the year (down from 50 the previous year), the state continues to take unprecedented measures to quash independent media and opinions, intensified by censorship related to the war in Ukraine.

Belarusians continue getting prison sentences for comments left on social media that could be interpreted as their dissatisfaction with the authorities. Viasna human rights center noted, "In 2022, freedom of expression was violated under the guise of combating extremism and terrorism. The authorities routinely blacklisted people, organizations, and media products for their alleged involvement in "extremist activities" or featuring "extremist content." According to the Ministry of Information, the list of "extremist products" contained 2,750 entries by the end of the year, more than 1,220 of which were added in 2022.

"A new group of repressed citizens in 2022 were tour guides," an expert noted. Pro-governmental media published articles defaming some travel agencies and persons working as guides, and as a result people in the travel industry had to self-censor. Initially, some were arrested on administrative charges, but their sentences became criminal, as in the case of Ihar Khmara who was not released after serving an administrative sentence (it was reported he was arrested "for speaking Belarusian" despite it being an official state language) and was sentenced to two-and-a-half years of restricted freedom under home confinement under Art. 342 of the Criminal Code (organization and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order, or active participation in them). Charges under the same article were brought against tour guides Aksana Mankevich and Valeryia Charnamortsava who remained in detention at the end of 2022. The government's Resolution 839 in December 2022 banned anyone who participated in the 2020 post-election protests from working as tour guides as of 2023.

Chatham House's November 2022 survey suggested that around 49% of Belarusians regularly engage with the content of independent media (half of them follow both state and non-state media). This is a significant number, considering that the very fact of following those media or sharing their content online can lead to criminal persecution. YouTube and Instagram continued to be the most popular social media platforms for news consumption, while the importance of Telegram went down. "The so-called 'remorse videos' of detainees shared by the government often demonstrate that those people subscribed to extremist Telegram channels, or shared banned content in Telegram chats," an expert said. As a result, people would read content on Telegram without sharing it or following its channels.

The Belarusian public largely adheres to norms and standards for online communities, and it frequently reports hate speech or misinformation on platforms. Bodies like Belarus in Focus's information office (Press Club Belarus) and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's office are involved in the dialogue with big tech platforms to make sure that the Belarusian content is not deprioritized or ignored, particularly in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine.

There are no public councils or ombudsmen to address most of the complaints about the media. "There are secure online communities for discussions among media managers and editors, and some of them regularly meet in person. Most of the complaints are discussed at these meetings and usually we find solutions," a panelist said.

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

Independent audience studies inside Belarus continue to be limited. Online research, however, is more widespread, either shared publicly (like Chatham House) or with limited groups of media and civil society partners (such as research done by NDI and Internews).

As blocking web access continues, reliance on online quantitative audience data from social media platforms has grown, yet Meta's increased restrictions on promotion makes it more difficult to get insights. One panelist shared, "A media partner reported that their Instagram account was blocked allegedly for war-related content. In reality, their content referred to common history and culture with Ukraine." All panelists noted limitations that TikTok introduced on war-related content, as well. On the other hand, as an editor on the panel observed, "TikTok is one of the few platforms which shows our real audience inside Belarus." YouTube analytics is also important since it continues to be the most accessible to Belarusians who do not want to be identified while browsing their favorite media content. "The war in Ukraine and the popularity of Ukrainian military experts on YouTube created more opportunities for Belarusian content producers," one panelist said.

> "The increasing gap between exiled media and in-country audiences contributes to the erosion of trust," panelist claimed.

Letters to editors are less popular as more and more media outlets have been deemed extremist by the government. Often media outlets and journalists warn their audiences inside Belarus to refrain from comments, likes, or shares to avoid potential arrest later. However, one consequence of this practice is that it reduces feedback media can receive from this still-significant part of their audience. "Journalists have to rely more on the feedback from friends and relatives still in country than on the comments from readers," an expert explained.

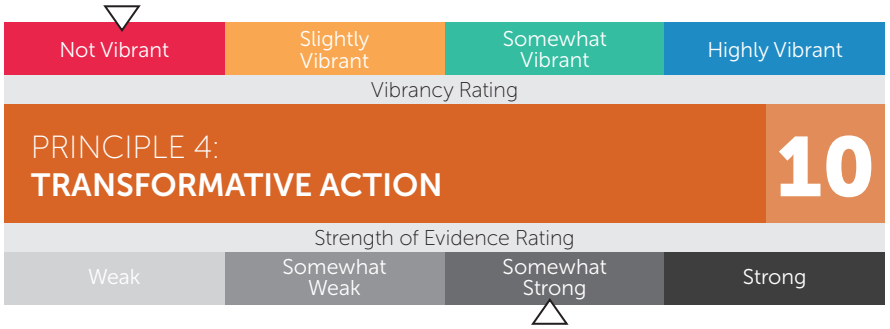
Public events largely happen in the centers of exiled Belarusians, such as Warsaw, Poland and Vilnius, Lithuania. Their online streaming is available globally, but people inside Belarus have extremely limited opportunities to engage directly with the media they follow. Anonymizing branded media content is balanced by promoting personal brands of journalists and non-professional content promoters. The November 2022 survey by Chatham House showed that the audience[3] of the leading independent media news outlets was less than the audience of the state ones. "The increasing gap between exiled media and in-country audiences contributes to the erosion of trust," panelist claimed.

Links between nonprofessional and professional media content producers remain weak, with each of them staying within their niche audience. "But cooperation between civil society and media has improved, and we often see media publications about the reports by non-profits," an expert said. However, others on the panel added that the prevalence of civil society-related news might be caused by the lack of access to governmental or in-country sources of other information.

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

Community media as commonly understood does not exist in Belarus, the panel experts unanimously agreed.

3 People who were polled were provided a list of sample independent outlets to reference.



Indicators under Principle 4 are the most polarized in the 2023 study of Belarus. On one hand, the indicators relating to nonstate media's information sharing across ideological lines, along with individuals' and civil society's use of information, received comparatively higher scores. However, indicators relating to the government's use of quality information to make public policy decisions, along with good governance and democratic rights, received single-digit scores from panelists. The average score for this principle is 10, two points lower than in 2022, reflecting the overall worsening operating environment in Belarus.

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

Most non-partisan content reaches large audiences through Belarus-based online resources that engage in self-censorship, such as the Onliner portal. However, exiled outlets started audience fatigue about "hard" political news and, over the course of the year, information about war in Ukraine. Therefore, more lifestyle and non-political content was produced in 2022 to attract those less interested in politics and afraid to engage with political content. The Belarusian language is often chosen as a medium to deliver content. Notable examples in 2022 were Euroradio's online formats about the history and culture of Belarus and Soika media's visual journalism.

Dialogue between various political forces is typically limited to the increasingly fractured Belarusian opposition. "Nongovernmental media did a good job in presenting views of the supporters and opponents of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya within the opposition," an expert noted. However, there is little to no evidence of how audiences in various information bubbles can receive alternative information, potentially contributing to greater polarization of Belarusian society.

Townhall meetings or call-in shows inside Belarus are limited to state-run ideologically controlled events. This approach became more prevalent after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Some initiatives are emerging that try to engage citizens in more direct contact with the exiled opposition, such as the new Novaya Belarus app and website. However, this is largely targeted at Belarusians who live abroad.

Open and constructive discussions may happen online, but the panelists were not sure how to measure if they are informed by quality news and information.

Media continue to be trusted by many Belarusians, according to available reports. For example, the Chatham House November 2022 report cited earlier demonstrated that only 25 percent of respondents consider independent Belarusian outlets "somewhat" or "completely" not credible, while this figure was 34% for state Belarusian TV channels and 27% for pro-Kremlin Russian TV channels.

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

There is limited evidence about what type of content informs people's views on political or social issues. As reported by the Australian Institute for International Affairs, polls performed in 2022 by Chatham House among largely urban populations show that most Belarusians opposed Russia's actions in Ukraine, and even more were against any direct involvement of Belarusian troops in the war.

"The attitude of Belarusians towards war at their borders could be a sign of them using fact-based information," an expert said. At the same time, the official governmental narrative has always been deeply anti-

militaristic, and the government never committed to sending Belarusian troops to Ukraine. As a result, some of this attitude could come from following the official sources.

Election campaigns previously were one of the remaining windows for voters to engage with candidates or current deputies in a legal and safe way. However, those opportunities for engagement have closed, and currently there are no avenues for direct dialogue with politicians. The local elections planned for 2023 were rescheduled to February 2024 and will take place alongside parliamentary elections.

With COVID-19 becoming less of an issue, there is less misinformation from the government regarding health, and the level of the government following WHO recommendations has returned to pre-pandemic levels.

Starting in 2020 after civic protests in Belarus, false information continues to be actively used by pro-state media to stoke popular sentiment against the political opposition. However, it is unclear whether this has impacted the views of a significant number of people. Some of non-professional content producers, like Volha Bondarava, initiated a series of governmental steps to persecute opposition or remove associated with it cultural memorials, but these attempts tend to be championed by one person rather than supported by popular will.

> **"There is a risk that civil society will stop reacting to misinformation, especially coming from the government, due to fatigue, and this itself could help misinformation to spread," one panelist expert said.**

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

This indicator received relatively high scores due to the notable work of civil society that is now mainly in exile.

The shutdown of CSOs in Belarus due to repressions that started in 2021 continued in 2022, with more of them relocating abroad or going deeply undercover. These exiled organizations with known brands--such as Viasna (Spring96.org), PEN Belarus, and Budzma--have successfully managed to restructure and continue activities. "Unfortunately, quite often news from those organizations is about the next group of cultural or civic activists being arrested," an expert said. It has become a normal practice for media outlets to regularly check with CSOs for information about new political prisoners. The specialization of their products increased, with PEN Belarus releasing a comprehensive report on violations of cultural rights in Belarus in 2022.

There were no recorded incidents of CSOs spreading mis- or mal-information to their constituencies in Belarus in 2022. In general, civil society actors attempt to spread information responsibly. However, it became more difficult to get such information because of increased restrictions stemming from Belarus's support of Russia's actions in Ukraine.

CSOs' work against mis- and mal-information is becoming more evident but mostly affects exiled populations, as the people inside Belarus would often have barriers to access this content due to laws on extremism, while opportunities to engage with people directly have shrunk. "There is a risk that civil society will stop reacting to misinformation, especially coming from the government, due to fatigue, and this itself could help misinformation to spread," one panelist expert said. At the same time, there have been new programs and formats by bloggers and independent media creatively addressing disinformation such as Euroradio's weekly review of the most absurd Kremlin and Belarusian propaganda called "Cringe of the Week," NEXTA's "Cotton Top-20" (a wordplay on "vata," a Russian word for "cotton," which is a nickname for a person with pro-Putin views), or WTF (Weekly Top Fake) by Belarusian Investigative Center.

Including hundreds of sources in the government's list of "extremists" has eased the fears of civil society to engage with the media. "Nowadays, it is rather an exception not to be called an extremist for posting independent content online. Therefore, the so-called 'extremists' from

civil society and media refer to each other more than before," an expert observed. However, for media that are not yet considered extremist, it is increasingly difficult to find a safe source they can quote, which in turn limits their target groups' access to information.

> "Any journalist and activist are now labeled terrorists, extremists, or spies. This cannot be grounded on quality information," said one of the panel's civil society experts.

Among nonprofessional content producers, there is engagement with civil society, with some of the activists or experts setting their own social media channels. The thinktanks. by website, supported by BEROC expert community, has developed a presence on Instagram. Female political experts Katsiaryna Shmatsina and Lesia Rudnik launched their web presence. A noteworthy initiative started in 2022 is Belaruski Gajun, a Telegram channel that publishes crowdsourced information about the movement of Russian troops and military equipment on the territory of Belarus. The account was set up by the non-professional content producer Anton Motolko.

Civil society efforts in 2022 continued to be concentrated around reporting the worsening situation in Belarus and attempts to improve the conditions for Belarusians forced into exile. "When the war in Ukraine started, many Belarusians were treated unequally compared to Ukrainians in the EU. The efforts of many political and civil society actors allowed for changes in laws in Poland and the Czech Republic, allowing them to make exceptions for large groups of populations." an expert said.

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

Government press conferences serve a nominal function: The only independent journalists allowed to attend are foreign nationals, and this happens at very random intervals, usually at the invitation of President Lukashenka.

There is a divide between pro-state politicians and the opposition when it comes to using facts to inform political debate. The government has deployed a variety of Russian state narratives, especially when it comes to the nature of war in Ukraine, while the mostly exiled opposition are effectively barred from dialogue with the government and instead resort to publishing one-sided messages. The exiled office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya leads regular consultations with Belarusian volunteers who joined the Ukrainian army to fight against Russia, while Belarus state actors describe them as terrorists and war criminals.

Government actors refer exclusively to state sources when explaining their decisions and ignore content from quality media or information from civil society. They are likely to use misinformation and to misinterpret the facts leading to their decisions. "Any journalist and activist are now labeled terrorists, extremists, or spies. This cannot be grounded on quality information," said one of the panel's civil society experts. For instance, the state-owned outlet SB.BY called jailed human rights defenders from the Human Constanta NGO "a spy network working under cover of volunteer work." The persecution of those who support human rights and media work through crowdfunding has continued.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

Given the current environment in Belarus, panelists gave this indicator extremely low scores. 'Since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the space for the government's reaction to the actions of civil society and media has shrunk," an expert said. As a result, the government does not take action to address corruption. Moreover, rather than taking steps to reduce human rights and civil liberty violations, the government and its allies engage in them. Belarusian elections have historically failed to meet international standards of integrity; there is no evidence that quality news and information have any impact on the outcomes of elections.

A partial panel was held virtually, and some experts were interviewed individually. IREX protects the identity of the panelists who agreed to participate in this study. Amendments to the criminal code include an article titled "Discrediting the Republic of Belarus," which provides for criminal liability for giving international organizations "false information" about the country.

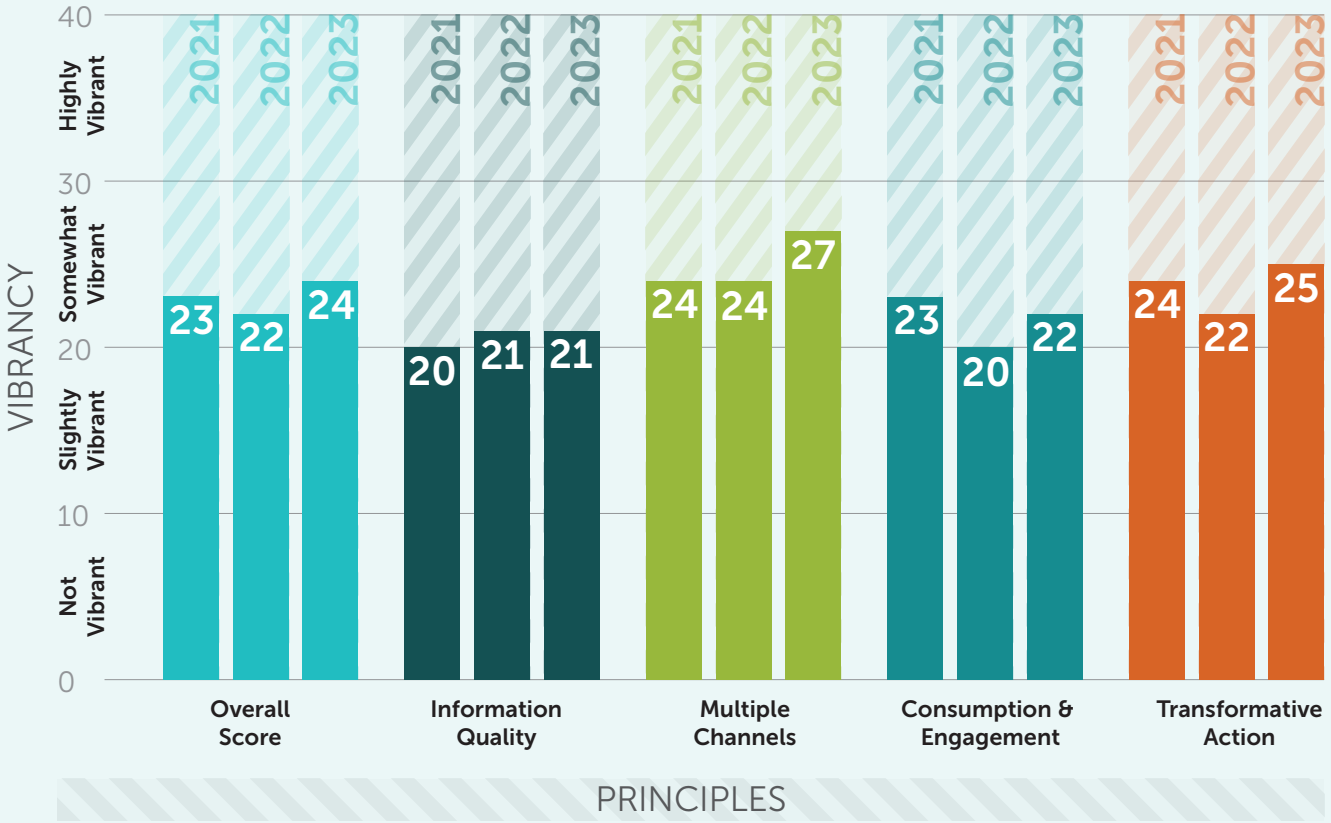
MOLDOVA

Vibrant Information Barometer

2023

USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

IREX



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.

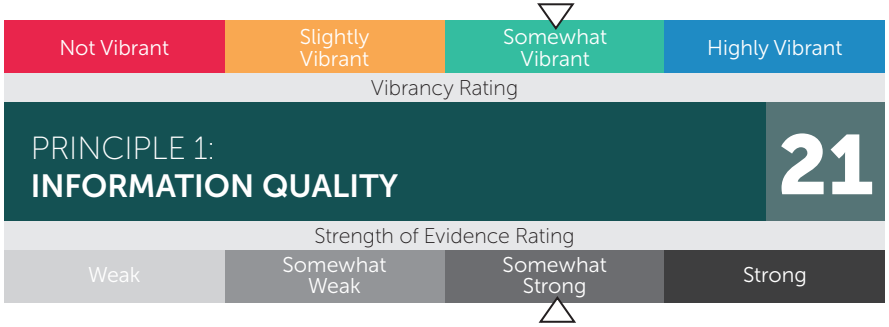
These circumstances dominated the government's agenda, to the detriment of long-term development priorities, including those directed to the media sector. Since February 2022, the Moldovan parliament has banned rebroadcasts of Russian TV news and political shows. However, Moscow-backed opposition forces 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 sustainnability, 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 Chișinau, 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 Ukranian 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 Chişinau 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 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 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 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 Chișinau not to "repeat the sad experience of Kiev," referring to the Ukraine War.

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

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

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.

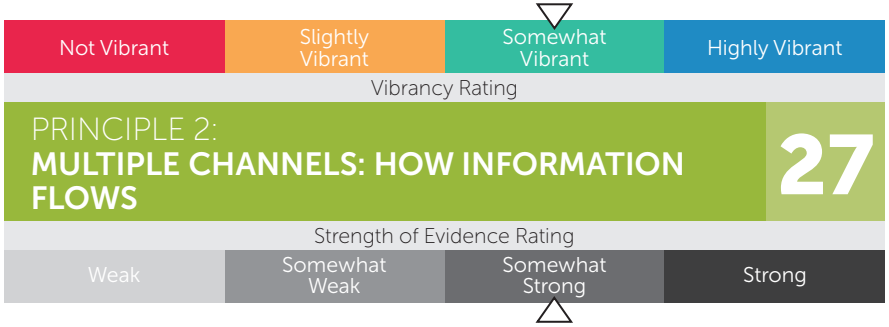
Panelists noted that media content producers have no options for apolitical public funding streams that would financially help them. Most independent media rely on international donor support. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, signs emerged that the old oligarchic media is declining due to 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 Pînzaru's access to the building.

Several panelists noted that media profesionals 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 editorial policy of the state media in the Transnistrian region is a direct reflection of the authorities' rhetoric," said Journalist A from the region.

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 thorough 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, Chișinău. "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 Bălți Mayoralty, which hampered journalists' work by illegally charging exaggeratedly high fees for access to public interest 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.

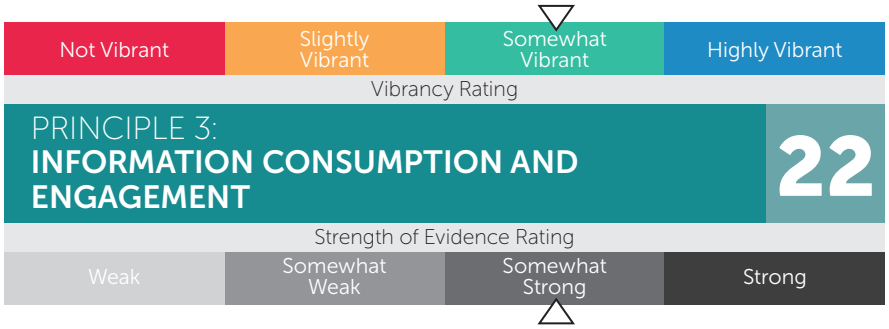
The VIBE indicator measuring independence of information channels scored the lowest in this principle. The panelists were unanimous about the lack of media independence, as media owner's and advertiser's political influences are obvious. They are also regularly engaged in the daily operations of their 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 sustainnability 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."

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

"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 that 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."

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 Nielson 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.

> "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.

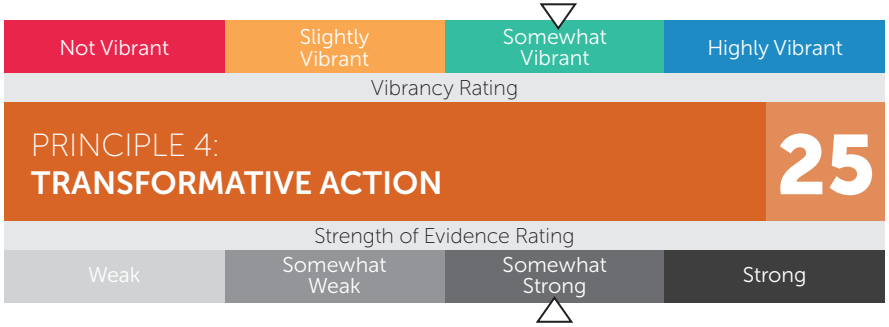
Almost all news portals have open processes for audiences to provide feedback through online comments sections on their social network pages. Transparency in authorship, corrections, and apologies are inherent to credible media only. Sanduța referenced several media that publish their financial reports, 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 Patrin 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.



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 demagogy 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.

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

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 citzens' 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 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.

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

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. 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, Molodovan 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 Rișcani 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. Buduchi 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 Transnistran 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.

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

Alina Andronache, journalist, blogger, Chișinău

Ion Bunduchi, executive director, *Association of Electronic Press,* Chișinău

Evgheni Ceban, journalist, *Newsmaker,* Chișinău

Journalist A (anonymous), Transnistrian region, Tiraspol

Journalist B (anonymous), Gagauzia, Comrat

Ruslan Mihalevschi, member of the Audiovisual Council of Moldova, Chișinău

Slava Perunov, executive director, *SP newspaper,* Bălți

Cristina Pohilenco, vice-director, *Jurnal TV,* Chișinău

Natalia Porubin, journalist, member of the Press Council of Moldova, Chișinău

Iurie Sanduța, journalist, executive director, *RISE Moldova,* Chișinău

Vasile State, editor-in-chief, *Radio Chișinau,* Chișinău

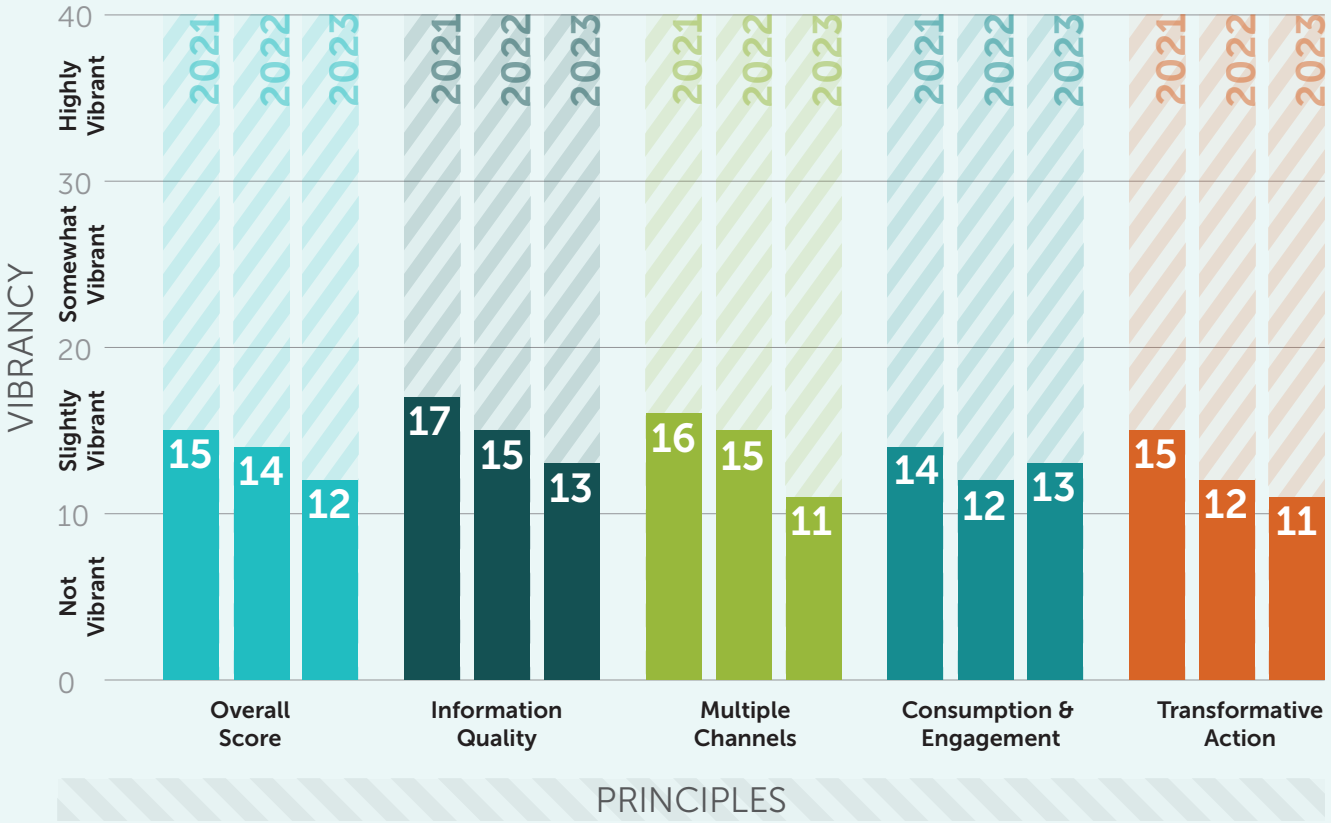
RUSSIA

Vibrant Information Barometer

2023

USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

IREX



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

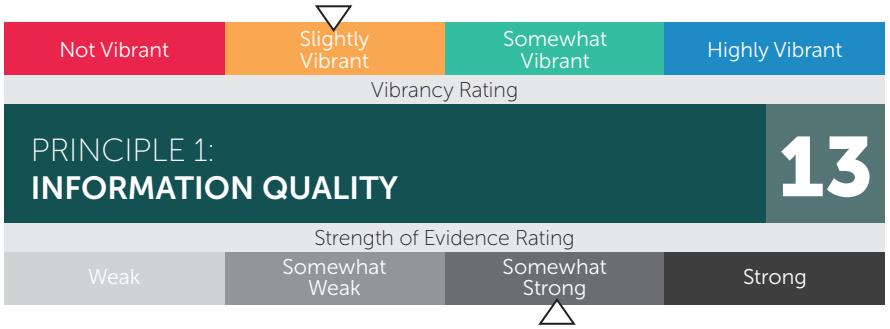
OVERALL SCORE
12

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 Moskvy, 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 media1 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 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.

1 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.

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."

> **"The word 'accountability' is not in journalists' thought process, nor those in governmental bodies. They work for Putin," said one of the experts.**

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. "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 thematical 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.[2] 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."[3] 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."[4] 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

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

3 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.

4 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#{%22itemid%22:[%22003-7352983-10042703%22]}.

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.

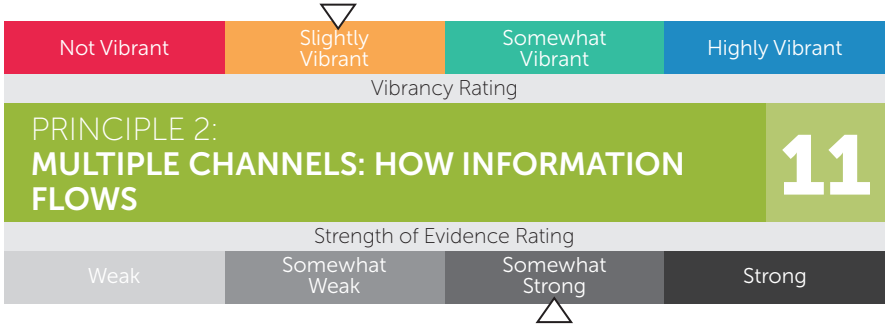
Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced

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.[5] At least 19 were imprisoned in Russia.[6]

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.[7] 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."

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.

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.

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.

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.[8]

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.[9]

> "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.

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.[10] 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.

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.[11] 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.[12]

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.

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.

> "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.

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.[13] 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.

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 *Obshestvennoe 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

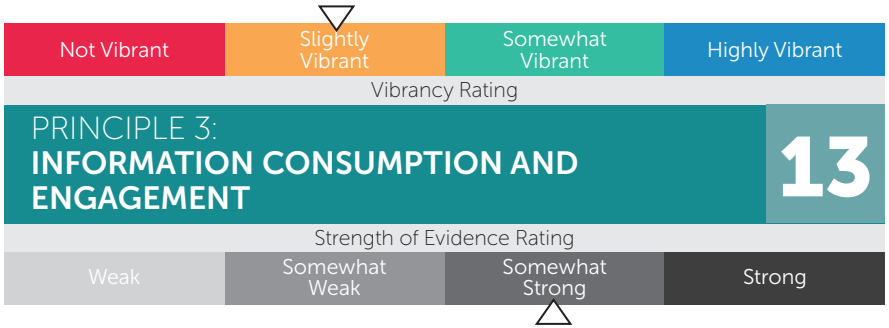
Many examples prove that media organizations are influenced by their ownership, but independent media which left the country primarily work on a professional basis. The media which are exiled are mostly dependent on funding sources, including advertising contracts and owner investments, while those who 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.

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

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.[14]

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.[15] "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:

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.

> “Government leadership does not promote media literacy at all levels.

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.

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

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

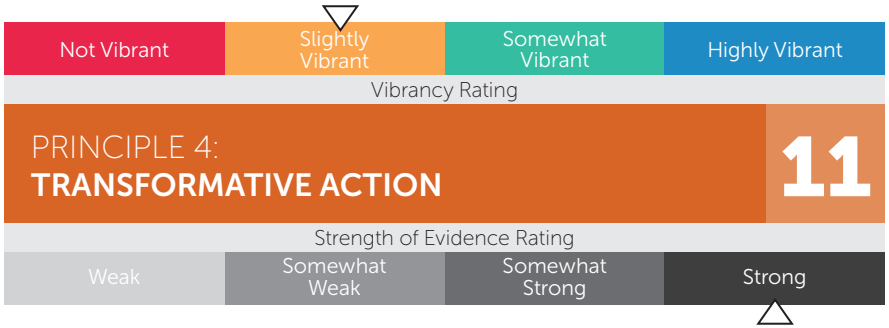
Generally speaking, it is uncommon for content producers to analyze their audience’s needs through qualitative research. Television companies mostly rely on quantitative methods, such as ratings, or the number of views; most TV channels also use quantitative methods. Other types of media rarely find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

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.

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

The remaining civil society organizations operating in Russia which try 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.

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.

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

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.

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

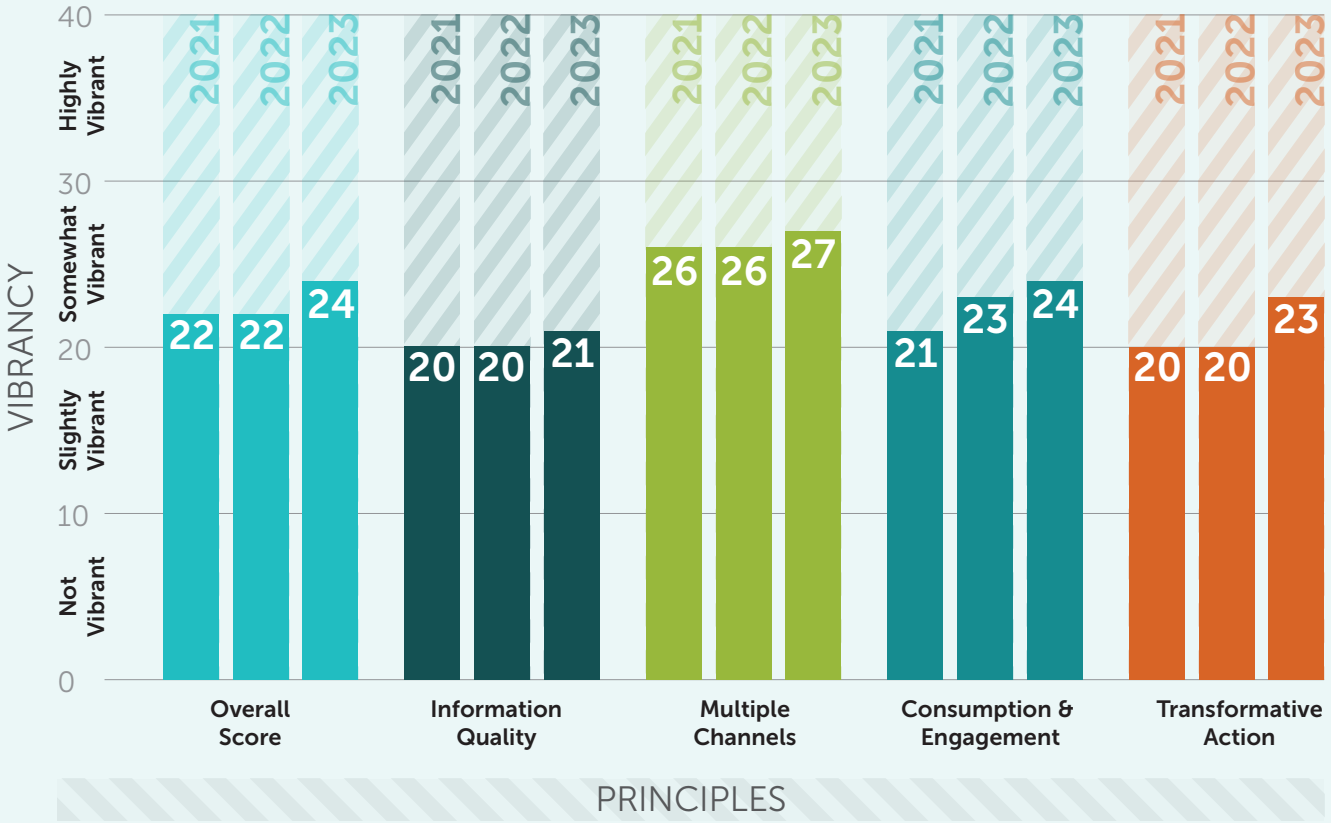
Due to laws restricting NGO activity and contacts with U.S.-based NGOs, the participants in the Russia study will remain anonymous. This chapter was developed by a Russian journalist after a series of structured interviews with colleagues in the media and information sector.

UKRAINE

Vibrant Information Barometer 2023

USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

IREX



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

In 2022, Ukraine amazed and inspired the world by mounting an extraordinary resistance to Russia's full-scale invasion. Within a year, the country withstood the aggression, recaptured more than half of the territory lost, garnered significant international support, and forged a large anti-Kremlin coalition.

As analyzed by Detector Media, particularly noteworthy in this war has been the swift access to information that helped Ukraine win the first battle. Russian propaganda about "liberation," "Nazis," and "military targets" was no match for thousands of amateur videos that showed the truth. Western public opinion could not ignore the suffering and heroism of the Ukrainian people, captured by global media powerhouses and humble smartphones alike. Ukrainians with internet access and smartphones documented and shared protests in the occupied cities, war crimes committed by occupiers, Russian weaponry being towed away by tractors, and interviews with Russian prisoners of war who were saying that they were heading to military exercises.

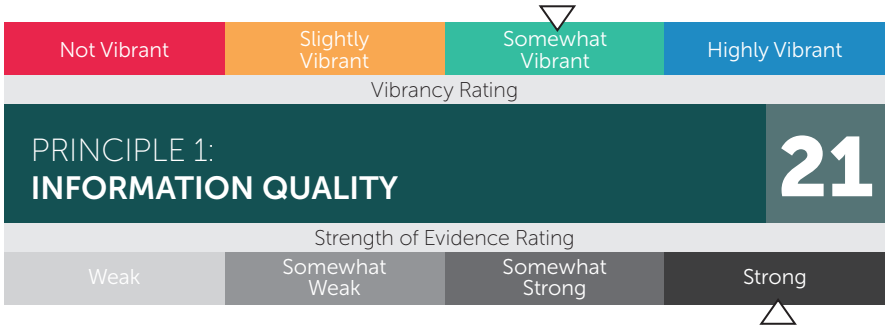
Martial law allowed the government to curb the media, including suspending operations and introducing wartime censorship. Although the restrictions introduced for the sake of national security were not as onerous as they could have been, the shutdown of three opposition channels from digital broadcasting without proper legal grounds sent a worrisome signal. Ukrainian journalists and media survived and adapted, and they are contributing to the victory. Media outlets focused on delivering vital information, and many journalists became war correspondents. Russian occupiers committed the lion's share of free speech violations. Journalists admit they self-censor to avoid compromising Ukraine's defenses, and society has become less tolerant of knee-jerk critics of the government.

Despite tremendous war-related challenges, VIBE principle scores saw modest improvement in this year's study compared to the 2022 edition. However, Principle 1 (information quality) receives this year's lowest score, 21, dragged down by invasion-related mal-information and economic crisis. Ukrainian media and other content creators managed to supply vital and prompt information to citizens, but malign Russian influence via social media remains a challenge.

With a score of 27, Principle 2 (plurality of channels) is the highest rated. Within it, access to public information is the only slightly decreased indicator since much public data is not accessible for security reasons. Government control over the mainstream television channels, via a 24-hour news broadcast to which several channels contribute, is partly justified by the need for a central, wartime information policy.

The score for Principle 3 (information consumption and engagement) improved slightly as media have withstood massive cyberattacks, and all stakeholders have invested in digital- and media-literacy efforts. Citizens' poor media-literacy and digital-security skills remained a major weakness, however, along with a lack of evidence-based debates.

Principle 4 (transformative action) also slightly improved, with panelists praising civil society contributions to a robust information flow, while giving their lowest marks to people's use of that information. Panelists also praised government efforts to inform society but warned it could use war as an excuse to become less accountable and transparent.



Principle 1's score has slightly improved since the 2022 VIBE study. However, the country's well-developed media infrastructure was either damaged by the Russian occupiers or undermined by war-related economic hardships. Hundreds of media closed. Russian air strikes on energy infrastructure led to substantial disruptions of electricity, the internet, and communications that affected both media consumption and media operation. The government carried out a unified information policy through the 24-hour United News Telethon, produced by major national TV channels and rebroadcast by all possible means. More than 70 percent of Ukrainians consume news from social networks, which are also the main source of Russian propaganda. The advertising market stalled at the onset of the invasion but started to revive in the fall.

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

Ukraine had a diversified and well-developed media infrastructure capable of delivering quality content before the war. Then the invasion brought occupation, damage, and disruptions, including widespread electricity cutoffs, interruptions in internet and mobile communications, and an economic crisis that caused more than 216 media outlets to suspend or relocate their operations. In formerly occupied regions, journalists returned to newsrooms and equipment damaged or looted by Russian soldiers. In the Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, and Kherson regions, broadcasting centers and towers were destroyed. The electricity supply was patchy, and artillery shelling was frequent.

In March 2022, the government obliged the major TV channels—private media groups 1+1, Inter, Starlight Media, and Ukraina (followed by November by My – Ukraina); the state parliamentary channel, Rada; and public broadcaster Suspilne—to broadcast the joint, 24-hour United News Telethon. As a result, television broadcasting has become less diversified and independent, a television journalist on the panel said.

The war accelerated the decline of print media due to a shrinking audience, scarce and expensive newsprint, disrupted distribution and delivery, and damaged printing houses, noted a panelist who is developing hyperlocal newsrooms. Still, there is adequate nationwide infrastructure for producing quality online and radio content.

According to the annual USAID-funded Internews Media Consumption Survey, 74 percent of Ukrainians get their news from social networks.[1] While 58 percent of respondents said they trust the media, trust increased only for local and regional online and television sources. The survey's focus group participants were split on how much information on the war they sought out. Many consulted more sources of news, to learn the latest developments as well as confirm other sources, while others eventually hit information fatigue and settled on two or three trusted news channels.

Another survey found declines in social media use across almost all the country, at least partly due to electricity and internet outages, with the largest drops in areas along the front line. As Facebook and, more dramatically, Instagram lost users in Ukraine in 2022, Telegram grew to become the most popular social network.[2] Although it has accounts for top national and local government officials and opinion leaders and is used by media as a source of information, Telegram is also one of the most prominent and dangerous tools for Russian propaganda.

Panelists named the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv, and the Institute of Journalism at Taras Shevchenko Kyiv National University as the best academic institutions for journalists,

1 *2022 Media Consumption Survey*, USAID-Internews. November 2022. https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/USAID-Internews_Media-Consumption-Survey_2022_eng-1.pdf

2 https://plusone.com.ua/research/

while in many other regions outdated journalism teaching offers too little practical training. The number of informal donor-funded training courses, a lower priority during the war, has decreased for safety reasons. More generally, many universities' continued remote instruction has led to a decline in student learning and engagement, and men eligible for mobilization into the army cannot leave the country to attend courses abroad.

Panelists agreed that Ukraine's professional and reputable media tend to behave ethically, with a respect for facts, unlike many nonprofessional content producers on social media.

> **"With streams of information and disinformation multiplying in the war, it has become more complicated to verify information promptly or at all, and there were instances when many professional media have inadvertently spread misinformation.**

Serious professional consequences for misbehavior, such as sanctions by the National Security and Defense Council (NSDC) are meted out only for some pro-Russia media and journalists, but not uniformly and not immediately, a regional editor on the panel said. If *jeansa*—the covert practice of taking money to promote a person's or company's interest in the guise of news—was the Ukrainian media's most common infraction before the war, hate speech, counterpropaganda, military censorship, and self-censorship prevailed in 2022, he said.

To some extent, fear of reputational and professional consequences works as an ethical guardrail in Ukraine's professional media, but it is not a factor for amateur content producers, primarily on social networks, most of whom remain anonymous, another panelist said. A media lawyer on the panel said that media self-regulation is developing but professional consequences are lax, even as the Commission on Journalistic Ethics and the Independent Media Council regularly name those who breach ethical and other journalism standards.

Panelists said journalists scrutinize government actors to little avail, as some investigations might get attention but do not lead to serious consequences. Moreover, in the current atmosphere, the public sometimes sees criticism of those in power as abetting the Russian forces. In the face of public outrage, journalists are compelled to apologize for mistakes or disclosures of sensitive military-related information, an investigative journalist from Kyiv said.

The range of topics covered has narrowed, and niche and thematic reporting has dwindled as regional and local news, especially related to the war and invasion, dominate content. Most international news is related to the war and support for Ukraine.

The most reputable private media and the public broadcaster enjoy editorial independence, and panelists denied that it is inherent to the United Telethon. Finally, a regional media outlet owner observed that although regional contextualization of coverage became more obvious due to location-related developments, a lot of content has clickbait features.

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

Most media and the government disseminate fact-based information. Nonprofessional content producers, such as anonymous Telegram channels and private interest groups in social networks and messaging apps, are the leading purveyors of intentionally misleading information.

In September 2022, the Institute of Mass Information (IMI) released its annual White List of popular national online media that uphold the highest journalistic standards.[3] The nine outlets are largely the same as the 2021 list: Suspilne, Hromadske, Liga, Ukrainska Pravda (UP), Ukrinform, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Dzerkalo Tyzhnya, Novoe Vremya (NV), and Babel.

3 Nine Online Media That Showed Highest Quality, IMI Monitoring. https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/dev-yat-onlajn-media-shho-staly-najyakisnishymy-monitoryng-imi-i47998

IMI monitoring found that Ukrainian online media most frequently got their information from the social media pages of officials or agencies, other social networks, and foreign media, except for Russian media.[4]

With streams of information and disinformation multiplying in the war, it has become more complicated to verify information promptly or at all, and there were instances when many professional media have inadvertently spread misinformation. That is a serious legal violation for broadcasters, which could face prosecution by the National Television and Radio Broadcasting Council (NTRBC).

A media literacy expert on the panel said representatives of the local or national government and various private Telegram channels had frequently reported on Ukrainian military successes well before official confirmation from the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, only to have the stories partially or wholly debunked later.

In its immediate aftermath, the Russian invasion led to a drastic drop in online stories commissioned by businesspeople or politicians, but by the fall they had returned to as much as one-third or one-half their previous volume.[5] No *jeansa* was spotted in IMI's White List media.

> **"Ukrainians trust the government, even though it often hides or restricts access to certain information.**

Ukrainians trust the government, even though it often hides or restricts access to certain information. Several times, miscommunication among state bodies has resulted in contradictory public messages, which were clarified later. The state makes its own efforts to debunk disinformation—for instance, with the NSDC's Center for Countering Disinformation. One panelist said civil servants disseminate much more accurate information than elected officials and politicians.

News organizations hold officials accountable by pointing out the rare cases of misinformation spread by government actors—but more often by publicizing information that the government would like to keep quiet.

Ukraine has strong fact-checking agencies that debunk disinformation, and simple fact-checking tools and manuals are available online, including StopFake, VoxCheck, Detector Media, Bez Brekhni, Po Toi Bik Novyn, Texty, NotaEnota, Gwara Media, and Brekhunets. StopFake and VoxCheck are local partners in a Facebook program launched in 2020 to counter disinformation.

In the Internews survey, one-fourth of focus group respondents were aware of services that can be used to verify content.[6] Around a third said they had used fact-checkers and information resources. Among the listed resources, respondents most often recognized StopFake and Detector Media, while most others were almost unknown to the participants.

In a September report, the Digital Security Lab (DSL), an expert and advocacy group, said Ukrainian content and social media accounts were more frequently being blocked.[7] Previously, the primary targets had been the accounts of journalists and public figures with large audiences on Facebook, but now anyone who writes about Russian war crimes can be blocked. After the Russians were driven out of the Kyiv region and their atrocities exposed, there was a massive blocking of posts, accounts, and even the hashtags #buchamassacre and #russianwarcrimes. Meta blamed issues with its algorithms, unblocked most of the posts, and temporarily changed its policy on hate speech for Ukraine. After human rights groups in April asked Meta to improve principles of content moderation for military conflicts, experts found that some content related to Russian war crimes was still blocked. For example, even after an instance of Russians shelling civilians, the popular hashtag #russiaisaterroriststate was hidden in an Instagram search.

4 https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/dzherela-onlajn-media-ofitsijni-osib-neofitsijni-akaunty-ta-inozemni-media-doslidzhennya-imi-i48039

5 https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/dzhynsa-v-onlajn-media-monitoryngovyj-zvit-veresen-2022-roku-i48017

6 *2022 Media Consumption Survey*, USAID-Internews. November 2022. https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/USAID-Internews_Media-Consumption-Survey_2022_eng-1.pdf

7 Report on Security During the War. Digital Security Lab. September 29, 2022. https://dslua.org/publications/zvit-bezpeka-v-umovah-viyny/

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

Russia has long run disinformation campaigns and information operations to discredit Ukrainian values, institutions, and history, as well as to undermine the country's aspirations to join the EU and NATO and the Ukrainian people's trust in their government. It has built networks inside Ukraine through nominally Ukrainian media, proxy politicians, and influence agents among pro-Russia, nonprofessional content creators.

Russian media and social networks have been blocked in Ukraine since 2017. Subsequently, in 2021 officials have shut down or confiscated several domestic, pro-Russia media outlets and sanctioned them or their owners, including pro-Russia television channels 112 Ukraine, NewsOne, and ZIK, associated with close Putin ally Viktor Medvedchuk.

According to a report by the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab, from the start of the war, the Kremlin aimed to demoralize Ukrainian audiences and destroy their will to fight.[8] Early gambits included so-called deepfake videos giving the impression that President Volodymyr Zelenskyy had fled the country and had urged Ukraine's troops to lay down their arms. Then came the use of forged documents to embarrass Ukrainian officials, as well as fake marketplaces on the dark web suggesting that Ukraine was reselling Western weaponry for profit. Pro-Kremlin narratives also sowed fear and intimidation to make Ukrainians believe Russia was unbeatable and Ukraine's neighbors were untrustworthy.

Despite blocking the major disinformation sources, such as clearly pro-Russia television channels and websites, in 2022 Ukraine faced Russian disinformation via instant messengers and social networks that do little or no content moderation as well as manipulation of popular Ukrainian news aggregators on social media, which do not verify information, a data journalist on the panel said. None has faced any consequences. The Security Service of Ukraine has started to publish lists of Russian Telegram channels, but they include only a small share of those identified by Ukrainian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), she said.

Russian propaganda has been especially active in the occupied territories and on social networks, one panelist noted. In a November report, data journalism agency Texty mapped 120 Telegram channels created by Russian information troops starting in the first weeks of the invasion.[9] Texty claims at least half were part of a coordinated effort and obviously managed from the same location. They mimicked local news feeds to attract real subscribers, but their main goal was to spread Kremlin rhetoric and feign local support for the occupiers. As the Russian army retreated or slowed its advances, the proliferation of new channels also slowed, reflecting the shifting priorities of the Russian military effort. Since early summer 2022, active Telegram channels have been running only in the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions.

According to the Digital Security Lab report, many new Facebook and Instagram pages launched advertising campaigns targeted at Russian speakers in southern and eastern Ukraine, with fake stories on the brutality of the Ukrainian army.[10]

"Today we can find more than 100 Telegram channels targeting Ukrainian audiences managed from Russia. They're synchronized with special operations of the Russian special services in producing waves of mal-information aimed to fuel panic and discord among Ukrainians and distrust of the Ukrainian government. They include manipulations and hate speech calling the Ukrainian army fascists and accusing it of crimes against civilians," an investigative reporter on the panel said.

Ukrainian government agencies contribute to pro-Ukrainian propaganda and use hate speech to rouse people's fighting spirit and inspire hatred of the aggressor. Ukrainians view this as patriotism, defend it by pointing to the Russian army's horrific war crimes, and do not accuse officials of playing on their emotions. But some manipulative or ambivalent

8 https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/undermining-ukraine/

9 Telegram Occupation How Russia Wanted to Breed a Media Monster but Ended up with a Paper Tiger. https://texty.org.ua/projects/108161/telegram-occupation-how-russia-wanted-breed-media-monster-ended-paper-tiger/

10 Report on Security During the War. Digital Security Lab. September 29, 2022. https://dslua.org/publications/zvit-bezpeka-v-umovah-viyny/

statements by Ukrainian authorities or politicians have caused heated public discussions, sometimes forcing them to provide explanations or details.

Although the public countenances hate speech toward Russia in both professional media and social media due to war crimes, Ukrainian media do not disseminate mal-information. Telegram is awash in anonymous channels disseminating content intended to harm. Ukraine's Security Service has blocked dozens of these kinds of channels, but it is a drop in the bucket. The cyber police have launched a Telegram bot to take complaints from the public about inappropriate social media channels and tell people how to block them. Often, law-enforcement bodies have managed to block these channels by identifying and prosecuting their operators if they are in Ukraine.

Panelists reiterated that Facebook promptly blocks and deletes posts about war crimes committed by the Russian occupiers but allows hate speech toward Ukrainians and other nations. Media self-regulation is weak, and the platforms rely on automation, artificial intelligence, and algorithms, which tend to miss a lot, to prevent mal-information, a television journalist on the panel said.

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

Since the start of the invasion, the Russian language has all but disappeared from Ukraine's media space. The TAVR Media company has renamed its Russkoe Radio to Radio Bayraktar. Megogo, the largest online movie and video platform, refuses to show Russian movies. Many TV shows that used to be presented in Russian or a combination of Russian and Ukrainian are now produced solely in Ukrainian, while others are being dubbed into Ukrainian.

July 2022 was the deadline for online publications to begin posting their content in the Ukrainian language, under a wider law passed three years earlier. The only Russian-language content that remains in Ukrainian media are programs and films ostensibly created to counter propaganda and targeted at Russians, such as *Civil Defense* and *Anti-Zombie*, produced by Starlight Media.[11] The government also supports the Russian-language TV channels FreeDom and Dom, based in Kyiv but intended for Russian speakers in the occupied territories and elsewhere.

Panelists said the media have not presented a wide range of ideologies and perspectives during the war, especially with television news centralized by the Telethon, but amateur content producers offer many alternatives.

Although the panel's media literacy expert said that generally there are media channels for different ethnic groups and there are formats adapted for people with disabilities, there was no consensus throughout the panel on that point. News about marginalized groups might be missing from mainstream media because news managers do not believe there is a sufficient audience for it, a regional media owner said.

The views of the marginalized pro-Russia community, parishioners of the Moscow Patriarchate's Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and Ukrainians who moved to Russia by choice or force are almost absent in the media, the panel's data journalist said.

An IMI survey of 10 national online media in August and September 2022 found that quoted experts were several times more likely to be men than women.[12] Female experts commented most often on the war and military topics (29 percent)—possibly because many women work as press officers for military or defense agencies—and foreign policy (21 percent). Women experts had little presence in business, economics, human rights, and science news. Women were the central figures in 30 percent of stories.

Although Ukraine's media sector traditionally employs more women than men, there are more men in technical and managerial positions--but not because of overt discrimination, a regional editor on the panel said.

11 https://detector.media/rinok/article/206703/2023-01-05-desyat-nayvazhlyvishykh-podiy-mediarynku-u-2022-rotsi/

12 https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/hendernyj-balans

The gender balance in journalism is much better than in other industries in Ukraine, but among nonprofessional content producers, there is a clear distinction between female (lifestyle, fashion, nutrition) and male (politics, money, technology) realms, the data journalist said.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

The war throttled the media industry's finances. After crashing, the advertising market started a cautious rebound in April, reaching 25 percent to 30 percent of its prewar volume by the end of the summer. The situation was a bit better for national media than for local or specialized ones.

During the first three months of the war, several dozen TV channels and radio stations, and several hundred newspapers and online media, closed. Some outlets survived, thanks to their owners' funds or grants from international donors, but even wealthy media owners have seen their fortunes suffer during the war and cut staff and salaries. Signs of a recovery appeared in the fall.

According to the All-Ukrainian Advertising Coalition, the 2022 advertising market shrank by 63 percent from 2021.[13] The value of television advertising fell by 81 percent to UAH 2.6 billion ($69.8 million), print advertising by 79 percent to UAH 221 million ($5.9 million), and radio by 61 percent to UAH 333 million ($8.9 million). Advertising in online media dropped by 41 percent to UAH 7.19 billion ($193 million).

The television advertising market began a gradual recovery in August, and by the fall it had reached almost one-third of pre-invasion volumes. Pharmaceutical companies returned first and now dominate in broadcasting. The space for television advertising has also shrunk because the main channels are involved in the advertising-free Telethon--while one of the four largest television groups, Rinat Akhmetov's Media Grupa Ukraina--left the market in July.

Given the wartime uncertainty, the ad coalition did not provide its usual forecast for the coming calendar year (2022), but it optimistically expects further recovery as Nielsen television panels and ratings-based ad sales resume. It also predicts the television ad market will grow by 40 percent, thanks to the return of spots by fast-moving consumer goods companies, and hopes for a 30 percent rise in product placements in programs and other media products.

The last quarter of 2022 gave reason for cautious optimism for radio, with the return of advertisers in pharmaceuticals, tradeing, finance, gaming, and mobile operators. Demand for regional advertising remains, boosting ad sales for some radio stations in western Ukraine to 2021 volumes.

A co-owner and executive in online and print media on the panel said his media outlets had regained 80 percent of their advertising volumes and that the strongest and most professional media will survive. Still, many local advertisers have reoriented their budgets toward advertising with Google and Meta. Advertising placement is not politicized, especially because political advertising, which gets placed in loyal media, has shut down during the war.

For the 2023 calendar year, the government has allocated almost UAH 2 billion ($53.7 million) to produce television content for state purposes, which could include Telethon, international channels FreeDom and Dom, and Ukrinform, the state information agency.[14] Major television groups involved in Telethon lost the chance to sell advertising on their most-watched, flagship channels. Later, two of them established duplicate channels where they could run ad spots.

Previous media experiments to create new sources of revenue, including readers' clubs and crowdfunding, have been sidelined, as many people can no longer afford them or prefer to send their donations to military or humanitarian efforts.

A media-literacy expert on the panel lamented the chronic underfunding of the public broadcaster, Suspilne, since 2017. In 2022, the state budget provided UAH 1.87 billion ($233.5 million), which was UAH 526 million

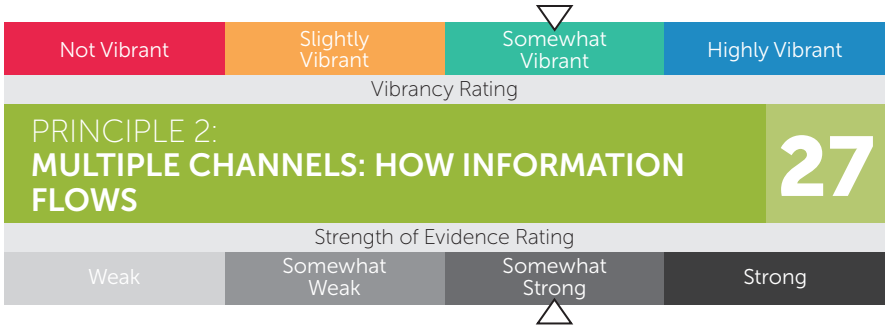
13 https://vrk.org.ua/images/AdVolume2022.pdf

14 https://detector.media/infospace/article/204414/2022-11-01-u-byudzheti-na-2023-rik-na-14-mlrd-grn-zbilshylos-finansuvannya-inomovlennya-marafonu-ta-ukrinformu/

($14.12 million) below the level required by law (no less than 0.2 percent of the previous year's state expenditures). For calendar year 2023, the state budget allocates UAH 1.5 billion ($40.26 million), even less than it had in 2022.[15]

Government funding of media and government contracts for coverage of official activities remain, but their distribution is opaque and could be distorting the market, a media lawyer on the panel said. An effort to reform the privatization of state and municipal media has not ended up securing reliable sources of revenue for them, and many have had to shut down, she said.

Journalists' salaries vary widely, depending on the type and location of media. Television journalists may earn UAH 50,000 to UAH 80,000 ($1,342 to $2,147) per month, while regional journalists may make one-tenth of that. For context, the average monthly salary in Ukraine was UAH 14,857 ($400) in 2022.



Overall, Principle 2's high score remained the same as in the 2022 VIBE study. Information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure has been damaged in the war, and access to information has been further hindered by electricity and communications outages. The lion's share of free speech violations were committed by the Russian occupiers, though journalists self-censor for patriotic reasons.

The indicator on access to information is the only one to decrease, with panelists citing groundless denials of access to certain public information. Another key issue within this principle is government control over mainstream television channels through the United News Telethon. Though this extraordinary measure is warranted by the need for a unified information policy during the war, it raises questions about the independence of the news media, narrows the range of voices and views in major media, and could undermine future democratic processes in Ukraine. Three opposition channels have been switched off digital broadcasting with no legal basis. On the other hand, the government has refrained from introducing true wartime censorship, which is permitted under the state of martial law declared on the day of the invasion.

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

Ukrainian law protects the freedoms of speech and press, in line with European norms. A panelist with a law background said that sometimes journalists suffer setbacks in court, but those with good cases stand a chance to be vindicated in a higher court. Moreover, even if all appeals at the national level fail, Ukrainian journalists can still turn to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). Libel law has been a civil law issue since 2001. Since then, all 11 attempts of legislators to criminalize libel have failed.

Ukrainian law protects journalists' sources, but the guarantees do not go far enough. A media lawyer on the panel recalled the 2020 ECHR ruling in the case of *Sedletska versus Ukraine*; this case supported journalists in not disclosing their sources, establishing a precedent that helped to win a number of similar cases in Ukraine's court system. Proper investigations and prosecutions of perpetrators of crimes that prevent journalists from performing their professional duties remains an unresolved issue which needs to be systematically addressed after the end of the war.

The government does not attempt to restrict the freedoms of speech and press, but some journalists are wary of a law adopted in December 2022 that allows the National Television and Radio Broadcasting Council (NTRBC) to block online media without a court hearing, "issue binding

15 https://stv.detector.media/suspilna-korporatsiya/read/7449/2022-09-14-u-proiekti-derzhbyudzhetu-na-2023-rik-na-suspilne-vydilyly-15-mlrd-grn/

orders to the editorial offices of media, regulate the work of cable and online television operators, and cancel the registration of print media," among other things.[16] The lawyer panelist saw no issues with the law itself but said much would depend on its application and the independence of the NTRBC.

"Even with introduction of martial law upon the full-scale invasion, direct wartime censorship has not been applied by the government," stressed a media lawyer. Panelists agreed that some wartime restrictions were legitimate, including requiring accreditation for journalists traveling to front-line areas, banning the publication of photos or videos of particularly recognizable places after recent shelling or firing, and the closure of public registers, such as for business licenses, land titling, and politicians' assets disclosures.[17] Some panelists noted a few instances of conflict between journalists and top military authorities over access to recently liberated Kherson, frequent interference by territorial defense units who seem not to know journalists' rights to cover the conflict and are skeptical of their credentials, an official preference for foreign journalists to cover shooting and destruction, and accusations that some journalists are supporting the enemy.

> "The only sources of information from Ukraine in the occupied territories were social networks and radio, panelists said.

The government has blocked Russian media and social networks through ICT providers in Ukraine for years, but consumers can access them via proxy servers. In addition, the opposition-linked Channel 5, Pryamyi Channel, and Espreso were kicked off the digital airwaves in April, after having been excluded from the Telethon for months. No government agency took responsibility for the action.

More Ukrainian journalists are censoring their work during the war. "Colleagues avoid publishing information about corruption or misdeeds of the Ukrainian military or volunteers for fear that Russian propaganda will use it to disgrace Ukraine internationally and thus diminish support," a freelance investigative journalist on the panel said. Those articles also might get a journalist blowback from the public, including insults, cyberattacks, and intimidation to disclose sources, she said. However, a media lawyer on the panel said well-documented probes into actions of corrupt officials and well-founded criticism of the government get a lot of public support.

In a poll of 229 journalists in December 2022 by IMI, 43.4 percent said freedom of speech had declined in Ukraine, 21 percent saw no change, and 5.3 percent said it had improved.[18] They cited major issues as Russian aggression and its consequences for the media and journalists (82.5 percent), problems with access to information and the shutdown of public registers (63.2 percent), problems with access to facilities and denials of accreditation (57.5 percent), restrictions on publishing certain content under martial law (48.2 percent), and such cybercrimes as DDoS attacks and phishing (38.6 percent).

Although violence against journalists has spiked during the war, most violations have been by the Russian army in occupied territories. Reporting is far safer in territory under the control of Ukraine's government. The panelists said Ukrainian journalists cannot work in the occupied territories.

In 2022, the IMI documented 567 violations of press freedom in Ukraine, 470 of them by the Russian soldiers, who killed, kidnapped, and shot journalists; destroyed TV towers; attacked newsrooms; committed cybercrimes; switched off Ukrainian broadcasting; and misappropriated media brands and launched fakes of local publications and channels to spread Russian propaganda.[19] Eight media professionals were killed

16 https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/ukraine-ifj-calls-on-the-government-to-revise-new-media-law.html

17 https://zn.ua/eng/how-the-closure-of-registries-affects-business-media-and-ngos.html

18 More than 43 percent of journalists believe that freedom of speech declined in Ukraine, IMI's poll. https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/ponad-43-zhurnalistiv-vvazhayut-shho-stan-svobody-slova-v-ukrayini-pogirshyvsya-opytuvannya-imi-i50582

19 IMI documented 567 free speech violations in 2022 in Ukraine, with more than 80 percent committed by Russia. https://imi.org.ua/news/567-porushen-svobody-slova-imi-zafiksuvav-u-2022-rotsi-v-ukrayini-ponad-80-vchynyla-rosiya-i50050

on the job, while 35 journalists died at the front line as soldiers or from Russian shelling while not working.

Of the 97 violations that the IMI attributed to Ukrainian actors—fewer than half the number in each of the previous two years—32 were cases of journalists prevented from carrying out their professional activities, 21 were denials of access to public information, and 21 were cybercrimes. A major violation was switching off the Pryamyi, Channel 5, and Espreso television channels from the digital broadcasting network.

On March 17, after the NDSC warned that Russian subversive groups were posing as Western correspondents, many people became suspicious of all journalists.

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

Before the invasion, Ukraine's ICT infrastructure was adequate—better developed in the larger cities, and poorer in smaller towns and rural areas with a narrower choice of media. Legal or social norms do not preclude any groups from access. Internet governance and regulation of the digital space have provided open and equal access to users and content producers. Most media do not provide adaptations for people with hearing and sight disabilities.

In Russia's attack and occupation, the infrastructure was partially ruined, even as delivering news was sometimes crucial to saving lives. Most technical infrastructure--including television towers, mobile operators' equipment, and newsroom equipment--were devastated in the occupied territories. People in the liberated Kharkiv and Kherson regions did not have access to the internet and telecommunications. The only sources of information from Ukraine in the occupied territories were social networks and radio, panelists said.

In May, NetBlocks, which monitors internet service disruptions, said Russia had rerouted internet traffic in the occupied Kherson region through Russian communications infrastructure.[20] After Russia's attack on Ukraine's energy infrastructure in November, internet service dropped by 33 percent across the country, according to NetBlocks.

Mainstream television channels that had encoded their signals and became paid services in 2021 became freely available via satellites on March 7, 2022. The government also ensured access to the Telethon channels via all alternative means, including over-the-top (internet based) platforms.

About 80 percent of Ukrainians use the internet, and half have smartphones.[21] Despite all the hardships, people with smartphones have shared real-time reports and posted photos and videos of the true situation across Ukraine, playing a tremendous role in covering the war accurately.

Newage Agency estimated that in May and June 2022, 19 million, or about 86 percent, of the 22.1 million Ukrainians aged 14 to 70 living in unoccupied territories used the internet.[22]

By December 2022, almost half of Ukraine's energy systems had been damaged by 126 missile and drone attacks, disrupting telecommunications and power, water, and heating supplies all over the country.[23] Missile attacks on energy and other civilian infrastructure stepped up in October 2022, as winter approached. "Once the blackout in districts on the left bank of Kyiv lasted for about 24 hours, and to get news from the internet, one would have to travel to another part of the city," said a panelist from Kyiv. Other locations have reportedly endured months without electricity.

20 https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-reroutes-internet-traffic-occupied-ukraine-its-infrastructure-2022-05-02/

21 Usage of Internet by Ukrainians: Results of Telephone Poll Conducted May 13–18, 2022. Kyiv International Institute of Sociology. https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=1115&page=1

22 Digital in Ukraine 2022. Trends of Ukrainian Internet and Influence of War. https://cases.media/article/digital-v-ukrayini-2022-trendi-ukrayinskogo-internetu-ta-vpliv-viini

23 https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-economy/3617307-majze-polovina-energosistemi-ukraini-vivedena-z-ladu-vnaslidok-raketnih-udariv-rf-smigal.html

Foreign governments and international donors sent equipment for use in Ukraine's energy and power facilities to support vital public utilities. The government, along with energy and telecommunications companies, and residents made huge efforts to adapt. Ukrainian mobile operators introduced "national roaming," allowing users to connect to other providers' networks for free, and they are quickly restoring their facilities in the liberated territories. Broadband internet provider Ukrtelecom, which operates in all government-controlled regions of Ukraine, said in late February 2023 that service had been restored to 87 percent of the settlements in its area.

Through public, private, and foreign efforts, tens of thousands of Starlink satellite terminals have been brought to Ukraine, originally for military communications but later also to support internet access in public spaces. However, most people cannot afford the system's setup costs or its monthly fees for personal use. Many Ukrainian businesses bought generators or portable power stations to secure an electricity supply and internet service.

Along with the martial law measures on a unified information policy and informational security, the Zelenskyy administration also decreed in March that Zeonbud, a private digital broadcaster with opaque ownership, would be subordinate to the state-owned Broadcasting, Radiocommunications, and Television Concern, which owns all transmitter facilities.[24] Given Russia's strikes on TV and radio towers, Zeonbud was tasked with various duties to ensure broadcasting continued, including backup digital transmission with the involvement of an alternative satellite operator.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

Before the invasion, Ukraine had a well-developed and resourced system of access to public information. The country's 2011 law on access to public information and subsequent amendments is one of the most advanced in the world. In 2016, the Supreme Administrative Court issued helpful guidance and explanations for lower courts' approach to the law, noted the panel's media lawyer.

Another civil society victory over the past decade was the opening up of registers on companies' beneficial owners, real estate titles, officials' asset declarations, court cases, and the electronic public procurement system. Most of these registers were closed during the war to stop the enemy or its allies from making use of the information. "State decisions and budgets became less transparent and accountable. A number of data sets at a united open data portal and their updates have become scarce for no reason," the data journalist panelist said. A civil society activist on the panel said journalists complain that restrictions on certain data, such as asset declarations of public officials, had a thin justification. It is also crucial to have access to systematized information on foreign financial aid to Ukraine and how it is being used in order to prevent abuse.

Many local authorities have begun to abuse wartime restrictions and use martial law as an excuse to refuse to provide information. "Lawyers have a lot of work, to [once again help develop court practice] and advocate for opening public registers. Civil society has plenty of tools and opportunities to [restore the] level of information openness to before the invasion," the lawyer said.

In early March 2022, the military's General Staff listed the types of information whose release could compromise Ukraine's defense. These restrictions have been interpreted broadly, with results ranging from close cooperation with and exclusive access for certain reporters to special operations at the front to a ban on taking photos or video, enforced by camera confiscations, deep in Ukraine-controlled regions.[25]

On March 27, the parliament criminalized the publication of unofficial data on the movements of weapons or troops. Later, it also banned immediate reporting on the effects of air strikes, lest the enemy use these open sources to correct its aim in real time.

24 https://detector.media/infospace/article/197677/2022-03-20-rnbo-pidporyadkuvala-tsyfrove-telebachennya-derzhavi-ta-zobovyazala-telekanaly-translyuvaty-spilnyy-marafon/

25 https://www.dw.com/uk/yak-i-chomu-ukrainska-vlada-obmezhuie-svobodu-zmi-na-viini/a-61438886

Panelists said a few military and law-enforcement press offices were particularly wary of journalists in 2022. In one high-profile scandal, several Ukrainian and foreign media, including CNN and Sky News, were denied accreditation to enter and cover the recently liberated Kherson.[26]

Citizens are not intimidated or threatened for seeking public information, visiting official websites, meeting officials in person, or filing information requests. No groups are excluded from exercising this right, and civil society organizations actively pursue public information.

> "Colleagues avoid publishing information about corruption or misdeeds of the Ukrainian military or volunteers for fear that Russian propaganda will use it to disgrace Ukraine internationally and thus diminish support," a freelance investigative journalist on the panel said.

Most government agencies have a press office or press secretary, who too often function more as public relations representatives or advocates than as conduits for information, especially if the information could be damaging to their agencies. Some press offices maintain blacklists of journalists who criticize them and "whitelists" of those who report only positive information, said a freelance investigative reporter on the panel.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Ukraine has a law against monopoly ownership of broadcast media, but the country's Anti-Monopoly Committee has admitted that it cannot measure the country's television market or determine relevant shares of television companies, thus making it challenging to identify potential monopolies.

Since 2021, Ukrainian law has required the disclosure of beneficial owners of any legal entities, but that leaves out nonprofessional content producers. In addition, the owners of many websites and online media are anonymous, a television journalist on the panel said, and a 2015 law on disclosure of broadcast media ownership has failed to unmask owners who hide behind proxies.

Internet providers and cable television operators are not monopolized.

Before the 2022 invasion, the four largest oligarch-owned television groups attracted more than 75 percent of Ukraine's television audience. Those groups are Viktor Pinchuk's Starlight Media (the ICTV, STB, and Novyi channels); Ihor Kolomoyskyi's 1+1 Media (six channels, including 1+1; the UNIAN news agency; and TSN.ua, one of the most popular online media outlets); Rinat Akhmetov's Media Grupa Ukraina (most notably the Ukraina and Ukraina 24 channels, and Segodnya.ua); and Inter Media Group, owned by Dmytro Firtash and Serhiy Levochkin.

In July 2022, Akhmetov, the richest Ukrainian oligarch, shut down his media businesses—10 TV channels, a satellite TV platform, and an over-the-top provider—which employed 4,000 people. In October, 200 former employees of Akhmetov's companies launched the My – Ukraina (We Are Ukraine) TV channel, which promptly obtained digital and satellite broadcasting licenses from the National Television and Radio Broadcasting Council without a competition. In November 2022, the new venture became one of the producers of the United News Telethon and in early 2023 is eligible to receive funds from the state budget. Without speculating on who was behind the deal, skeptics point out that the UAH 11 million to 19 million ($295,000 to $510,000) estimated monthly operating costs are steep for employee-owners, and longtime observers suspect the president's office had a hand in the channel's quick licensing procedure and integration into the Telethon.

Left out of the Telethon were Channel 5, Pryamyi Channel, and Espreso, all linked to the opposition European Solidarity Party. Instead, the

26 How the Press Service of the United Command "South" for a Long Time and Systematically Doesn't Allow Journalists to Work. Other Parts of Front Do Not Have Similar Problems. https://texty.org.ua/articles/108271/pres-sluzhba-ok-pivden-davno-i-systemno-ne-daye-pracyuvaty-zhurnalistam-na-inshyh-chastynah-frontu-podibnyh-problem-nemaye/

three channels ran their own marathons and partly rebroadcast the telethon—until April 4, when they were kicked off the digital airwaves. No state agency has taken responsibility for the decision, which the channels have appealed unsuccessfully to various national bodies, and even finally to the EU. Meanwhile, the state-owned Rada TV channel uses their frequencies, while the operator of the digital television network, Zeonbud, continues to charge them fees for their place in the multiplex. The three channels continue to broadcast online and via satellite.

The panel's media lawyer said this case is dangerous, a short step to manual control of the media where access to airwaves can be cut at the flip of a switch. Although it is not clear who the defendant would be, the case could be appropriate for the ECHR.

Hindered by the war, the NTRBC did not run competitions when it awarded licenses for the frequencies freed up by the prewar shutdown of channels suspected to be owned by close Putin ally Viktor Medvedchuk and the July switch-off of Akhmetov's channels.[27] It gave temporary licenses in 13 regions to several-dozen local companies, as well as the state-owned Armiya FM – Military Radio and channels of the public broadcaster. It also relicensed two media groups to launch ICTV2 and 1+1 Ukraina channels, duplicating those companies' flagship channels, which were tied up with the Telethon, enabling them to earn advertising revenue.

Launching and promoting online media is easy and accessible. The cases of Trukha (a Telegram channel that went from 100,000 to 2 million subscribers in 2022) and Lachen (another Telegram channel by a 23-year-old man that has gained more than 750,000 subscribers since January 2022) show how quickly nonprofessional channels that distribute sensationalistic content with frequent updates can win hundreds of thousands of subscribers, the data journalist said.

These issues might be better regulated under a new law coming into force 2023 that broadens the NTRBC's authority to oversee all types of media, introduces regulation of online media, and simplifies broadcasters' licensing, among other things.

The Suspilne public service broadcaster provides varied formats and content. In the annual Internews Media Consumption survey, the share of respondents who said they most often watch its main television channel for news doubled, from 4 percent to 8 percent, over 2021. The share for its Ukrainske radio station increased from 16 percent to 19 percent.[28] In October 2022, a top executive at the public broadcaster cited a survey in which 87 percent of respondents said they trust news from Suspilne. She said public broadcasting's social media audience has multiplied 2.5 times during the crisis, to six million subscribers, mostly on Telegram.[29] Panelists said the public broadcaster's coverage remains nonpartisan. Its online coverage appears on IMI's White List, and despite UA Pershyi being a part of the government-friendly Telethon, the panel had no particular criticism of its news production.

Internet service providers do not discriminate against any specific type or source of communications, with the exception of blocked Russian media and social media.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Typically, only a handful of outlets in Ukraine have prioritized operating as a business to support their operations. The national television market especially has been dominated by the largest media groups, owned by oligarchs pursuing their political and economic goals. Repeated media monitoring over the years has made it clear that these owners influence editorial policy, although that kind of influence happens in regional media, too. The Telethon has put a lid on that kind of behavior in wartime newscasts, but these companies' online outlets still back their owners' interests.

Panelists were unanimous that the state monopolized news on the national channels through the Telethon. They said the government

27 https://detector.media/monitoring/article/206393/2022-12-27-voiennyy-chas-novi-kanaly-y-rozpodil-mists-u-tsyfrovykh-multypleksakh-monitoryng-roboty-natsrady-u-drugomu-pivrichchi-2022-roku/

28 *2022 Media Consumption Survey*, USAID-Internews. November 2022. https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/USAID-Internews_Media-Consumption-Survey_2022_eng-1.pdf

29 https://www.prostir.ua/2022/10/rol-nezalezhnyh-media-u-vidbudovi-ukrajiny/

used the Telethon to promote itself, and they cited instances of biased coverage from the participating channels, especially Rada and My – Ukraina, allegedly influenced by different groups in the Zelenskyy administration.

In the Internews Media Consumption Survey, focus groups said the Telethon has ended competition, and therefore differences, among the channels and that the war has eroded owners' influence on editorial policy.[30]

However, the panel's television journalist said the government and owners obviously have a great deal of influence on media companies, which has been exacerbated by the extraordinary demands of the war. In addition, many media outlets have no firewall between the newsroom and the business offices, another panelist said.

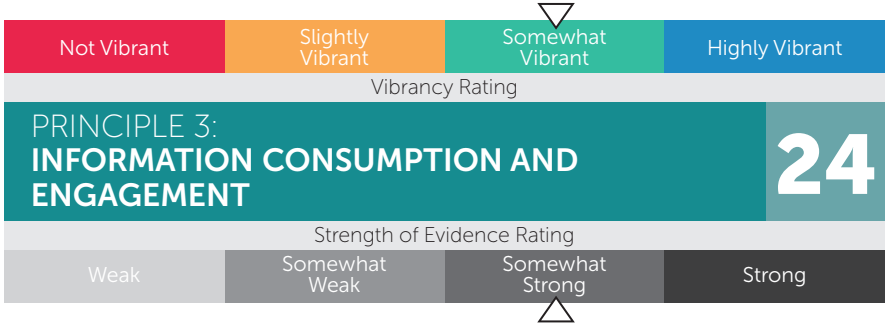
Private advertising contracts rarely influence editorial independence, but so-called information coverage contracts may dictate the content and favorable tone of reporting on local government.

While in television news major media groups follow the same policy, the influence of owners is more obvious on their online resources and in social media. The media-literacy expert pointed to the Podrobnosti.ua website's favorable coverage of its owners. In addition, Channel 5, which is traditionally associated with former President Petro Poroshenko, regularly covers the activities of his charitable foundation. A journalist from Kherson said local media there have contracts to cover the activities of the council and the mayor, and their content is full of *jeansa*. Their chief social media editor is also a cheerleader for the mayor, he said.

As already noted, public broadcaster Suspilne is consistently underfunded, but there were no apparent cases of political interference with its editorial policy in 2022.

In 2022, there were no new appointments to the NTRBC, whose members are chosen by the president and parliament, or disputed allocations of broadcasting licenses or frequencies.

Overall, the few state media in the country do not enjoy special privileges, such as better access to equipment or services, lower taxes, or sole access to certain information, although Rada did get exclusive access to the newly liberated Kherson in 2022.



Principle 3's overall score increased slightly over the 2022 VIBE study. Panelists said there are plenty of digital and media literacy tools and training opportunities available in Ukraine for media workers and ordinary citizens alike, and people are increasingly using them. The government continues to promote digital and media literacy efforts, as well as the country's information security. The media have withstood repeated cyberattacks, secured the necessary help and expertise, and gotten back up and running. The lowest-scored indicator, media literacy, also rose, thanks to a major increase in media literacy initiatives from the government, many media outlets, and civil society. Amid the war, platforms for debates are limited to social media, where a low level of discourse prevails. Television ratings measurement was paused due to the war, but online media need to use measurements to survive. Content producers and civil society collaborate, but the government can be an unwilling partner. The presence of community media is negligible in Ukraine.

30 *2022 Media Consumption Survey*, USAID-Internews. November 2022. https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/USAID-Internews_Media-Consumption-Survey_2022_eng-1.pdf

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

Ukrainian laws ensuring data privacy and digital security, as well as criminal code provisions on cyber-fraud, do not violate personal freedoms. Due to Russia's many cyberattacks on the eve of and during the invasion, the National Cyber Security Coordination Center under the National Security and Defense Council has stepped up its work, and the state has run more campaigns on information-security skills, incorporating online educational materials, contests, and quizzes, and in-person events.

Reports in January 2022 of leaks from a government portal that citizens must use to perform some administrative tasks were denied by Ukraine's cyber-police, but panelists still questioned how secure it is. Furthermore, the partly outdated personal data of millions of citizens are for sale on the dark web, a freelance investigative journalist said.

> **"Awareness of Russian propaganda's narratives and methods has increased, as the subject has become one of the most frequently covered by Ukrainian media.**

From February 24 through the end of 2022, Detector Media reported that the government's team for computer emergencies, CERT-UA, registered and investigated more than 1,500 cyberattacks on Ukraine, primarily from Russia, targeted at state agencies and information and energy infrastructure. Detector Media further related that the State Security Service of Ukraine neutralized 4,500 attacks from the start of the invasion to the end of 2022.

A digital security expert on the panel said many media organizations had lax digital security in 2022, and demand for those services grew fast. Spurred by cyberattacks on their websites and their employees' email and social media accounts, many media turned to Cloudflare services. On March 17, a major attack hit many Ukrainian media when a shared advertising network was hacked.

Last year saw more attacks on messenger apps and a change in the aims of phishing attacks, according to the Digital Security Lab.[31] The DSL said that when Russia invaded, journalists and activists increasingly took their communications from Telegram to the better-encrypted WhatsApp and Signal. Hackers then started to phish for access to these apps. The aims of Russian hackers' phishing attempts also started to expand from stealing data to spreading malware for deleting information, spying, leaking information, and gaining remote access to devices.

A manager of a national civil society organization said many training courses and online materials on digital security for journalists and the general public are promoted or offered by groups such as hers or media-support organizations, such as the DSL, Internews Ukraine, and IMI.

Internews Ukraine has launched Nadiyno, a free interactive platform for Ukrainians to get real-time advice on protecting their personal data and gadgets. Crucially, it also serves the occupied territories, where Ukrainian mobile operators do not work and people must present their passports to get Russian SIM cards, making it easier to track their phone activity. The platform covers how to protect communications over messenger apps and to prepare for smartphone checks by the occupation authorities. In an Internews Ukraine poll in October 2022, 64 percent of respondents faced issues with digital security, and 55 percent had below-average digital-security skills.

According to Detector Media's 2021 Media Literacy Index, 13 percent of respondents showed the lowest level of digital literacy, 32 percent below average, 45 percent above average, and 8 percent the highest level.[32] Seventy percent deemed the issue of protecting personal data on the internet urgent, and 44 percent viewed the practice of tailoring news on social media to each specific user as a manipulation.

31 Report on Security during the War. Digital Security Lab. September 29, 2022. https://dslua.org/publications/zvit-bezpeka-v-umovah-viyny/

32 https://detector.media/infospace/article/201662/2022-05-01-indeks-mediagramotnosti-ukraintsiv-druga-khvylya-doslidzhennya-detektora-media/

Citizens have free access to training and tools, but many do not realize that they need it. A regional editor noted skeptically that an article his outlet had run on digital literacy during the war was among the least-read.

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

Ukraine's government continues to promote media literacy. Since 2021, the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy has run Filter, pulling together the best ideas on immunizing society against misinformation. Another project, Svravdi, is run by the ministry's Center for Strategic Communications and Information Security to monitor and counter Russian disinformation and respond to enemy information attacks. The panel's data journalist said it has been a success: "Through cooperation of the state with the civic sector, there have been more online and offline ways to spread the word about information threats." Less successful, she said, have been efforts to educate people about journalism standards and what constitutes quality information.

Recently adopted state standards for basic education, which envision media literacy education as cutting across all subjects, are promising. Until now, the subject could be taught only as an elective if extra hours were available, or as part of civic education.

Ukraine has benefited from donor-funded media literacy projects since 2010, including IREX's Learn to Discern initiative, launched in 2015. The Ministry of Science and Education runs projects targeted at people from certain sectors, such as education, culture, youth, and business, and some projects are reaching out to a growing population of displaced people. In addition, NGOs and media run online courses, fact-checking initiatives, quizzes, and games, such as NotaEnota, How Not to Become a Vegetable, and Gwara Media's Perevirka (Verification) bot. Media literacy courses, including some that focus on digital security, are available at the state digital education portal, Prometheus, and EdEra platforms.

Online training is well developed, diversified, and high quality, but access to it is complicated by wartime conditions and internet disruptions, one panelist said. The panel's media literacy expert said that despite numerous media literacy projects available across Ukraine through libraries and education facilities, they are not really geared towards adults.

A fact-checker on the panel said she and her colleagues get more requests for verification now, but people under stress still tend to believe unverified news. "When the invasion began, even people with a security service background and after numerous media literacy courses were spreading false information," she said. Other panelists were skeptical that people, in general, can discern distortions or lies from reliable news.

In the Internews Media Consumption Survey, 83 percent of respondents said they are aware of the existence of disinformation, and almost three-quarters said they know how to distinguish unreliable content from truthful.[33] Only 37 percent of those aware of the problem consider it urgent. Of respondents who were asked to say which of three texts were true or false, 14 percent got them all right, and 72 percent correctly identified one or more.

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

Journalists and citizens still have many opportunities to exercise their right to free speech and information, and journalists use them more actively than the wider public.

The war has made Ukraine the single-deadliest country for journalists, according to the International Federation of Journalists.[34] Notably, 80 percent of 567 free speech violations documented by the Institute of Mass Information were committed by Russian occupiers. Civilians in the occupied territories consulted Ukrainian media or social networks or interacted with government-controlled areas of Ukraine only at great personal risk.

33 *2022 Media Consumption Survey*, USAID-Internews. November 2022. https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/USAID-Internews_Media-Consumption-Survey_2022_eng-1.pdf

34 https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/67-journalists-killed-so-far-in-2022-ifj-demands-immediate-action.html

Plentiful and diverse sources of information and consumption patterns suggest that most Ukrainians engage with reliable information on a weekly basis, panelists said.

The war has made it more difficult to have constructive debates or raise other topics, the data journalist said. For instance, a heated debate over a Channel 5 fundraiser for the armed forces—a calendar featuring the outlet's nearly naked female journalists—was squelched to avoid criticism of any efforts to raise donations for Ukraine's military.

Awareness of Russian propaganda's narratives and methods has increased, as the subject has become one of the most frequently covered by Ukrainian media. As a result, efforts to defend against hate speech spread by Russia have intensified, the data journalist said. Many people have joined Ukraine's informal "cyber-troops," who try to block or file complaints against Russian propaganda campaigns on social media.

> "The panelists stressed that open platforms for discussion--such as Telegram channels, Viber chats, and Facebook groups--which are either poorly moderated or not moderated at all, are the perfect place for lies, distortions, and hate speech.

It is difficult to analyze the status of public debate platforms under martial law, which, for instance, restricts the right to assemblies. Traditional political talk shows on national TV channels disappeared upon the invasion, but some talk shows, such as *Govoryt Velykyi Lviv* (The Great Lviv Talks), appear on YouTube. Most city councils stream their sessions online. Academic discussions take place. Ukrainian-language YouTube grew rapidly last year, and vloggers debate with one another, one panelist said. Facebook is also a place for public debate, but it often limits visibility of a page or blocks or deletes the content. Moreover, bots and trolls are ubiquitous on Facebook and YouTube, she added.

The panelists stressed that open platforms for discussion--such as Telegram channels, Viber chats, and Facebook groups--which are either poorly moderated or not moderated at all, are the perfect place for lies, distortions, and hate speech. The media lawyer said people complain about disinformation or manipulations, but there are no effective bodies to deal with such complaints. For instance, the Independent Media Council is a civic initiative with no legal power over the media or journalists and is unregulated by the government. The government does not have instruments to influence social media platforms.

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

Before the invasion, the Television Industry Committee, a trade association of the key oligarch-owned media companies, commissioned a periodic television ratings panel affordable only to the largest media. In March 2022, the Nielsen audience research had to pause as the movement of people across the country made it impossible to assemble a representative panel, but it will relaunch in 2023.

A regional media owner said major online media and content producers actively use Google Analytics, Meta, or their own metering tools to inspire trust and engage their audience. Those who do not do this risk disappearing from the market. Media often run polls on their websites or engage their audiences with targeted advertising. Panelists said Ukrainian media have made progress in using measurement data to improve their coverage or engage audience segments, but they questioned the quality of certain types of research and the interpretation of data.

Generally, media have feedback mechanisms, but sometimes they use these vox populi tools to present public opinion with a slant. Methods such as live or online voting and quoting viewers' comments and questions during talk shows disappeared as talk shows went off the air during the war. Some media maintain chats and clubs to communicate with readers and Telegram channels to respond to their questions, and they hire managers for community building.

"Feedback from readers became the source of many media reports on

occupation and de-occupation. In other cases, feedback helped relay information immediately, often without verification, and that caused sharp increase in the popularity of news aggregators on Viber and Telegram as sources of prompt and unique news," the data journalist said. If a report turns out to be false, corrections are made to the initial publication only, and they are not necessarily picked up by the aggregators.

On media transparency, straight news items often have no byline, unlike longer articles. The Institute of Mass Information found in 2022 that 38 percent of Ukraine's 50 most popular online media publish contact information for the newsroom, the top content manager, and the beneficial owner.[35] Thirty-four percent publish their editorial policies, and 20 percent publish information about their funding sources or financial reports.[36] Seventy percent publish the name of a chief editor, and 94 percent place links to their social media pages.[37]

Although the Telethon is referred to as a government and private-television venture, a panelist said, the government typically resists cooperating with the media or civil society. "Journalists interact and network with each other but have not yet created an effective mechanism for self-regulation," the television journalist said. Closer networking has become obvious during the war, when many media had to relocate, another panelist added. There are partnerships of hyperlocal publications, investigative reporters, and Ukrainian and foreign media.

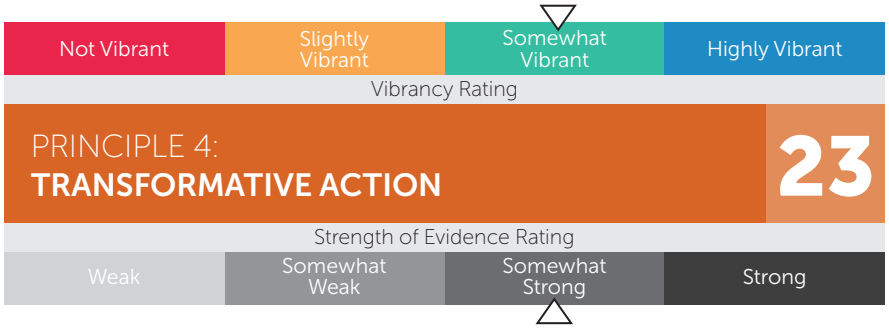
Indicator 15: Community media provide information relevant for community engagement.

Ukrainian legislation does not define community media. Most panelists refrained from assessing this indicator, saying that Ukraine does not have community media as conventionally defined.

Grassroots media are at an embryonic stage, and Ukrainians are not accustomed to supporting community media through donations or volunteering. A regional editor who considers his media NGO community media said people donate—of course less now due to the war—but not enough to sustain normal operations. Such media survive only with the aid of international donors.

Some panelists named nationwide Hromadske TV and Detector Media as NGOs operating media. They are primarily supported by donors, along with some crowdfunding, but they do not enjoy broad community support.

Various local or thematic community initiatives on social networks or messenger apps are not transparent about funding sources or income distribution, and they may lack editorial oversight and policy. The fact-checker said many regional Telegram channels search for news and cover important topics, but it is impossible to know who is behind them, whether a group of passionate people or a local political or business figure using the current climate to attract an audience.



Principle 4's score increased modestly from the 2022 VIBE study, along with all five indicator scores. The Ukrainian media landscape remains diverse and pluralistic, but panelists could not say whether the consumption of quality news media outweighs the damage done by unreliable social media sources. Panelists again gave the lowest score in this principle to individuals' use of information. The highest score in this principle went to civil society's contributions to vibrant information

35 https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/38-onlajn-media-demonstruyut-prozorist-v-2022-rotsi-doslidzhennya-imi-i47997

36 https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/vlasni-redpolityky-publikuyut-led-bilshe-tretyny-providnyh-onlajn-media-doslidzhennya-imi-i47866; https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/20-providnyh-onlajn-media-oprylyudnyuyut-dani-pro-svoye-finansuvannya-doslidzhennya-imi-i47749

37 https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/zbilshylasya-kilkist-onlajn-vydan-yaki-oprylyudnyly-na-sajtah-dani-pro-golovrediv-doslidzhennya-imi-i47462

flows. Panelists praised the government's efforts to inform society on war-related issues, but they also complained that the government has become more closed-off and less transparent on other issues, using the war as an excuse. Government responses to wrongdoing uncovered by the media remain selective and incomplete.

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

As the Institute of Mass Information's White List of trustworthy online media shows, Ukraine has many nonpartisan and reliable news sources, especially online, some with audiences several-million strong. Many have had great success diversifying their formats. For instance, Novoe Vremya operates as website nv.ua, a print magazine, Radio NV, a YouTube channel, and a podcast, allowing it to consolidate audiences and set discussion platforms for people with various views, said a panelist representing a national civil society organization.

The data journalist noted that Strana.ua, which had spewed Russian propaganda before the occupation, had dropped out of the five most popular online news sources, according to SimilarWeb ratings. On the other hand, Obozrevatel, famous for clickbait, *jeansa*, and low-quality content, is still there. The growing popularity of social media as a news source has helped create information bubbles and degraded discussion culture. Social media exchanges are more emotional and often personal, and are inflamed by bots, she said.

As the Internews Media Consumption Survey shows, media with dubious reputations remain popular, while quality media that play it straight and do not engage in *jeansa* struggle for a wider audience.[38] The more trustworthy Ukrainska Pravda is consumed by 8 percent of respondents, Hromadske TV 5 percent, and Liga.net 3 percent. On the other hand, the oligarch-owned 1+1 is both the most popular television channel (62 percent) and the most popular website (21 percent), second only to online news services. However, the survey also found that, if before the war, respondents mainly relied on one or two sources of news, after the escalation, respondents say they use three to five different sources to ensure they have a complete picture of events and to check the news for disinformation.

There are few platforms for exchanging information across ideological lines, as society is divided into information silos, a television journalist on the panel said. In the first months of the invasion, the Telethon facilitated an ideological rapprochement among many Ukrainians on several issues, especially Russian aggression, but it did not hold, he said.

Another panelist said Ukrainians choose media that confirm their pre-existing views.

The panelists did not find evidence that people generally base their perspectives on fact-based information.

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

As the war shattered people's quality of life, it made them more susceptible to populist appeals against injustice and outlandish, sometimes mystical, views of social problems and their solutions, a journalist on the panel said. For a time, they became more vulnerable to enemy propaganda narratives, sensationalistic news aggregators, and other disreputable sources of information. Even in so fertile an information space, though, Russia's overall propaganda campaign failed.

The media literacy expert from Mykolaiv said that at the beginning of the invasion people tended to believe "their sources close to the front" and spread conspiracy theories that Mykolaiv or the whole south would be handed over to Russia in exchange for Kyiv or other areas, despite the government's assurances to the contrary. In another case, when the city's water supply was damaged by the occupiers, people blamed the city government for not making what they said were cheap and easy repairs, which actually had to be done in the neighboring, occupied Kherson region. A Kherson journalist said that the reliability or falsity

38 *2022 Media Consumption Survey*, USAID-Internews. November 2022. https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/USAID-Internews_Media-Consumption-Survey_2022_eng-1.pdf

of information—for example, whether Russia would attack civilians and where it was safe to flee to—greatly determined whether individuals did or did not become victims of war crimes.

Most panelists said they doubt that people are guided primarily by quality information. For example, the fact-checker on the panel recalled that in the early days of the invasion, many people looked for marks, such as arrows, on walls or streets, or lights on roofs and in windows, erroneously believing them to be signals left by collaborators to help guide Russian missile strikes or troop movements.[39]

> “Government agencies and officials have developed robust methods for reaching people, as information has become vital for most Ukrainians.

The regional editor bemoaned people's media illiteracy, citing the unequal audiences for quality and inferior media and a lack of knowledge about how to deal with authorities and local officials. As an example, he said inertia and baseless fear had stopped most parents from complaining about unsanitary conditions in a school in the northwestern Rivne region. Only five parents complained to officials, and only one mother dared to speak to the media publicly.

There were no elections in 2022, and Ukraine's next parliamentary elections are scheduled in 2023. One panelist, however, said that in light of the seismic impact of war on all aspects of Ukrainians' lives, it would be meaningless to consider the role of misinformation or quality information in the upcoming vote. Another panelist noted that the ban on 13 pro-Russia parties had not caused any outrage, possibly a sign that people had stopped believing their rhetoric.

Health care is another area rife with misinformation, although that has become less true in war-affected areas. And electricity disruptions have not sparked protests or eroded the government's support, contrary to Russian propaganda, she added.

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

Ukraine has an active and robust civil society that uses reliable information and knows how to interact with the media and use social media, the television journalist said. These groups communicate with the public, engage influencers, and produce their own content, raising public awareness of important social issues.

Many civil society groups are involved in training and supporting media outlets, fact-checking and media literacy activities, and fighting disinformation. The list includes Detector Media, the Institute of Mass Information, Internews Ukraine, the Regional Press Development Institute, StopFake, VoxUkraine, NotaEnota, Bez Brekhni, and many others.

A civil society manager said civil society organizations in Ukraine have produced plentiful analytical materials despite the war. For example, they worked closely with the national anticorruption agency, cohosting public hearings on an anticorruption strategy and helping determine how to implement it, as well as collecting data on entities and people related to the Russian aggression for further sanctions. Civil society has also produced analytical materials for the public and the government on Ukraine's implementation of requirements for EU membership.[40]

Donor-funded programs often envisage close cooperation between media and civil society in conducting research, including investigations, and sharing it with the public, one panelist said. During the war, volunteer groups and charities helping the army or children have gained greater sway in society as the media have covered their efforts to support and restore Ukraine. Civic participation in policymaking is stronger in Kyiv than elsewhere.

39 https://www.bbc.com/news/world-60879945

40 https://rpr.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Koalitsiia-RPR_Vstupnyy-ispyt-dlia-Ukrainy.pdf

Panelists praised the country's influential and genuine civil society organizations, contrasting them with the plethora of registered but inactive NGOs, politically focused groups, pro-Russia organizations set up specifically to spread the Kremlin's agenda, or fronts for local politicians or officials, religious groups, and trade unions. Civic participation in key decisions increases every year but is still minimal, a policy analyst said. Some regional media demand payment to cover civil society activities.

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

In some ways, the war has made the government less accessible and transparent. There is no broadcast of parliamentary sessions, much information is kept secret, and journalists often do not know what debate lays behind the government's decisions.

> "Many civil society groups are involved in training and supporting media outlets, fact-checking and media literacy activities, and fighting disinformation.

Otherwise, government agencies and officials have developed robust methods for reaching people, as information has become vital for most Ukrainians. The president briefs citizens through video addresses on official communications channels every day. Similarly, ministries and other agencies conduct regular press briefings and frequently update their social media pages and websites. Since the invasion, ministries that work with various industries (i.e., agriculture, transportation and industry) have had to suspend their usual analytical and research functions, as they and their constituents have had to move to a war footing, the civil society representative said.

As in the pandemic, wartime press conferences have become a key way to disseminate government information. Regular live broadcasts of public officials have functioned well, although they have sometimes descended into political self-promotion, one panelist said; additionally, the policy analyst said the video addresses may deliver selective facts and distortions, because the government does not have to debate or answer questions. Some regional local governments are weaker communicators. For instance, Kharkiv residents were surprised and perplexed when the local government started dismantling tram rails and renovating the streets without notice during the frequent bombardments.

Government representatives primarily use and publish reliable information, but those close to them, such as advisers who could be perceived as official voices, may have presented misleading information on the course of war, a regional panelist said. Before the escalation, political misinformation—such as twisted or commissioned opinion polls, distorted statistics, false interpretations, or facts pulled out of context—that was spread on behalf of Russia or its proxies often steered the political discourse. Today, straightforward propaganda bears no political or ideological fruit.

At the national and local level, appointed officials of the executive branch tend to base their policies on facts, but elected bodies are less consistent. Individual deputies often take a populist tone, the television journalist said. The opposition is largely squelched under the pretext of avoiding discord. Debates on social media are plagued by distortions and bots.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

The government is less transparent and accountable now that public registers have been closed, some public procurement information has been restricted, and public data are barely updated, with the war as a pretext. Exposing corruption has become more complicated, and the government's response to it remains selective and incomplete. A journalist on the panel cited a few successful cases of corruption-busting in 2022. In one, the Skhemy investigative project (run by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty) and the Ukrainska Pravda online magazine ran simultaneous exposés on the alleged misuse of UAH 1.5 billion ($40 million) in road construction funds by the Dnipropetrovsk region's

governor. In response, the Special Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office has filed charges against him, and investigators conducted multiple searches in the regional capital, Dnipro. The governor was dismissed in January 2023.

In October 2022, an investigation by the Bihus.info project--which brings together journalists, tech experts, and activists--revealed that a top aide to Zelenskyy, Kyrylo Tymoshenko, had taken for his own use an SUV donated by General Motors to Ukraine for humanitarian missions and evacuating residents from front-line areas. Tymoshenko had to give up the car and in late January 2023 quit his post.

In addition, activists managed to reverse the irregular appointment of a new director with thin qualifications to the state film archive, and others protested in the street against a change to urban development procedures. At the close of 2022, that measure had passed parliament and was awaiting Zelenskyy's signature, although a citizen petition has urged him to veto it.

In some cases that draw great public ire, investigations drag on until people are no longer paying attention and then "dissolve," a journalist said. For example, activists managed to stop a new owner from demolishing a famous Kyiv building, Kvity Ukrainy, in 2021, but an appeals court later overturned a ruling that deemed it an architectural landmark.

The government does not respond appropriately to media reports revealing human rights violations and is reluctant to punish officials for corruption. A panelist said violations of the rights to assembly, speech, and religious freedom usually elicit a strong public response, and another agreed that the public has little tolerance for human rights violations.

Panelists were not able to assess during the war how quality information contributes to free and fair elections. Generally speaking, they said that although the war had put people on their guard, they can still be easily manipulated by politicians and support populism.

Given the ongoing conflict, IREX is treating this year's study of Ukraine as a sensitive country and, for security reasons, is not publishing panelists' names.

CENTRAL ASIA

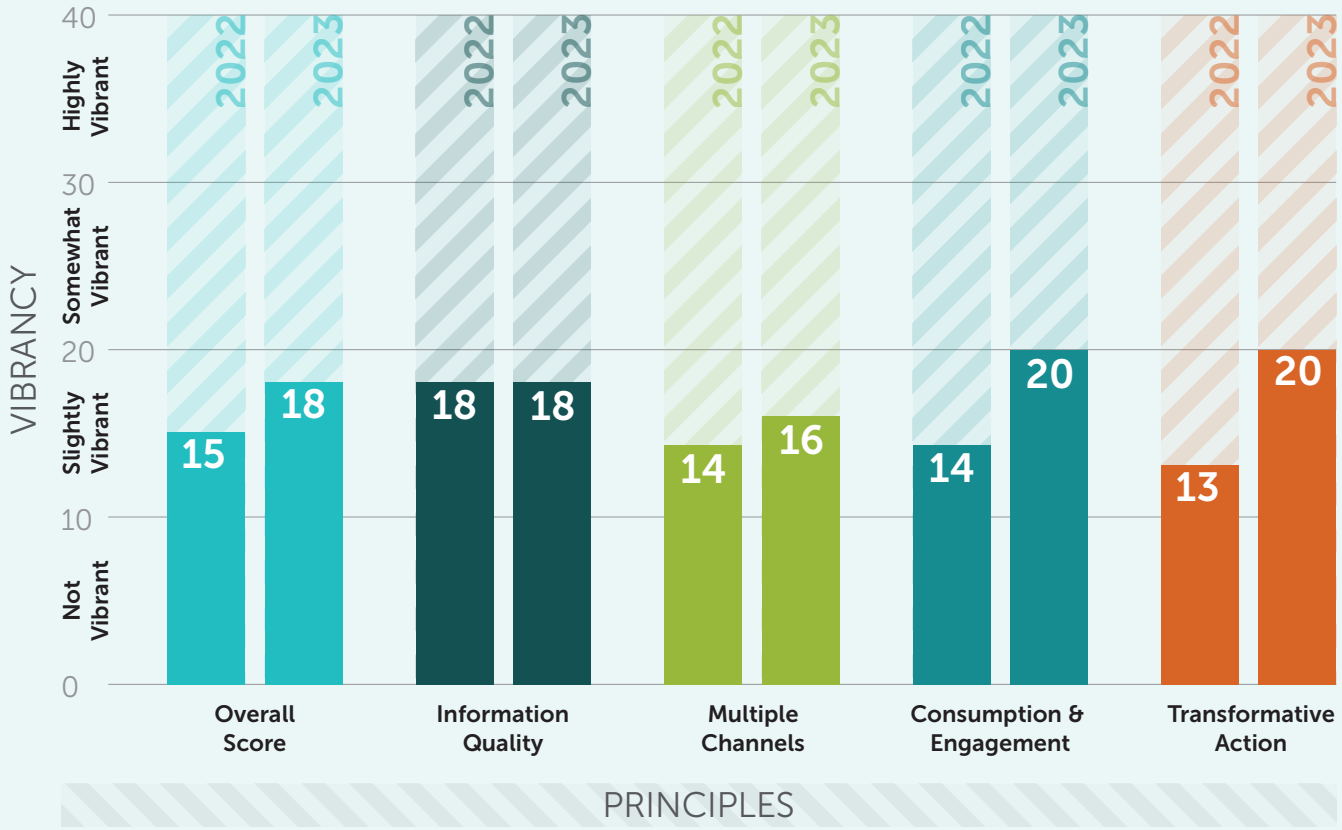
KAZAKHSTAN

Vibrant Information Barometer

2023

USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

IREX



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

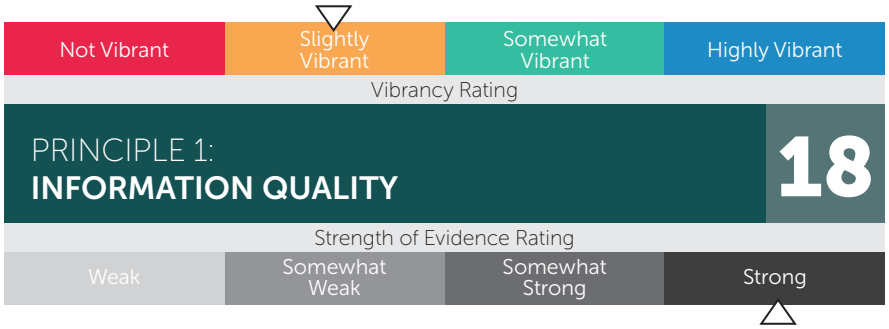
OVERALL SCORE
18

Protest rallies in January turned into mass riots and violence, setting Kazakhstan up for a volatile year. Armed attacks across the country led to a loss of life, as well as severely damaged infrastructure. Journalists and bloggers suffered more than 50 recorded attacks and violations, including one death, wounds and injuries, detentions, and summons to the police. The internet was completely unavailable across the country for several days, leading to an information vacuum. The January unrest also charged Kazakhstan's society politically—and as people became more interested in political events, independent resources appeared to support investigations on state budget spending and to monitor the work of state bodies.

In March, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev unveiled an initiative to "revise the law on the media, taking into account the interests of the state, the demands of society, and trends in media development." By the end of the year, government agencies, civil society, and the journalistic community had developed a draft law on the media that introduced innovations including a statute of limitations for defamation cases, the granting of special status to journalists, the introduction of a press card for media personnel, and the drafting of legislative amendments to improve information access. Despite reforms announced by the president, many long-running concerns persist. The information space and digital broadcasting infrastructure remain mainly under state control, while private channels have limited access to digital terrestrial multiplexes, resulting in a loss of audience and reduced advertising revenue.

Acts related to exercising the right to freedom of expression (insult, dissemination of deliberately false information, incitement to discord) remain criminal offenses, and media literacy remains weak. People tend to believe fake news that spreads rapidly on social networks and messenger apps more than official media—a situation aggravated by the war between Russia and Ukraine.

Kazakhstan's overall country score rose to 18, a three-point increase from last year's study. Citizen journalism is booming, and people are using the internet as their main source of information. At the same time, problems with fakes and internet fraud often occur. The government is investing huge amounts of money in the media and the internet in an attempt to strengthen information security, but its approach has been ineffective and has spurred propaganda and positive coverage of officials. Principles 3 (information consumption) and 4 (transformative action) saw increases in scores from the 2022 VIBE study, which can be traced to a large number of Telegram and Instagram channels, as well as the emergence of tools for interaction between citizens and the state (such as eotinish.kz, dialog.egov.kz, public hearings, and advisory bodies). These tools are evolving into a good way to uphold the rights of people and contribute to operational communication and solving urgent problems of Kazakhstanis. In addition, publications on social media networks have led to real changes, such as reducing illegal public procurement.



The gap between professional media and anonymous telegram channels is obvious: The former try to use and rely on fact-based reporting, while, the latter are more oriented toward sensational stories and publish more fake news. Compliance with ethical standards still remains one of the main problems throughout Kazakhstan's media sector. Social, economic, political themes are covered sufficiently but coverage of human rights is low. The indicator examining sufficient resources received the lowest scores in this principle, driven by the country's inadequate advertising market along with insufficient state support and grants from international organizations to the media.

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

In 2022, dozens of media in new formats—Telegram channels, TikTok communities, and Instagram accounts—cropped up in Kazakhstan's media market. Young and middle-aged people rely heavily on public and social networks for much of their information.

The infrastructure allows the production of a variety of content (print, broadcast, and digital), but a large segment of the older generation still relies heavily on television. The situation also differs depending on geography: In the villages, people prefer television—even if it does not provide objective and comprehensive information and falls almost completely under the control of the state. To prop up the dying print media infrastructure, the Ministry of Information and Community Development proposed state subsidies for newspapers under a new media law.

According to freelance journalist Chingis Ualikhan, only a small number of independent media produce high-quality information materials, "double-check the facts, and use official data that can be double-checked."

In addition to journalism courses, which almost every regional university offers, organizations including Adil Soz IF, Legal Media Center, Internews, Medianet, and the Foundation of Turkic-Speaking Journalists provide a variety of courses and training seminars aimed at improving professional qualifications, both online and in person. According to Jamilya Maricheva, head of project Protenge, the NGOs perform serious work to train and support journalists, and this has a positive effect on the media market.

Unfortunately, though, ethical standards are not always respected. Professional content creators often disregard facts and produce material that is far from accurate. This was particularly noticeable in the aftermath of the January events; the aikyn.kz news website, for example, disseminated information under the headline "terrorists."

According to experts, the state-owned media conducts itself more ethically, fueled by "more censorship and fear," as described by Galiya Azhenova, a lawyer who works for the Adil Soz NGO. However, many important topics are hushed up, for example, the true causes of the January events and illegal rallies. Despite the wide range of topics covered by media, important problems are often bypassed or simply silenced under pressure from the authorities, such as detentions of LGBTQ+ activists and the war between Russia and Ukraine. Thus, there is still no honest information about what happened in January, how many people died and suffered, and who was responsible. However, bloggers covered the January events faster and more fully than official media, according to some of the panelists.

Gulnar Assanbayeva, teacher at KIMEP University and independent media expert, noted that there have been no recorded cases of journalists being punished or censured for inaccurate information and that editors also violate ethical standards. In most cases, amateur

content creators make no effort to adhere to any ethics. No one faces any consequences for violating ethical standards.

Timur Gafurov, editor of the online news website ng.kz, remarked that the large number of anonymous Telegram channels has influenced ethical standards negatively, because their authors often publish unverified information. Maricheva, however, said that there is no institution of reputation in the country—and as society has a "short memory," all ethical violations are quickly forgotten.

Very often the news is very similar across all media. Moreover, in most cases, these are reprints from other media, since most publications cannot afford extensive correspondent networks. At the same time, however, resources to specialize in particular topics do exist. "We see a trend towards an increase in expertise in materials about the country's economy, including the oil, agricultural, and financial sectors," Maricheva noted. The most popular resources are Telegram channels @qztrd, @FINANCEkaz, @shishkin_like, @kazservice, and @tengenomika. However, this trend is more relevant for specialized channels in social networks or for new media, while the mainstream media often avoid covering certain issues.

According to the panelists, the best-covered topics include social issues, political issues, and governmental budget formation and spending. After the January unrest, political scientists became popular and in demand, and society became more politicized.

Media coverage of human rights, on the other hand, is abysmal—and unfortunately, the events of January did not improve the situation. Topics including HIV, domestic violence, religion, the LGBTQ+ community, the military and defense industry, and military operations in Ukraine draw little coverage. Kazakhstan adopted a neutral stance on the war in Ukraine, and in some cases government agencies demanded that journalists remove pro-Russian materials. Accordingly, the discussions on this topic are rather restrained.

When covering the work of governmental agencies and departments, the media with state funding focus on promoting and praising state bodies. Independent sources are more critical; they analyze the activities of *akims* (heads of local government) and budgets, make inquiries, and ask uncomfortable questions. At the same time, however, independent journalists are forced to depend upon alternative sources to obtain information about the work of government agencies.

The situation regarding access to public information is not ideal. Officials classify many documents as restricted, and it is virtually impossible to prove the legality of their actions. Unfortunately, the public has no access to the decisions of local executive bodies, the government, or decrees on the president's website. At the end of 2022, the Ministry of Defense proposed the introduction of criminal liability for discrediting the army and spreading false and destructive information during "special periods,"[1] an initiative that may worsen the situation.

Editorial independence is often out of the question because of the continuing practice of state funding of mass media, in which most media outlets participate. According to the panelists, in WhatsApp chats, presidential representatives advise journalists on which topics they should and should not cover. Instagram feeds are mostly independent, but internal self-censorship runs strong.

Another problem is that news often lacks any analysis or contextualization, leaving the audience with a limited picture of events. For example, few people produce serious analytical materials on the topics of elections, referendums, actions, and rallies.

Indicator 2: The norm for information is that it is based on facts. Disinformation is minimal.

Reliance on facts, the use of multiple sources of information, and objectivity in the production of informational content are mostly accepted as the norm, but not everyone follows these guidelines, especially non-professional content producers.

In many cases, professional content producers violate this norm as well.

1 "Kazakhstan proposes to introduce criminal liability for discrediting the army," Radio Azattyk, December 8, 2022. https://rus.azattyq-ruhy.kz/society/44366-vvesti-ugolovnuiu-otvetstvennost-za-diskreditatsiiu-armii-predlagaiut-v-kazakhstane.

During the January events, for example, President Tokayev said that the country was attacked by 20,000 terrorists. Although this information was not confirmed and the president's tweet was deleted, journalists did not retract their reports. It was reported that "20,000 terrorists cut off the heads of two policemen, raped nurses," which was later not denied by any media, although it was obvious misinformation.

According to Ualikhan, journalists sometimes spread false information, but bloggers, influencers, and opinion leaders are the worst offenders. Young, inexperienced journalists often misinterpret facts and make mistakes with figures. The blogger Meirzhan Turebaev, for example, openly advertised banned financial pyramid schemes, causing a large number of people to lose their assets and financial investments; he was subsequently brought to justice.

Maricheva believes that journalists generally rely on facts in preparing their materials. However, they are primarily motivated not by an interest in upholding professional standards, but by a fear of consequences from the state for publishing defamatory material, which can be more severe than reputational losses.

> **"Editorial independence is often out of the question because of the continuing practice of state funding of mass media, in which most media outlets participate.**

"In the pursuit of an increased audience, which gives the opportunity to monetize through advertising, content producers are beginning to ignore the norms and principles of quality journalism," says Ainur Koskina, a QOS-live journalist. Koskina added, "Public authorities often allow themselves to disseminate incomplete, inaccurate, or false information. They do not bear any responsibility for this, although journalists monitor and report such facts. This generates the same behavior among content producers who rely on the same impunity."

State authorities disseminated false information during and after the January events, maintaining, for example, that there were no cases of torture in the country. In another case, a minister's statement about a possible sugar shortage provoked panic and caused sugar prices to rise sharply; in another example, officials failed to provide credible information about the Ekibastuz (a city in northeeastern Kazakhstan) heating cuts during cold weather. Such cases, however, never lead to any negative consequences, apart from stirring discussions on social networks.

State databases to obtain and verify information exist and are quite effective, including the public procurement website, e-government, the register of state enterprises, the database of decisions of the Supreme Court, and the national bank. Equally popular are the private resources adata.kz and kompra.kz, while Factcheck.kz offers high-quality verification of information published on media and social networks. The project, in its sixth year, promotes a culture of fact-checking, media literacy, and critical thinking among journalists. However, this fact-checking site only gets a wide audience when information portals reprint its materials; otherwise, people rarely visit the resource directly to check information.

An Almaty Management University (AlmaU University) study found that 37 percent of respondents believe that "the media deliberately try to mislead people by spreading deliberately false or greatly exaggerated information," 45 percent believe the media "cannot be called objective and impartial," and 48 percent believe that "most media are more concerned with supporting ideology than informing people."

Responsibility for the accuracy of the information generally rests with publishing editors. Publications on websites generally do not enable commenting platforms, since by law a commentator cannot be anonymous and must register by providing his or her phone number. As a result, fake news mainly spreads on social networks, where moderation is minimal. Widespread bots in support of state policies are another problem.

Media platform algorithms are not effective enough to counteract the spread of false information. There is no working tool to protect against

cyberbullying, although a law passed last year to protect children from cyberbullying has come into force. According to the law's developers, it should protect children from insults and harassment on social networks, but so far there have been no successful examples.

> With the invasion of Ukraine, Russian propaganda intensified in Kazakhstan.

Indicator 3: The norm for information is that it is not intended to cause harm. Misinformation and hate speech are kept to a minimum.

With the invasion of Ukraine, Russian propaganda intensified in Kazakhstan. Examples abound: A guest of the "Evening with Vladimir Solovyov" program on state-owned Russian television caused a stir with his statement that "the next problem is Kazakhstan"; Russian film director Tigran Keosayan spoke about the "ungratefulness" of the Kazakhs in a video messages; and Russia's ambassador to Kazakhstan gave an interview to the Russian Sputnik news agency in which he said that the Kremlin would not hesitate if President Tokayev asked for help in connection with "nationalism" in Kazakhstan.

In August, Ukraine's ambassador to Kazakhstan, Petro Vrublevsky, speaking about the full-scale war in his country, said in an interview with local blogger Dias Kuzairov: "We are trying to kill as many of them as possible. The more we kill Russians now, the less our children will have to kill."[2] (The ambassador was soon recalled.)

Despite the aggressive tone of the statements and the fierce discontent they sparked in the media, the Kazakh Foreign Ministry reacts to such statements in a very restrained, neutral manner.

There is no intentional dissemination of disinformation and hate speech in the media, as editorial offices are responsible for fact-checking.

Social networks are the main medium for hate speech. Murat Abdilda, a blogger with over 40,000 followers on Instagram and over 111,000 followers on TikTok, received a 4.5-year prison sentence under the criminal code article "inciting social, national, tribal, racial, class, or religious discord."

Scandals related to topics like national language issues and the war between Russia and Ukraine erupt frequently on social media, and it has become a tradition for bloggers who stir up controversies to later apologize publicly, often under pressure from law enforcement agencies.

According to Assel Karaulova, president of Kazpressclub, anonymous Telegram channels, which are very common in Kazakhstan, spread a lot of misinformation and unverified information—and they take no responsibility. Furthermore, according to Yerkimbay, the state-funded stopfake.kz project only engages in denial of data that benefits them: "The aftermath of the cases that appeared in the Kazakh media after the war resulted in an increase in hate speech content."

Indicator 4. The content is generally inclusive and diverse.

Information is mainly in Russian and Kazakh, but mass media in minority languages (Uzbek, Uighur, German, and Korean) exist. The quality of Kazakh-language resources often suffers because the materials are translations from Russian, and there is little content in Kazakh on TikTok, Instagram, and other social media. According to Ualikhan, the Kazakh-speaking population does not receive the kind of analytical content that is available in Russian.

People with disabilities have uneven access to information, as there is no protocol in the media law that addresses their needs. There is a requirement to adapt materials in the law on access to information, but there are problems with this in practice.

Experts noted that important official information from state authorities is poorly represented on social media, where many young people get their news. There are also few materials reflecting people's different political views.

2 "Kazakhstan expels Ukrainian ambassador Petro Vrublevsky," Kursiv. October 5, 2022. https://kz.kursiv.media/2022-10-05/kazahstan-otzyvaet-ukrainskogo-posla-petra-vrublevskogo/.

At the same time, over the past year, resources on the protection of women's rights, sex education, gender equality, and problems of domestic violence have appeared and grown quite popular. According to Azhenova, the average viewer and reader wants the official point of view on gender, ethnic, and other groups, but the presentation is one-sided: dances, songs, and friendship between people. Religion and LGBTQ issues remain problematic subjects. Journalists avoid writing analyses on these topics because they lack expertise and out of fear of punishment—such as the $350 fine a court gave journalist Rufiya Mustafina for her interview with an imam, which the court said violated religious law. The ruling was later reversed.[3]

Amateur content producers include representatives of different population groups, including a large number of TikTokers from the regions and from a wide range of social backgrounds. In general, members of all groups and minorities have a voice on social media, and they also have their own channels for disseminating information.

In terms of gender equality, an overwhelming number of media executives are men. Women do not hold top positions, though they are active as journalists, reporters, and presenters.

Indicator 5: Content production is adequately resourced.

The financial situation of the private media and journalists who work for them is unstable and unsustainable. The advertising market is not very big. At the same time, approximately the same amount of public money is spent on state media, loyal private media, telegram channels, which creates unfair competition. Private media, which do not take money from the government in principle, are forced to dump and look for additional sources of income.

Funding sources are very limited, and the state remains the main "donor," with funding totaling about $100 million a year and serving to control the agenda of the country's main media channels. At the same time, the budget is distributed in an opaque and closed manner, making it impossible to talk about fair competition.

Private funding in the media is significantly limited. Any attempt by a businessperson to start a media outlet is viewed as an application to participate in politics. Private media depend on grants from international organizations, advertising, and government orders to produce positive coverage on, for example, the work of local executive bodies, the police, and the parliament. Information on who funds media outlets is often unavailable (e.g., Qaz365.kz and ulysmedia). According to Azhenova, there are news agencies and websites that may be maintained by the presidential administration, but the founder remains unknown.

Advertising is often politicized; sometimes advertisers are "asked" to withdraw advertising or terminate advertising contracts with media that express criticism or oppose the authorities. According to Srym Itkulov, editor-in-chief of Arbat.media, there is still a lot of politicized native advertising in the information environment.

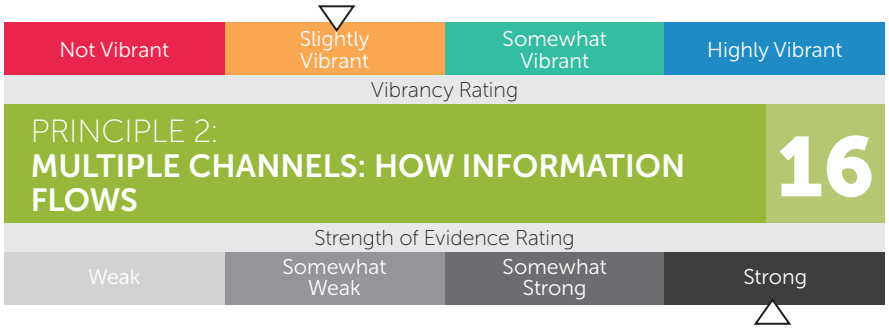
Salaries are typically low, especially in the regions ($300-$400 a month), often leading journalists to take part-time jobs, including working with state media in some cases.

In April 2022, employees of the country's main television channel, Khabar, demanded a pay rise, threatening to skip work. A month later, Senator Nurtore Jusip raised this problem publicly.[4]

Many journalists are leaving the field to teach in schools, where the pay is much higher.

3 "Interview with imam: journalist defended in court the right to publish material," Sputnik. December 12, 2022. https://ru.sputnik.kz/20221210/intervyu-s-imamom-zhurnalistka-otstoyala-pravo-publikovat-material-v-sude-30238175.html.

4 "The senator said that the salaries of Kazakh journalists are low," Aikyn. May 5, 2022. https://aikyn.kz/197982/nartay-men-poznerdin-zhalakysy-ten-be-senator-kazak-zhurnalisterinin-zhalakysy-tomen-ekenin-aytty/.



Formally, Kazakhstanis have the right to produce and receive information. However, in practice journalists have repeatedly been attacked, arrested, and prosecuted. Most people in the country have access to the Internet, but its quality depends on geography. Despite the concept of a "hearing state" declared by President Tokayev—meaning that government officials should listen to citizens, be aware of their problems, and respond to requests--there are big problems with communications between government agencies and society. Panelists gave low scores to the indicator on the independence of sources, since government agencies continue to influence editorial policy, and censorship and self-censorship are widespread. The panel gave its highest scores for this principle to the indicator looking at access to channels of information.

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

Kazakhstan's constitution, along with additional codes and laws, guarantees the right to freedom of speech and access to information. In practice, however, journalists regularly face violations of their rights.

In January, 41 journalists were injured, mostly in connection with detentions, summons for interrogations, and accusations of spreading knowingly false information. Six journalists and bloggers who covered the protests were brought to administrative courts on charges of violating the law on rallies.

Journalist Zhanbolat Mamai was imprisoned in March 2022, accused of "distributing knowingly false information" and "insulting a representative of the authorities" during the January events; he was shifted to house arrest in November.[5] Other examples include bloggers Danat Namazbayev and Margulan Boranbay, who had criticized Russian policies and actions, including the invasion of Ukraine, on Facebook; they were sentenced to five years in prison for calling for the overthrow of the constitutional order and inciting national discord. In July, journalist Makhambet Abzhan was arrested and charged with extortion; shortly before his arrest, he had published materials on his Telegram channel, Abzhan News, about the assets of President Tokayaev's nephew.

The offices of www.elmedia.kz and www.orda.kz suffered several attacks during 2022 as well. Journalists Dinara Egeubayeva, Gulnar Bazhkenova, and Gulzha Yergaliyeva were threatened by the public after the "January events" for disseminating information about the ex-president's family. In November, a pig's head was sent to the editorial office of Orda.kz with a torn photograph of editor-in-chief Gulnar Bazhkenova inserted into its mouth.

In March, the court rejected the appeal of journalist Aynur Koskina against the former deputy of parliament Bebolat Tleukhan, who hit her and damaged her equipment. The court considered that Tleukhan did this "by negligence" and, accordingly, found no concrete evidence of a crime.

In some cases, attackers have faced consequences. In January, for example, the family of journalist Amangeldy Batyrbekov was attacked; his son was shot in the shoulder and back. The court sentenced four attackers to imprisonment for "attempted murder."

And in July, the Supreme Court acquitted the chair of the Union of Journalists, Seitkazy Mataev, and his son Aset, who received prison terms back in 2016 for tax evasion and embezzling funds allocated for

5 "Democratic Party leader Zhanbolat Mamai released from pre-trial detention center under house arrest," Radio Azattyk, November 2, 2022. https://rus.azattyq.org/a/32112137.html.

placing state orders in the media.[6]

One article of the administrative code, "slander combined with the accusation of a person of committing a corruption crime," has proven particularly problematic for journalists conducting investigations in the public sector. The court acquitted journalist Aleksandra Sergazinova under this article, but the risk of being imprisoned for 25 days remains.[7]

According to Gulmira Birzhanova, the only article designed to protect journalists—"obstruction of the legal professional activities of a journalist"—does not work in practice. In 2022, for example, there were 19 obstruction cases, but none went to trial.

Censorship is common, especially in state media, where there is an unofficial understanding that the authorities expect the press to present as little "negativity" as possible. In private media, owners and affiliates sometimes exert pressure on editorial policies as well.

Self-censorship of journalists and editors is highly developed, given that some topics are still dangerous and sensitive, including investigations into the enrichment of politicians, oligarchs, judges, deputies, and *akims* (heads of local government). Nevertheless, criticism and investigations into the former president's family are increasing.

> "Journalists regularly face violations of their rights.

Since sites for which no one is responsible are periodically blocked, the state has influence on information and communications technology (ICT) providers to intervene if necessary. In addition, sites are blocked on the orders of the prosecutor, law enforcement agencies, or the National Security Committee. In Astana, during a rally in December, the internet stopped working. Orda.kz, azattyq.org, iho.org, and bit.ly links that were archived did not open.

Several Kazakh publications have faced blocking by Russia. In particular, Roskomnadzor issued several notifications to several Kazakh media (Exclusive.kz, ratel,kz, newtimes.kz) about the removal of materials related to the war. Some of the publications refused to comply with the requirements and were blocked from publishing on Russian territory; some removed materials in an attempt to prevent the loss of Russian readers.

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

Infrastructure for receiving and transmitting information exists, but it is stronger in large cities than in regions, along with remote and border areas, where the main sources of information are state media and resources available through the mobile internet, such as social networks and various channels in instant messengers.

In the villages of some regions, internet and cellular communications remain unavailable. Moreover, it is not always possible to choose a provider since the internet is mostly monopolized. For example, the ability to use 5G belongs only to Kazakhtelecom. Print publications, in turn, face regular problems with postal delivery, especially to remote regions.

Threats of a social network slowdown are not uncommon, and the internet was completely shut down in January for several days. The internet often "disappears" during social protests and rallies. For example, on the day of the presidential inauguration, the infamous businessman Marat Abiyev organized an illegal rally, allegedly to draw the attention of officials to problems in agriculture (according to him). About 300 people were detained, and Abiyev was taken into custody for 15 days. At that time, the residents of Astana did not have access to the internet, since the government was trying to halt the spread of information about the rally, fearing the involvement of a large number of people. The state attributed this to "an accident in the power supply equipment at the internet gateways." Periodic local shutdowns also occur; in November, the internet was almost completely absent in Astana

6 "The Supreme Court acquitted the chairman of the Union of Journalists Seitkazy Mataev and his son Aset Mataev ," Radio Azattyk, July 19, 2022. https://rus.azattyq.org/a/31949923.html.

7 Govorov, Georgy. "Slandered or conscientiously mistaken? – The regional court considered a libel case against a journalist in Kostanay," Nasha Gazeta, December 6, 2022. https://www.ng.kz/modules/news/article.php?storyid=47396.

for nearly an hour.

Kazakhstan deploys four out of five possible ways to control the internet, according to Freedom House's 2022 Internet Freedom Survey: shutting down the internet, blocking foreign sites, restricting VPN technologies, and via new laws restricting the distribution of foreign sites and their content.

> "The internet often "disappears" during social protests and rallies.

Extrajudicial blocking of websites is extremely common and reaches paradoxical situations when websites of international organizations are blocked by district courts and district prosecutors' lawsuits. For example, when a local court in Kazakhstan ruled that the WHO's website spread information about suicide, the website was blocked. Instances of extrajudicial blocking far exceed those blocked by a court decision.

When the internet was blocked during the January events, information was disseminated via radio, television, and SMS messages.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

The changes to the legislation on access to information in 2022 specified what information should be posted on the websites of state bodies, but problems obtaining information persist. The Ministry of Information and Public Accord acknowledged that "the increase in the number of applications on the facts of restriction of the right to access to information indicates that the failure to comply with the requirements for ensuring access to information by information holders is today systematic."

Officials delay their responses, respond with non-replies, and classify information as restricted or state secrets. Officials often justify refusals to provide budget information by pointing to commercial secrets or the law on personal data (in matters of salaries of officials, budget funds allocated for various projects, public procurement, distribution of budget funds for the media, etc.). In addition, there is practically no judicial route to challenge the restriction of access under the pretext of classifying information as "for official use." In this regard, the Ministry of Information and Social Development published the concept of amendments to the law on access to information, but they do not contain fundamental innovations.[8]

According to Itkulov, "We still do not have enough mechanisms and tools that provide citizens with access to information about the work of state bodies and the decisions they make." Another shortcoming is that not all government agency websites offer an adapted version for people with disabilities.

The panelists did note, however, increased activity on the appeals websites www.eotinish.kz and www.egov.kz, where both journalists and citizens can make inquiries, comment on draft laws, and pose questions to akims and ministers. Also, journalists, bloggers, researchers, and lawyers now actively use open data sources, which have grown popular.

Citizens' trust in governmental bodies is quite low. Moreover, according to Ualikhan, citizens know little about digital platforms where they can effectively communicate with officials.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

There are no laws in Kazakhstan that regulate the concentration of ownership of media in the hands of national and foreign companies. The country has both public and private media, some of which are funded by large industrial groups. There is a 20 percent limit on the participation of foreign capital in media ownership. Perhaps this is why foreign investors are not entering the media market, which is an obstacle to the development of the sector. There are still no public service media.

Private media includes mainly online publications and newspapers. Television channels are mostly dependent on the state, but there are several regional channels with their own news, which differs from the official line.

8 "A new concept of legislation on access to information," Digital Rights and Freedom Landscape. September 23, 2022. https://drfl.kz/ru/novaya-koncepciya-po-dostupu-k-informacii/.

The frequency allocation process can hardly be called transparent, and the procedures are mostly opaque. A special commission under the Ministry of Information and Social Development makes frequency assignment decisions, and the list of frequency owners is usually limited.

Citizens do not face any barriers to creating media, however. The process of registering a print or online publication is fully digitalized. It is much harder to create a television channel, which requires licensing and large investments. In 2022, a large number of Telegram and Instagram channels that call themselves "micromedia" appeared; their content is diverse, and they are gaining popularity rapidly.

According to Itkulov, after the January events and the start of the war in Ukraine, the politicization of society—and in particular, youth—increased dramatically. Accordingly, this stirred the growth of information channels on social networks.

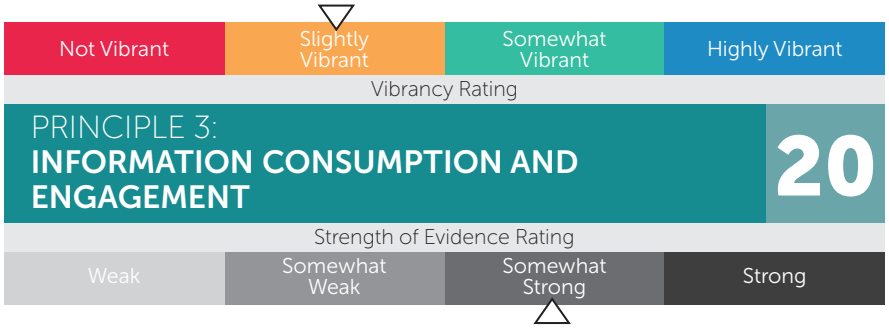
Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

The practice of interfering with editorial policy and influencing content is very common and reinforces self-censorship: journalists know their bosses and what topics may be undesirable. The state interferes in the editorial policy of the media in order to promote its political interests, while media financed by big business or financial industrial groups show loyalty to their funders. Thus, the sources of income directly affect the editorial positions and content.

According to Azhenova, since the distribution of frequencies, licensing of media, and telecommunications services are not transparent, it is difficult to talk about their independence: "Whoever gives frequencies and subsidies instructs what to broadcast or write in the newspaper."

Maricheva believes that it is almost impossible for the media to maintain an independent view on sensitive topics for the state. The media, for example, hardly dispute the official version of what happened in January 2022.

State media have wide preferences and different sources of funding and enjoy easier access to news sources than private media. For example, only state media were invited to the unveiling of the memorial to those killed during the January events in Almaty.



Thanks to the emergence of various messaging apps, such as Telegram, that add to Kazakhstan's media ecosystem, people have become more active in social networks. Involvement in the discussion of topical issues has increased significantly. At the same time, personal data protection tools do not work to their full extent, as evidenced by regular leaks and DoS attacks. In addition, the state continues to apply mechanisms for blocking objectionable and illegal content. Despite government initiatives, the level of media literacy remains quite low: people believe fakes and spread them. There are very few community media, mainly, their functions are performed by publics on Instagram and other social networks.

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

A special law guarantees the protection of personal data, but in practice there are serious problems with its application. Citizens periodically complain about mass leaks of personal information (medical, commercial) and the use of personal data without their consent. In March, the personal data of Kazakhstan citizens became publicly available through the fault of Yandex; later it was the fault of Kazpost. As a rule, citizens do not apply for the protection of their rights, so there is practically no judicial practice on this topic.

The media often use tools to protect against attacks, and contact the provider and law enforcement agencies, but this is hardly effective. It is very expensive for people to install their own protection system, so few people use one. In addition, as experts noted, there are few specialists on this subject.

There is very little evidence that citizens have information security, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation by internet and bank fraudsters.

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

Although officials talk frequently about the need to develop critical thinking skills in the population, in practice, the level of media literacy leaves much to be desired. People spread fake messages without thinking about their veracity and tend to believe charlatans and conspiracy theories shared on social networks.

According to a 2021 Internews study on media literacy and consumption, the average level of media literacy was 16.2 out of a maximum of 35 points. Internews experts note that the most critical media literacy skills include the ability to recognize false information and distinguish bots and trolls from real internet users, as well as awareness of social networking algorithms. Internews highlighted a high risk for Kazakh citizens of being exposed to disinformation, information wars, and propaganda.[9]

> **“People spread fake messages without thinking about their veracity and tend to believe charlatans and conspiracy theories shared on social networks.**

Media literacy has been introduced into the school curriculum as an elective subject, but the qualifications of the teachers who teach it remain a big issue. The Ministry of Information created an information portal to combat fake information, StopFake.kz, but it is not a popular, in-demand resource, since the range of topics is very limited by the interests of the state.

NGOs (Internews, Adil soz, Legal Media Center, Factcheck) typically provide training in media literacy, along with some interested universities. In recent years, there have been many different online courses on media literacy, as well as research about it.

According to Gafurov, the commentators of the www.ng.kz website are quite capable of detecting fakes in the comments of opponents and errors in journalists’ reports. But their critical thinking skills work only in one direction and, as a rule, do not apply to themselves.

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

Constitutional guarantees and laws give everyone the right to freedom of speech without exception, but there are certain difficulties. Activists, journalists, and bloggers actively exercise this right, but the laws contain restrictions on the discussion of certain sensitive topics and liability for inciting hatred and spreading false information. This, according to Azhenova, significantly slows down public discourse.

There are a lot of platforms for discussion, including the official resources www.eotinish.kz, www.egov.kz, and various groups on Facebook and other social networks. Comments on media websites provide another platform for discussion, which, after the introduction of mandatory user registration, smoothly flowed into social networks.

According to Gafurov, Kazakhstan has a fairly well-developed format for public hearings, but only *Maslikhat* (local parliament) deputies make decisions based on public hearings, while “the people are just letting off steam.”

In 2022, Kazakh youth created an independent forum called Morning Tea in Almaty, where representatives of the intellectual elite gather on Saturday mornings to freely discuss the most topical issues of culture, science, education, media trends, etc.

Another key platform for expression is the sanctioned free speech rally

9 “Media consumption and media literacy in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan,” Internews. 2021. https://newreporter.org/mediastudy2021/.

organized by the www.orda.kz editorial board in June 2022. "I believe that once a year journalists have the right to step on that stage and speak out for freedom of speech. Maybe in other countries journalists don't go to rallies, but we need to remind them of that until we have full freedom of speech and democracy," said website editor Gulnara Bazhkenova, who moderated the rally.[10]

> "Media literacy has been introduced into the school curriculum as an elective subject, but the qualifications of the teachers who teach it remain a big issue.

Complaints about media coverage are handled by the Public Committee for Media Self-Regulation, a non-governmental organization that also conducts ethics education, makes public statements, and promotes ethical standards.

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

Content producers try to understand the interests of their audiences, but measurements are still too limited in terms of audience composition and demand, as well as geographic coverage, and little consideration is given to rural populations. TNS Central Asia LLP, a professional media measurement company, provides high-quality audience research services, but the cost is out of reach for many media. As a result, digital data available on free or low-fee sites are used to analyze audiences and work with advertisers. Content producers also use Yandex, Google Metrics, and other free services. The Internews study[11] showed that 92.7 percent of respondents said that they had never contacted a media editorial office, and nearly a fifth said they do not trust any channels.

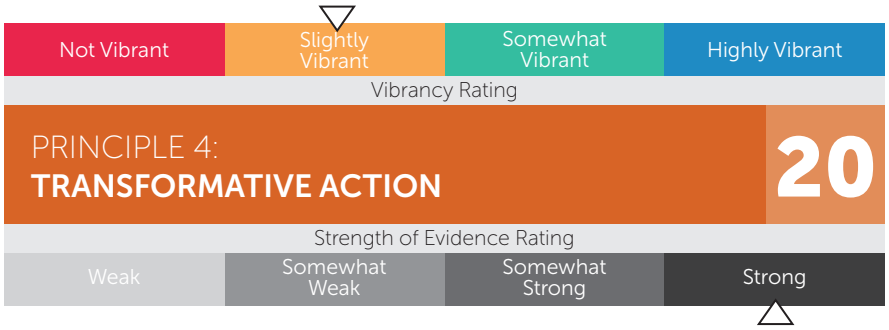
According to Karaulova, the media do not study their consumer audience well, focusing heavily on founders and sponsors instead. The interaction between all market players is weak; industry organizations also work unproductively or are engaged by the state.

According to Azhenova, almost all television media are greedy for cheap entertainment programs; there is no wide and direct discussion on the air. However, much brighter prospects can be seen with some social media groups--such as Zanamiviehali, Protenge, Obozhau, and Manshuk—that do field reports along with live broadcasts and discussions on political topics, among others.

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

There are no true community media outlets in Kazakhstan, in their pure form. There are local newspapers, but they are financed from the state budget. The only local "media" to speak of are Instagram groups, Telegram channels, and WhatsApp groups, used to discuss local problems and share news.

In the Kyzylorda region in south-central Kazakhstan, however, Rima Turmanova—a librarian by profession—created Multimedia Radio in 2021 with support from local village leaders and residents; the channel enjoys popularity in the area.



While there is still no opposition media in Kazakhstan, there are parties that promote their information agenda. As a rule, when making

10 "'There is a constant feeling of censorship.' How a rally for freedom of speech was held in Almaty," Radio Azattyk, June 25, 2022. https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-oschuschenie-tsenzury-est-postoyanno-kak-v-almaty-proshel-miting-za-svobodu-slova/31914760.html.

11 Internews: https://newreporter.org/mediastudy2021/?fbclid=IwAR1q7fyj17ZrMPjhJlyOUB69TGTM-gP4na0WsoYSlI2GI9QrfUN1lmMPVN58.

decisions, people are guided by opinion leaders and independent media coverage. The role of civic activists, who identify the most important problems and draw the attention of the state to them, has increased. There is more information related to exposing corruption and the illegal withdrawal of assets from the country, but officials at various levels are not sufficiently open and transparent to either the public or journalists. Even so, when a case emerges that has traction with the population and becomes public, authorities are forced to respond, making covering up violations more difficult. As a result of these dynamics, the panel gave low scores to indicators examining individuals' use of quality information and information's support of good governance and democratic rights. The highest score in this principle was civil society's use of quality information, driven in part by CSOs taking on issues such as combating domestic violence and ecological issues.

> "Kazakhstan's citizens often form their opinions on unreliable or unverified information, according to the panelists.

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

There are a lot of content producers, including many apolitical bloggers focused on creating entertaining content. Still, they occasionally raise political and social issues; for example, during elections and a referendum, some bloggers called on people to go to the polls.

Bloggers provide opportunities to discuss sensitive topics, usually on social networks, but often this depends on a subscription to a particular person or media, such as Radio Azattyk, and independent political scientists Dosym Satpaev, Dimash Alzhanov, and Shalkar Nurseitov. People with differing points of view participate in discussions on the internet and on YouTube programs, but not in the official media.

According to Gafurov, website commentators actively engage in discussions and debate articles—but their opinions are often based on data that their opponents do not find credible. For example, in disputes about the war in Ukraine, opponents refer to sources in Ukraine and Russia but mutually distrust the sources of opponents.

Discussions of news materials can hardly be called constructive; they usually veer toward hype, statements on the verge of hate speech, or ridicule.

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

September 2022 studies from the nonprofit Youth Information Service of Kazakhstan (YISK) have shown that Kazakh citizens are convinced that they can distinguish reliable from unreliable information; however, only a small percentage know about and use data verification tools.

The panelists estimated that about a third of citizens can distinguish the truth from false information. Many people trust anonymous messages in instant messengers, which feature a lot of dangerous health and safety recommendations, such as calls to buy unverified medicines and health products.

Election results in Kazakhstan are affected not by pre-election campaigning, but by the work of election commissions. During the November presidential elections, there was no high-quality, meaningful information about the candidates; many who voted for the incumbent president approached the decision from the standpoint of "it can't get any worse." As for interaction with deputies, the electorate practically does not know them.

Kazakhstan's citizens often form their opinions on unreliable or unverified information, according to the panelists—and the experience of covering problems associated with the coronavirus pandemic showed that people are vulnerable to taking action based on inaccurate information.

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

Active and "real" NGOs (versus government-organized NGOs, or GONGOs) actively share quality information, monitor the situation in

various fields of public life, and often reveal pressing issues. Effective work takes place primarily in the areas of accountability of the state budget, combating domestic violence, protecting the rights of prisoners, protecting the rights of journalists, social welfare of the regions, ecology, and protecting personal data.

Civic activists are invited as experts to various working groups, a trend that is growing from year to year. However, NGOs most often limit their participation to discussing key decisions, and state bodies and parliament do not take all proposals of civil society into account. One exception is the law on the protection of children from cyberbullying, where NGOs managed to eliminate norms that could seriously restrict freedom of speech on the internet and give the authorities unlimited opportunities to block social networks.[12] Another example is the law on the abolition of the death penalty; human rights activists sought it for many years, and it came into force in late December 2021.

An example of the participation of civil society in decision-making is the project "Budget of Popular Participation," in which citizens propose improvements to housing settlements, and the state budget allocates funding for the projects of the winners. Another successful initiative, the Nemolci project, helps victims of violence, monitors court cases, and stimulates quality investigations.

> "Sometimes, government officials publicly accuse journalists of incompetence.

The media began to turn more to NGOs for information and comments, indicating an improvement in interaction and an increase in the expertise of human rights defenders.

Zertteu Research Institute uses its own research to encourage corruption investigations. Another NGO, the Legal Media Center, actively contributes to drafting laws on the media, access to information, and the protection of personal data, lobbying for the interests of journalists and the implementation of international standards in Kazakh legislation.

Unfortunately, the population as a whole does not show initiative to fight for change and influence the adoption of government decisions; such efforts usually involve civic activists, journalists, and educated bloggers.

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

Although President Tokayev has publicly stated the function of a "hearing" and open state, the problem of quality communications is a major one. Government agencies regularly hold press conferences, issue briefings in the Central Communications Service and Regional Communications Services, and send out press releases, but MPs, ministers, and *akims* often run away from journalists, refuse to answer questions, and simply ignore the media.

According to Azhenova, government agencies demonstrate little effort to initiate public discussions: "There are no cases where a public body has organized itself and discussed in advance and extensively in public, at a conference, the pressing issues. NGOs usually organize such discussions, inviting key agencies."

In addition, sometimes government officials publicly accuse journalists of incompetence, as happened with the First Deputy Prime Minister Roman Sklyar.[13] He said that the media had not properly covered the work during the Ekibastuz heating accident, specifying that only journalists of the Yertys Media holding company had worked objectively.

Political debate in Kazakhstan is underdeveloped, and candidates do not always provide convincing facts and research results. In 2022, the presidential candidates' debate again took place without the participation of the main candidate—the current president.

12 "Parliament passes scandalous law on cyberbullying and blocking social networks," Sputnik. April 20, 2022. https://ru.sputnik.kz/20220420/parlament-prinyal-skandalnyy-zakon-o-kiberbullinge-i-blokirovke-sotssetey-24322625.html.

13 "Sklyar, amid the failure of his work, accused the media of incorrectness in covering accidents," ZonaKZ. December 14, 2022. https://zonakz.net/2022/12/14/sklyar-na-fone-provala-svoej-raboty-obvinil-smi-v-nekorrektnosti-pri-osveshhenii-avarij/.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

Information about corruption in Kazakhstan regularly appears in the media and on social networks. However, the prosecutor's office and law enforcement agencies react only in response to public outcry and publicity. For example, the Protenge Instagram account regularly publishes investigations on public procurement, which led to official investigations and tenders to be cancelled. However, there are cases when seemingly high-profile publications in the media draw no reaction from the state. In 2022, there was also a lot of interest in the search for misappropriated funds during the rule of ex-President Nazarbayev, but very little quality information appeared on this topic.

The presidential election could not be called a fair competition, as international assessments confirmed.[14] The incumbent President Tokayev had significant privileges and political advantages over his rivals. It is worth noting, however, that for the first time two women ran for the presidency.

According to Gafurov, "Even high-quality information cannot make elections in Kazakhstan fair and free—that would require changing the composition of election commissions." Officials denied journalists access to information, blocked their physical access to polling sites, and subjected them to other difficulties.

Civil activist Ilyas Samuratov tried to obtain data on the number of voters from the city election commission, which denied his request on the grounds that the commission had received no complaints. Samuratov then appealed to the prosecutor's office, where the complaint was forwarded to the police, which dismissed the case without consideration.[15]

14 "According to OSCE/ODIHR observers, early presidential elections in Kazakhstan lacked competition, and despite effective preparations for the elections, observers stressed the need for further reforms," OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. November 21, 2022. https://www.osce.org/ru/odihr/elections/531818.

15 Samuratov, Ilyas. "We will make the coward tremble, The bold one will look - we will melt. We are afraid of the brave, We fly away in fear," *Nasha Gazeta*. January 6, 2023. https://www.ng.kz/modules/news/article.php?storyid=47704.

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

Zhuldiz Abdilda, editor-in-chief, Ulan, Almaty

Gulnar Assanbayeva, KIMEP University, teacher, independent media expert, PHD, Almaty

Galiya Azhenova, lawyer, Adil soz, Almaty

Gulmira Birzhanova, media lawyer, Legal Media Center, Astana

Olga Didenko, media lawyer, Internews-Kazakhstan, Almaty

Timur Gafurov, www.ng.kz, editor, Kostanay

Jamilya Maricheva, head of the project protenge.kz, Almaty

Askhat Yerkimbay, NGO Minber, Almaty

Srym Itkulov, editor-in-chef, Arbat.media, Astana

Assel Karaulova, Kazpressclub, president, Almaty

Igor Loskutov, media lawyer, Yur-Info, Almaty

Ainur Koskina, journalist, QOS-live, Almaty

Chingis Ualikhan, journalist, freelancer, Almaty

Ruslan Nikonovich, owner, Novoe TV, Karaganda

Ekaterina Nazarenko, editor-in-chef, https://pkzsk.info/, Petropavlovsk

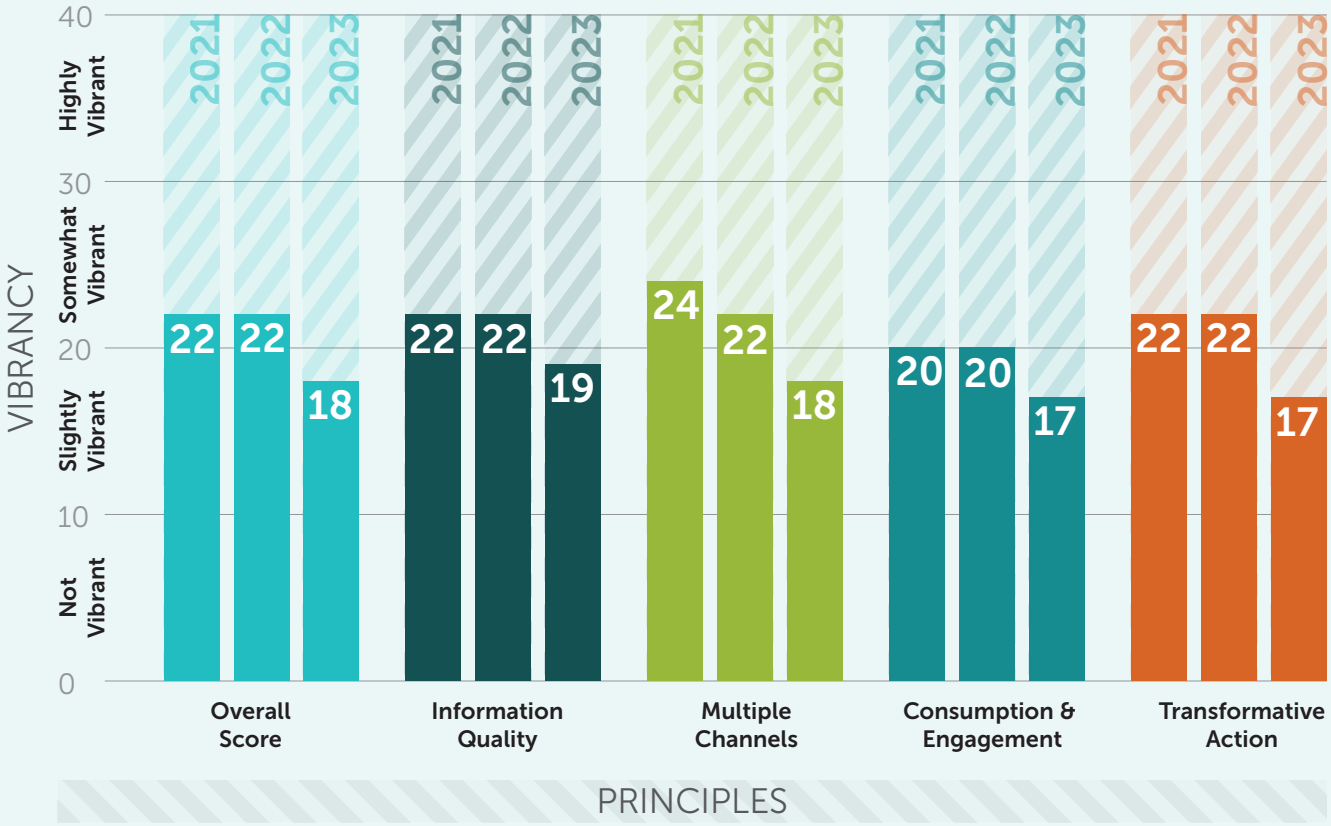
KYRGYZSTAN

Vibrant Information Barometer

2023

USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

IREX



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

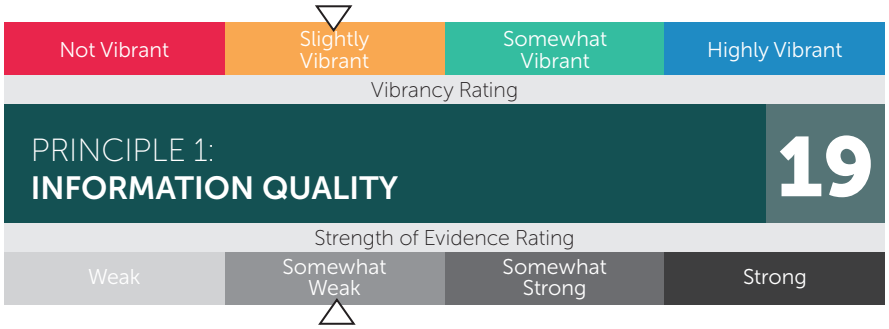
OVERALL SCORE
18

In 2022, Kyrgyzstan dropped eight positions in the democracy rating of the British Research Center's Economist Intelligence Unit. Kyrgyzstan now ranks 115th among 167 countries in the world. The research center report shows the country also lost its status as a "hybrid regime" and is now considered an "authoritarian regime."

Kyrgyzstan saw many political developments in 2022. Major rollbacks in democratic gains and freedoms coincided with the tightening of Kyrgyzstan's domestic policy. A scandal arose surrounding gold production at the nationalized Kumtor mine and the securitization of national gold production and sales. The border delimitation process with Uzbekistan presented problems, with the subsequent repression, arrest, and prosecution of 26 civil-rights activists who protested moving the Kempir-Abad reservoir to Uzbekistan. Also, this year, authorities fabricated a criminal case against the akyn (folk)-improviser/singer/poet Bolot Nazarov and investigative journalist Bolot Temirov, which resulted in the government stripping Temirov's citizenship and expelling him from the country. Periodic armed clashes broke out on the Tajikistan border due to rapid inflation, rising poverty, declining remittances from migrant workers, and the influx of Russian citizens fleeing the war in Ukraine.

Throughout the second half of 2022, officials in President Sadyr Nurgojoyevich Japarov's administration promoted a draft media law that significantly restricted the rights to freedom of speech, information, and the media, according to the Media Policy Institute and the Adilet Legal Clinic. Freedom of speech and other civil liberties suffered under the law, called "On Protection Against the Dissemination of Inaccurate (False) Information." The law was adopted originally in 2021 to repress independent media. As a result, the government blocked the ResPublica newspaper's website, Azattyk Media. These trends led to *Freedom House's Freedom in the World 2022* ranking report to list Kyrgyzstan in the "not free" category, and one of 30 countries experiencing a sharp decline in freedom over the past 10 years, dropping 14 positions.

These trends have negatively impacted the country's information space, as reflected in the VIBE index score declining from 22 in 2022 to 18 in 2023. Panelists noted widespread and direct suppression of freedom of speech and freedom of assembly throughout the year. They agreed that if these trends continue, soon Kyrgyzstan will have no independent media, and criticizing authorities will be impossible. The nation's very weak media literacy also poses particular risks.



In 2022, media polarization in Kyrgyzstan intensified. Independent media engaged in an open information war with state-controlled media and their affiliated political factions. Political groups without professional media standards actively defamed journalists in the independent media, accusing them of advocating pro-Western ideology and serving the interests of the US and Europe.

For Principle 1, panelists gave the highest score to the indicator examining the quality of information. This result suggests that the majority of citizens have access to the internet, which helps meet information needs. The panelists gave the lowest score to the indicator examining sufficient resources. Independent media are especially vulnerable: These outlets cannot produce diverse or reliable information in the face of the government legislating against freedom of the press and deliberately spreading false information.

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

Panelists agreed that local journalism outlets increased their capacity to produce quality stories, now that citizens have broader access to digital technologies. However, the overall media sphere has a dearth of quality stories and covers a narrow range of topics. International organizations and donors--including Internews, the Soros Foundation, and the Democracy Commission of the US Embassy--provide the main support for media that do report on a variety of topics. These subjects range from ecology and urbanization to corruption investigations and gender issues.

In general, newsrooms concentrate resources on creating news content to drive traffic, and mainly focus on national political news. The majority of consumers are traditionally committed to television viewing, and their "window" to international information is still the propaganda-driven journalism of Russian television channels. Local news covers a limited range of topics and is available only the Turmush website (Akipress) and state TV, which encompasses National Television and Radio Corporation of Kyrgyzstan (NTRK) and ElTR, a national television channel whose title means People's TV in English. With the exception of Osh oblast, outer regions have virtually no functioning independent regional media.

Kyrgyzstan media lack professional staff, which significantly limits capacity to produce high-quality content. Most editorial offices have a shortage of media specialists such as investigative reporters, graphic designers, copywriters, editors, videographers, or even translators. The country has more than 10 universities with journalism programs, but the vast majority of graduates do not enter the profession, according to an October 17, 2022, Internews article. Many media workers become journalists without professional training. Gladys Temirchieva, editor-in-chief of news site Vesti.kg, pointed out that universities train staff without considering the needs of the media market.

International organizations and funders in Kyrgyzstan have non-formal training opportunities for bloggers that work in editorial offices. However, panelists noted that these courses are predominantly specialized in narrow topics, such as data journalism, infographics, and data visualization. Trainers generally do not offer courses on basic media knowledge and skills because of the high turnover in journalism. Instruction is normally taught in Kyrgyz, which automatically excludes journalists working in other languages. Media workers have limited access to foreign, high-quality educational resources, even on the internet, since the majority of content producers are not fluent in enough other languages aside from Kyrgyz.

Nurbek Sydykov, a lawyer at the non-government organization (NGO) Media Policy Institute, confirmed that state and pro-government media

often disseminate false information and misinformation out of selfish motives, often after receiving a written order from an interested party.[1] In 2022, the Media Complaints Commission received nine complaints, including charges of insulting individuals' honor and dignity; one-sided submission of material; and organization of information harassment in social networks. The commission is a media self-regulatory body founded in 2008 to provide an alternative to court procedures. However, panelists noted that often the commission is ineffective in its decisions and recommendations. Some media outlets do not recognize its authority to regulate the professional media community.

Regional print media have limited access to high-quality, non-monopolized printing services. Independent journalist Almaz Ismanov noted the decline and reported that the Public Foundation's American Printing House on the verge of closing.

> **"The majority of consumers are traditionally committed to television viewing, and their "window" to international information is still the propaganda-driven journalism of Russian television channels.**

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

Panelists agreed that journalists have challenges in complying with this standard. Limited human resources in editorial offices and time pressures mean that journalists cannot always double-check the accuracy of data they receive. Journalists also spend considerable time following the legal procedures for obtaining information from relevant state authorities.

The country saw cases where responsible state bodies and politicians disseminated inaccurate information or even disinformation, according to the news site Factcheck.kg and an October 25, 2022, article on news outlet Kloop. Disinformation and fake news comes from all government bodies, notably from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, as well as from the State Committee for National Security and the Ministry of Education. Often President Japarov disseminates unreliable information, strongly exaggerating government successes. For example, during clashes on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border in 2022, the government's Border Guard Service stated that the Batken International Airport was shelled. But a few hours later, Manas International Airport open joint-stock company (OJSC) officials refuted this information, Kloop reported on September 16, 2022.

According to the panelists, many journalists and bloggers had difficulty distinguishing facts from truth when covering the 2022 Kyrgyz-Tajikistan armed conflicts in September 2022. For example, a number of independent media published an investigation that revealed Tajikistan attacked Kyrgyzstan first, which contradicted the government's information. The pro-government media not only published materials based on conjectures and assumptions, in violation of professional ethics, but also accused independent media of inciting ethnic conflict.

A group of Kyrgyzstani media--including Azattyk, Kloop, Cactus, Factchek, and T-Media--have united to fight against misinformation and fake news, practicing fact-checking as a mandatory procedure while producing information.

The government's secrecy about the most important socio-political events prevents citizens from learning facts, creates vulnerability to rumors, and contributes to the development of false ideas about news events. For example, consumers still have trouble finding reliable information in the Kempir-Abad reservoir case over disputed territories between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Kyrgyzstan authorities classified the agreement, and media information on the case differs greatly in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

1 https://docs.google.com/document/d/1vqbV6USmMLavY3pMSQJ4_O4gPLSNWiDAVJBn4YFPaaU/edit

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

Anna Kapushenko, editor-in-chief of Kloop Media, expressed her belief that Kyrgyzstan's professional journalists have no desire to harm anyone by spreading misinformation. "Many newsrooms do this unintentionally due to [limited] human resources," she said. "However, the feeling of a deliberate hatred towards certain groups does appear when analyzing messages broadcast by [government] authorities. President Sadyr Japarov's team is constantly using manipulation and gaslighting to mislead the public," she continued.

Journalist Sanjar Eraliev, with Azattyk Media, pointed out that professional ethics are a significant problem for journalists in the Kyrgyz Republic. "The more opportunities for dissemination of information content, the more violations of ethical standards, and the less the ability of the journalistic community to effectively respond to such violations," he said. At the "Media in Kyrgyzstan: Steps into the Future" forum in March 2022, the media community wrote changes to the country's Journalists Code of Ethics for the fourth time since its passage in 2007.

President Japarov, as a key newsmaker, often makes hostile and hate-filled speeches, stigmatizing dissenting activists and politicians opposed to his policy decisions. In an interview with online outlet Kabar News, Japarov called protesters who rallied against the transfer of the Kempir-Abad reservoir to Uzbekistan "liars" and "false patriots," and even accused them of attempting a coup d'état, in violation of the country's main principle of justice—the presumption of innocence.

Key officials and politicians from the president's administration also often abuse their powers. A December 30, 2022 Kloop article gave the example of Edil Baisalov, Kyrgyzstan's deputy prime minister who is responsible for social issues. The article reported that Baisalov constantly uses manipulation and gaslighting to protect the actions of President Japarov's team, claiming independent media are enemies of the people.

Anyone who criticizes dubious initiatives and decisions of the authorities is attacked by troll factories, which have become especially widespread since the 2020 parliamentary elections, according to Factcheck.kg. Investigative journalists with the news outlet 24.kg found a connection between Daiyrbek Orunbekov, head of the government's Information Policy Department, with the organization of troll factories. Kloop Media, which monitors Kyrgyzstan's trolls, reported in June 2022 that they uncovered fake online posts promoting individual bills and politicians that protect corrupt officials, harass journalists, and spread propaganda and anti-Ukrainian sentiments.

Several pro-government media outlets instill hatred for NGOs and independent media—claiming that these entities are agents of American or other Western intelligence services that promote values alien to Kyrgyzstan. They tell the public that these so-called agents aim to destroy traditional institutions and culture, and to destabilize Kyrzygstan's political standing.

In 2022, government officials made yet more attempts to approve a draft law targeting supposed "foreign agents," a tactic borrowed from Russian legislation to control critics. These attempts were accompanied by rallies and public speeches, with pro-government protesters demanding the closure of three independent media outlets, Azattyk, Kloop, and Kaktus Media.

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

Government officials use controlled media to disseminate information that sows enmity and hatred toward certain groups of citizens that disagree with the policies and practices of the ruling elites. Professional media do not fully cover the life and views of all societal groups, least of all ethnic groups. For example, the lives of the largest ethnic groups in the Chuy Valley, the Uyghur and Dungan communities, garner little coverage. Professional media only minimally produce content in the Uzbek language. However, these populations that are underrepresented in key media do have social media alternatives, with thousands of consumers participating in Facebook groups. Ethnically Kyrgyz people are represented in 80 to 90 percent of the country's main media

channels and small media enterprises, Eraliev noted, reducing ethnic minorities' trust in the media.

Given the government's repressive approach to independent media, the journalists and editors from these outlets often cannot produce content on relevant topics: LGBT rights, women's issues, and ethnic minorities such as Uzbeks. "On certain topics, for example, religion and ethnicity, the media try not to prepare materials, fearing [accusations of] inciting hatred," noted Dina Maslova, editor-in-chief of online news site Kaktus Media.

The ruling elites demand that journalists focus more on President Japarov's positive improvements for citizens rather than on negative news that reflects badly on the government. For example, Deputy Head of the Cabinet of Ministers Baysalov, who is active in social networks, directly demanded journalists stop "multiplying pain" in response to media coverage of a rape case involving police officers and a 13-year-old girl."[2]

> **"Kyrgyzstan media lack professional staff, which significantly limits capacity to produce high-quality content.**

In August 2022, the Media Policy Institute issued a statement in response to a government attempt to block the 24.kg news outlet, noting that authorities continually accused journalists of being more dangerous for the country than the real enemies of society: corruption and nepotism in power. "The further the authorities move away from the truth, the more they will hate those who speak it," the statement read. The law "On Protection from False Information" now is used for illegitimate purposes to persecute independent media. This is the new face of censorship in Kyrgyzstan, according to Media Policy Institute's statement, and seems to indicate an intention to establish state control over independent news.

Gender representation in the journalism is disproportionate. Because of low salaries and the low status of Kyrgyzstan's journalism profession, state media outlets overwhelmingly appoint men as managers, while core staff are largely women. At independent media, women dominate among the leaders and founders.

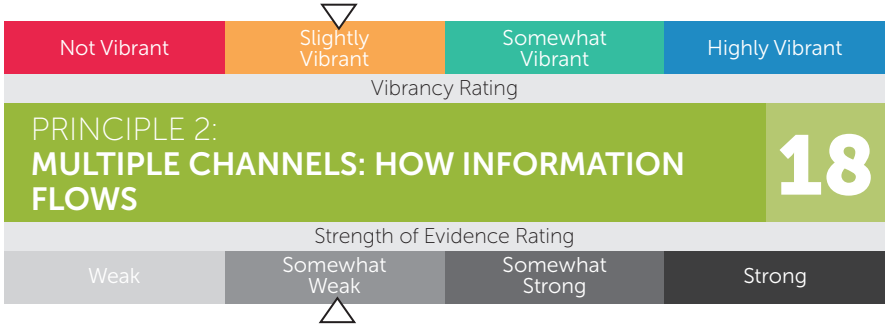
Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced

Independent media have especially limited financial resources, as traditional funding sources for media activities are no longer enough for survival. Advertising revenues for all independent media have decreased significantly as advertisers have shifted their focus to social networks. Advertising placement by key state-owned and affiliated companies is very politicized. The State Property Management Fund (SPMF) and President Japarov's press service decide on the outlets and the types of advertising placements.

Independent media survive on grants from foreign donors and organizations, which are limited and do not give journalists long-term or stable employment. Many newsrooms have reduced their already meager staff and implemented salary freezes in an attempt to lower costs, despite rising inflation. Editors are constantly faced with high turnover as trained personnel leave newsrooms for higher wages. "The editorial offices that have financial resources hunt for promising or experienced employees from other editorial offices, offering them higher salaries," according to Vesti.kg's Temirchieva. Alarmingly, media monitoring conducted by the NGO Journalists in 2022 show that regional media in Kyrgyzstan are on the verge of collapse due to lack of financing. In contrast to independent media's declining financial situation, a number of state media are in a privileged position. Year after year, funding for state-owned media has grown. The majority (64 percent) of the state's total media budget goes to the country's main TV channel, NTRK, which in 2022 lost its public status and became a national channel and TV family. NTRK has not published reports on its income and expenses since 2014. In general, the public cannot access information about state-run media outlets' finances or sources of money. State funding does not go to all state-owned media. For example, the state

2 https://24.kg/vlast/239039_vinovatyi_smi_edil_baysalov_otkazalsya_kommentirovat_iznasilovanie_devochki/

regional website Kyrgyz.media closed in August 2022 due to lack of funding.



In Principle 2, panelists gave their lowest average scores to the indicator looking at citizens' rights to produce, distribute, and consume information and to the indicator concerning the independence of information channels. Kyrgyzstan has increasingly lowered its legal protections for freedom of speech, and key government officials have created an environment in which citizens have no possible way to criticize the regime. Officials also use state media as political tools to manipulate public opinion. The highest scores in this Principle went to the indicator examining access to channels of information, buoyed by affordable internet and widespread access to digital broadcasting.

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

The Constitution of Kyrgyzstan contains provisions guaranteeing freedom of speech, freedom of expression, and freedom of the press. Despite these protections, in years past authorities have attempted to revise media legislation. In 2022, the Kyrgyz government developed a new draft law, amending the 2021 legislation on mass media. A legal analysis of the revised law showed that it gives the state unreasonably wide opportunities to regulate and interfere in the activities of the media. According to an October 27, 2022 Kloop Media report, journalists believe authorities are again attempting to introduce censorship with the draft law.

Panelists noted that despite the relatively liberal nature of media legislation, the government continually suppresses freedom of speech. Journalists and civil rights activists who criticize corrupt authorities are criminally prosecuted on various pretexts. They also receive threats and are preemptively interrogated by law enforcement agencies. For example, media outlets Kaktus, Kloop, and Azattyk's editorial offices experienced attacks and physical threats in February of 2022.

"There are big questions about the lack of rule of law now," according to Temirchiyeva, "Laws are interpreted and applied to please the authorities. Despite the declared freedom of speech and freedom of the press, there is tremendous pressure on the media community."

The panelists pointed to the scandalous case in 2022 of Bolot Temirov, investigative journalist and the well-known founder of the YouTube channel Temirov Live. The Bishkek City Court expelled Temirov from Kyrgyzstan, banishing him to Russia on trumped-up charges for his criticism of the government. This represents the first time in Kyrgyzstan history that a Kyrgyz citizen was expelled with a five-year ban on entry. Panelists also reported that the government is persecuting media associated with opposition politicians. For example, Ravshan Jeenbekov, the director and owner of opposition outlet Next.TV, was arrested during the Kempir-Abad reservoir protest and found guilty of inciting ethnic hatred.

In August 2022, authorities arrested 19-year-old blogger Yrys Zhekshenaliyev, who posted an archived video message on the Polit Uznik website from former State Committee on National Security Chairman Abdil Segizbayev. Human-rights activists called the arrest a persecution of dissent and called on authorities to stop repressions of dissidents. Nurbek Sydykov, a lawyer with the Media Policy Institute, explained that persecuted journalists are mainly subject to Article 330 of the Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic, incitement of hatred, and Part 3 of Article 278, inciting mass riots. It became possible to prosecute citizens who protested the delimitation of Kyrygzstan and Uzbekistan's borders because of the broad and vague wording in those articles, and the fact that these articles contradict the norms of Articles 19 and 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

In 2022, the government repeatedly applied the law "On Protection from Inaccurate (False) Information," commonly known as the "Law on Fakes." Media lawyers and experts decried the legislation as an unconstitutional act establishing censorship in the country. But officials used the rule to block the Azattyk news website for two months, after it posted a video called "Heavy fighting on the border of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan."

Panelists agreed that authorities are using courts to fight independent media and NGOs, and attacking internet sites to remove materials. For example, the editorial office of Kaktus.media saw more than 20 attempts in 2022 to hack its social networks and instant messaging. Most panelists agreed that independent media coverage of potentially controversial and sensitive topics often results in state harassment, cyber attacks, protests, hate speech, direct threats, inspections, and hints of criminal prosecution. Government authorities also restrict internet connections but have yet to restrict information channels.

"From a source in the tax service, we learned in November that [government] inspectors had obtained a list of more than 100 NGOs and media outlets that 'need to be checked,'" according to Maslova.

> "Journalists and civil rights activists who criticize corrupt authorities are criminally prosecuted on various pretexts.

Sources also reported that in February, March, October, and November of 2022, the State Financial Intelligence Service was instructed to check the bank accounts of the Soros-Kyrgyzstan Foundation, Internews, and other independent publications and media heads, Maslova added.

Panelists noted that the state actively used censorship during the Batken border conflict with Tajikistan. Officials called media outlets and requested that they not publish certain information while ordering them to publish other information. For example, officials told Kaktus.media not to publish a statement from Tajikistan's Foreign Ministry and not to post a video of an accident involving a Kyrgyz tank that accidentally hit a car and killed 12 people.

Officials began debating changing the law related to covering armed conflicts, seeking to impose restrictions on coverage so the media are obliged to cover the government's point of view. Panelists observed that this law leaves the media in an uncomfortable position: Act within the framework of journalistic ethics, and cover events as reliably as possible; or refrain from covering military conflicts, to avoid compromised information.

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

Internet services are affordable and have contributed to the increase of online platform users. According to the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 99 percent of Kyrgyzstan's citizens are covered by mobile networks, and 70 percent of them have access to high-quality 4G internet. In 2022, Saima Telecom, which provides internet and TV services, began to expand and build networks in Kyrgyzstan's rural regions. Saima Telecom is also increasing consumer access to information and communications technology (ICT). At the Fourth Industrial Forum "Media Toptoo 2022," speakers noted that since 2019, Kyrgyzstan has gained 1.1 million social network users, now totaling 3.6 million.

OJSC Kyrgyztelecom covers 95 percent of the country with digital broadcasting—as a private multiplex, it covers only large cities with its television broadcasting. Independent media broadcast via private multiplex Digital Technologies LLC. In 2022, Digital Technologies turned off transmitters in the Naryn region due to a lack of funding. In addition, this company is suing several TV broadcasters that have fallen into debt.

Panelists also pointed to Islamic leaders' growing influence, which has created a barrier for girls and young women in accessing the internet. Many religious leaders have proclaimed digital technologies a source of temptation and defilement for women.

The panelists noted that more educated and nonconformist consumers have begun to watch Ukrainian politicians, bloggers, and journalists on websites, as a result of the Ukraine war and Russian TV broadcasting

propaganda of hatred and aggression. Internet resources have provided citizens with alternative information about military events and world powers' positions on the war.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

In September 2022, Kyrgyzstan approved the Open Data Concept and Action Plan, which committed the government to creating a sustainable open-data system accessible to citizens. However, current political practices are counteractive to the plan. When Japarov took office, *Jogorku Kenesh* (the Supreme Council) adopted many new laws, including more tax and criminal codes. These regulations are disallowing journalists and the public to access data on officials' statements. As a result, state and municipal employees are able to ignore the plan without any consequences.

> "Many religious leaders have proclaimed digital technologies a source of temptation and defilement for women.

"Government agencies often do not comply with the two-week deadlines for providing information," noted Mahinur Niyazova, editor-in-chief of news outlet 24.kg. Before Japarov's administration, journalists could ask for comments and information from agency specialists; now they must go through press secretaries for information.

The panelists said that the public has no access to information on the most pressing issues of Kyrgyzstan's policies, economics, and society. Neither the media nor the public are permitted information access on important parliamentary meetings or government expenditures, such as the defense budget and funding for fighting corruption. According to the panelists, journalists saw a rise in the number of government documents receiving the status of "for official use only." Journalists also have no access to courts for covering high-profile cases. Even obtaining reliable and complete information to help citizens fulfill their duties is difficult. For example, the panelists pointed out that citizens have had to go to the media to clarify details of the new tax code after the Ministry of Finance conducted a poor public information campaign. As a result, journalists had to spend a great deal of time finding the necessary information.

On October 28, the mass media of Kyrgyzstan refused to publish news and official information from state bodies for three hours, protesting restrictions on freedom of speech in the country. Instead of news, outlets presented a black banner with the text "No news. There is pressure on the media." In addition, editorial boards refused to publish state press releases the entire day.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Kyrgyzstan had 130 TV and radio channels at the end of 2021. State-owned and privately owned companies all provide terrestrial television services across the country. Panelists observed, however, that the competition between independent and state-owned media is unfair, because state-owned media have better access to funding and sources of information. For example, NTRK employs 760 people, while the private E1TR has just 260. Even the most popular independent media have just seven to 10 employees (with the exceptions of Azattyk and Kloop). The state budget allots approximately $9 million to maintain state-owned media. NTRK receives more than half of that allocation. In 2021, the station received KGS 400 million ($4.6 million), but after it its 2022 transition from a public to a national television and radio channel, KGS 13 million ($149,000) was allotted to increase employee salaries.[3]

Kyrgyzstan's government does not provide private media with the subsidies that would allow them to produce socially significant content. Independent media rarely create educational programs, given the constant time pressures of the news cycle and the emphasis on building politically oriented programs and entertainment content. "There are different channels for disseminating information in Kyrgyzstan. But, in essence, the state TV conglomerate is silencing other voices," noted Kapushenko, "Independent media do not have enough resources to interrupt the propaganda materials of state television channels."

3 https://24.kg/vlast/226003_9millionov_ejegodno_tratit_byudjet_nasoderjanie_gosudarstvennyih_smi_/

Panelists agreed that independent media outlets turn to foreign website hosting services out of security considerations and given the high service costs in Kyrgyzstan. According to Ismanov, in 2022, a number of Kyrgyz websites hosted in Russia were on the verge of closing as fallout from the Ukraine war. The website of the Association of Community Media was not working for a certain time; and Journalist.kg, a website of the country's oldest media NGO, was blocked by a Russian hosting company. The EU MediaDialog project's site on hate speech in Kyrgyzstan also stopped working last year.

The lack of open data on affiliations of certain media outlets with political groups makes their audiences vulnerable, because it does not allow them to know what special interests these media serve. While Kyrgyzstan does have a law that regulates the concentration of domestic and foreign ownership of media, it is functionally toothless since the Ministry of Justice, which registers media outlets, does not keep records of foreign capital investments in media ownership. To date, no media company has been subject to any penalties for violating the share of foreign participation in media financing outlined in law.

Broadcast signal distribution channels are monopolized and are in the hands of the state through the Republican Production Association of Radio Relay Trunks of Television and Radio Broadcasting. The state fully controls the lists of TV and radio companies, which are included in two (social and commercial multiplex packages.

A new law adopted in April 2022 "On the National Television and Radio Broadcasting Corporation of the Kyrgyz Republic" provides the legal foundation to create a state media corporation that includes NTRK, along with regional state television and radio companies. This corporation could potentially join state television and radio broadcasting organizations, companies, studios, and creative production associations. However, there are currently limited concerns that this corporation could evolve into a production and distribution monopoly, since the government cannot currently provide minimum financial resources for the state media included in the corporation.

It is difficult to assess the fairness and transparency of the process of allocating the spectrum for broadcast frequencies due to the lack of information; however, criminal cases appear go before the judiciary that highlight unfair and opaque frequency distribution.

Kyrgyzstan law mandates that TV and radio companies, regardless of the form of ownership, broadcast more than half of their programs in the Kyrgyz language. In reality, however, even the relatively well-resourced NTRK is unable to comply with the law.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

The panelists all agreed that financing state-owned media from the government budget has a number of negative consequences. It creates unequal conditions in the media sphere, thereby distorting the country's market. It also turns state-owned media into instruments of political struggle, prohibiting them from competing and creating high-quality information content. All of these effects propagate the image of journalists as unscrupulous and corrupt. Government subsidies also hinders technological development and introduction of innovative media approaches by reducing competition among the state media, limiting resources, and fixing incomes of content producers.

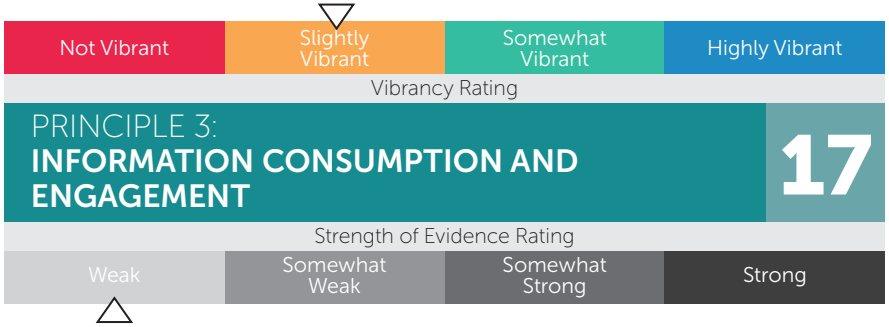
Panelists pointed out that state-owned media have exclusive access to certain sources of information. For example, presidential interviews appear only in state media. State-owned outlet Kabar was able to conduct a series of exclusive interviews with the president. NTRK staff also can more easily invite a minister or deputy for an interview than any independent media journalist can. Only state media are permitted to cover such news stories as parliamentary sessions or to attend events held in residences.

Journalist Eraliev noted that bloggers offer the public access to a variety of media, and despite the advantages of state media, bloggers' channels are often more popular and attract large audiences.

The Bulak.kg media website pointed to the ways in which state-run media are controlled by the government. Journalists at the site collected and analyzed posts that promoted pro-government viewpoints regarding

the border dispute between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. The data revealed that NTRK employees participated in this discourse. Bulak.kg also analyzed posts on social networks, and results showed that state channels and Region.kg disseminated hate speech, threats of violence, and manipulation through videos related to the Kempir-Abad reservoir protest. The posts condemned activists' actions and their demand to release state documents on the case. Meanwhile, privately owned outlet Vesti.kg published a video that showed the local population's support for the Kempir Abad issue in a rally sponsored by the government.[4]

"The editorial policy of many media outlets may depend on the conditions and values of the founders, on the financial stability of the resource, and on the values of employees," Temirchieva noted. She called out the government's intense pressure on the media, and the arrests, persecution, and detentions of Kyrgyzstan journalists, as causing self-censorship. For example, she said that her outlet, Vesti.kg, disabled comments on its website to avoid provocations from some authorities, creation of fake accounts that support the government, and possible application of the law on false information.



Principle 3 received a relatively low score. The indicator on media literacy garnered the lowest scores, due to a lack of critical thinking among consumers and the population's generally low level of media literacy. The indicator covering personal data protection and digital security received the highest score, as media workers and consumers had many training opportunities in 2022 on digital practices and security in working with data. The indicator might have also scored highly because some panelists are unfamiliar with the mechanisms of personal data protection and digital security, which limited their discussions on these topics during the expert meeting.

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

In 2008, the government passed a law on personal information. The law focused on protecting human rights and freedoms related to the collection, processing, and use of personal data. The law was amended in 2022 and now contradicts the previous legislation. When the 2022 draft law was discussed in parliament, some MPs assessed it as unconstitutional given that it had no checks and balances for the National Security Committee and put citizens' personal information protections at risk.[5]

Media company staff, journalists, and state employees have inadequate levels of digital security knowledge. International organizations provide training on protecting personal and digital data for Kyrgyzstan's activists and media community, but it is impossible to completely eliminate user-error weakness in information security.

Cyber attacks on government websites are an ongoing phenomenon. In the summer of 2022, for example, hackers entered the government's Ministry of Finance website. However, hackers target journalists' personal accounts, independent media's editorial offices, and journalist's Telegram social media channels more than they do government sites. As Kapushenko explained, "Attackers first targeted accounts linked to the nationalized mobile operator MegaCom's phone numbers, illegally obtaining access codes to log into accounts." Journalists found out from international security experts that media opponents were creating duplicate MegaCom SIM cards to gather data from journalists' phones.

4 https://vesti.kg/politika/item/104972-batken-by-tak-okhranyali-ubegaete-pozor-vozmushchennye-uzgentsy-provozhayut-sadyra-zhaparova-posle-vstrechi-video.html

5 https://24.kg/vlast/227046_zakonoproekt_oproslushke_pod_kolpak_mogut_vzyat_lyubogo/

But independent news site Akchabar.kg reported that the state-owned company denied any involvement. To combat government access to personal data, security specialists recommended using two-factor authentication for all platforms and to unlink accounts from Kyrgyz mobile operators.

Panelists pointed to a significant hacking case that occurred on October 6, 2022, involving Kloop media. Kloop and T-Media journalists were covering a *kurultai* (a regional political and military council) in Uzgen on the issue of transferring the Kempir-Abad reservoir to Uzbekistan. While broadcasting live on Facebook, suddenly the journalists lost their internet connection, according to a Kloop article. Later it was revealed that the broadcasts for both media outlets were removed from Facebook as a result of an attack on the Facebook page of the Kloop journalist. The new Kloop journalist, who previously worked at T-Media, neglected digital security requirements and did not use two-factor authentication procedures. Her Facebook account was linked to the MegaCom mobile operator, and attackers easily obtained an access code to the accounts of both publications and deleted the broadcast. Immediately afterwards, Kloop changed its security protocols and introduced stricter liability for non-compliance with digital protections.

> **“Media company staff, journalists, and state employees have inadequate levels of digital security knowledge.**

Most independent media and bloggers do not practice security measures. According to the panelists, Bolot Temirov's harassment and expulsion could have been avoided if the Temirov Live YouTube channel had better digital protections of sensitive data. (None of the digital equipment in the channel's editorial office had protections in use.) Panelists held that funding is a serious barrier to installing digital protections—the cost can be prohibitive to transfer server maintenance abroad and create mirror sites to ensure safety.

Niyazov noted that hackers began using media site templates to write fake news articles, which misled even the most loyal readers. The average consumer has very little digital literacy. Only a few citizens, who work in digital technology fields, have some level of knowledge.

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

Panelists agreed that the level of media literacy in Kyrgyzstan is very low. The country offers no courses on media literacy in its education curricula. The Ministry of Education does plan to introduce them in secondary schools during the 2023-2024 academic year, according to news site Bulak.kg. Additionally, many websites have courses on critical thinking and information literacy skills. However, the vast majority of consumers do not seek out these resources due to language barriers or unawareness of the need for such training.

Panelists expressed the belief that the population's attitude on the Ukraine war serves as a litmus test of its media literacy levels. Many citizens mindlessly repeat pro-Russian propaganda they see on Russian TV programs, which suggest that the Russian government had no choice but to invade and justify President Putin's aggressive policies toward invading Ukraine.

In addition, many citizens obtain political news from instant messenger apps such as Telecom or SnapChat. When they see news sent in a chat room or to an acquaintance or a newsletter, it has the potential to become “truth” in a consumer's mind. The majority of Kyrgyzstan's citizens have family members or friends that are laborers in Russia, and they actively distribute video and audio podcasts from Russian social networks via instant messenger apps. This transmits a two-tiered system of Russian propaganda and helps explain how misinformation in Kyrgyzstan continues to spread.

Temirchieva expressed the view that the nation's media literacy level does not depend on the level of education. For example, parliamentarians with high education and business credentials do not have high media literacy, she said. These deputies lobby for bills restricting freedom of speech and assembly; defame NGOs, independent journalists, and bloggers; and advocate blocking social networks such

as TikTok. Many users confuse social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Telegram) with news and informational websites--or are not aware of news websites' existence at all. Thus, citizens' consumption of news content can be very superficial.

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

Journalists, activists, and NGO representatives actively use information available to them, and they exercise their rights to freedom of speech. However, most ordinary citizens do not know about their human and civil rights, and those who are aware cannot adequately protect them. The panelists explained that some of their viewers and readers are afraid to contact government agencies for information on activities and services, often turning to journalists to find this information. Citizens who testify about violations in agencies and with officials do so anonymously.

Panelists noted that the public hearings and discussions that public authorities had previously enlisted widely are gradually being phased out, or only conducted formally. Most bills are not publicly examined, as required by law. As Ismanov pointed out, parliament held no public hearings on socially relevant issues during 2022. Moreover, the Adilet legal clinic criticized parliamentarians for reducing the time period for public discussions from one month to 15 days. Kapushenko said that in 2022, authorities introduced a new way of dealing with journalists and the public by banning the use of recording devices at events that should be in the public domain.

> "Some citizens become tools in the hands of manipulators: unscrupulous politicians and their trolls that advocate for closing media and arresting journalists and human-rights activists.

Media experts and some MPs have repeatedly stated that government authorities use bot factories to spread disinformation. Specially hired people open hundreds of fake online accounts and through them denigrate people and organizations—most often independent journalists and civic activists. These social media bullies also use hate speech. Some citizens become tools in the hands of manipulators: unscrupulous politicians and their trolls that advocate for closing media and arresting journalists and human-rights activists.

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

Kyrgyzstan has not had any large-scale measurements of media consumption since 2018. Most media companies have no understanding about their audiences or information needs. In this situation, each media format, and each individual edition, finds its own strategies. For example, online media constantly monitor statistics on content consumption, most often using the free Google Analytics website visitor statistics service. Internews announced a people meter initiative to measure viewing habits, but at the end of 2022 it had not launched.

Niyazova pointed to a study of current media consumption in Kyrgyzstan by the regional Internews REVIVE project. According to Niyazova, 72 percent of respondents consume news from social networks; while 28 percent had the greatest trust in information from NTRK—in particular, its information program "Ala-Too." According to Maslova, Kaktus's editor-in-chief, this year the media began to more actively challenge state pressures. They reprinted materials on freedom of speech, covered cases against the media, and promptly organized joint statements and appeals concerning these cases.

Independent media and civil society organizations receive feedback from each other on work issues. At the same time, relations between independent media and press services are much more tense, and feedback is often not constructive. Staff at pro-government media or state-owned media tend to ignore critiques by citizens and fellow media professionals.

Panelists noted, and research data show, that Kyrgyzstan has a generally low level of public confidence in the media. Some journalists seem unaware of their moral responsibility for disseminating inaccurate information and do not often seek to gain their audiences' trust. To avoid apologizing for publishing unverified and fake information, the media usually try to deflect audiences from identifying the unreliable information they disseminate. The media outlet Kloop is the only exception, panelists said. Its editorial board publishes refutations, apologizes for the publication of unverified information, and explains in detail how and why such an error occurred. Moreover, these retractions are highlighted on the site's home page.[6]

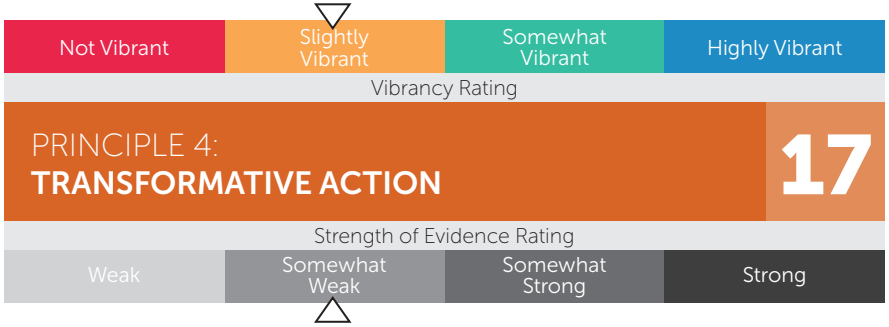
Indicator 15: Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.

The Association of Community Media is registered in Kyrgyzstan, and the group's website, Kyrgyzmedia.kg, hosts material produced by 20 community multimedia centers and five community radio stations. The association is a partner a supporter of freedom of expression, but despite its 10-year history, community media have not become professionalized. Most community journalists work on an amateur level, and regional governments offer little or no support for community media outlets.

The overwhelming majority of panelists did not have sufficient information about the state of community media in the country. Marat Tokoev, head of the Public Association of Journalists, pointed out that the biggest problem of community media is sustainability, due to frequent employee turnover.

According to Ismanov, "Local community media are unevenly represented in regions. They are more popular in the Naryn and Chui regions but are rarely represented in the most densely populated regions, like Osh." He noted that community media are non-politicized and, as a result, they rarely spread misinformation.

6 https://kloop.kg/blog/2022/11/13/issledovanie-kyrgyzskogo-matematika-priznali-nauchnym-otkrytiem/



Panelists had a difficult time assessing the indicator concerning people's actions based on quality information. They had no knowledge of research or data on the impact of information on citizens and said that journalists have little awareness of such issues. The lowest average score in this principle went to the indicator discussing government bodies using high-quality information to make public policy decisions. They gave the highest average score to the indicator on civil society using high-quality information to improve their communities. To a certain extent, this score reflects the panelists' positive professional interactions with civil society institutions.

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

Kyrgyzstan has a variety of media, offering a range of content: political, economic, educational, and entertainment. Niche media especially has grown. State-owned television outlets, such as the NTRK television family, launched specialized channels on culture, science, and sports. Private media, including Akipress with 12 specialized sites, have followed suit. Temirchieva noted that the NTRK Culture Channel is very popular with older citizens in rural and urban areas. Elima Dzhaparova, a journalist with Internews, said that #Akyrkysabak, the Kyrgyz YouTube series about youth, garnered millions of viewers in the first days after posting.

Many new media formats have appeared over the past year, especially

TikTok videos and podcasts, according to Eraliev. Producers have released a range of podcasts including "Eki Daryger," "Isyk Nan," "Kishi," "Media Kyzdar," "More than sex," and others, he added. The podcast series, "Ysyk Nan," by KTRC radio journalist S. Kaldybayeva, represents the first podcast produced in the Kyrgyz language. The series examines the Pamir Kyrgyz people, who have resettled in their historical homeland in Afghanistan and are trying to adapt to their new life.

Religious and Islamic media in Kyrgyzstan are widespread, and the exact number is unknown. As of five years ago, researchers indicated that the country had 56 mainly internet channels. Other outlets, including Radio Maral, Ayan TV, and state TV and radio companies, have a significant number of religious programs in their broadcast schedule. The vast majority of the nation's media, as well as society as a whole, are politicized. "Often the audience gets tired of political news, but many citizens do discuss political issues," journalist Niyazova said. Independent journalist Bakyt Orunbekov noted that the country has a wide range of political party press, but these media mainly "come to life" during pre-election periods.

Panelists said that they believe independent media try to maintain standards and provide platforms for discussion and dialogue between supporters of different ideological views. State and pro-government media are biased when selecting speakers for public dialogue programs and don't provide opportunities to voice opinions that differ from the government line. Ismanov maintained that "each media outlet has its own 'list' of [speakers] they prefer. But no media outlet will ever admit to having such a list."

"State and pro-government media are biased when selecting speakers for public dialogue programs and don't provide opportunities to voice opinions that differ from the government line.

Panelists noted that no media outlet is capable of organizing constructive dialogues on certain controversial topics, including the Ukraine war and the armed clashes with Tajikistan, Participants' extreme emotions surrounding these issues preempt such discussions.

Representatives of various ideological views use social networks and some media sites for open dialogue and discussions in the comments sections. Eraliev emphasized that sometimes digital platform discussions can be very constructive, and lead to solutions to problems that mainly concern individuals. For example, people on digital platforms often provide financial assistance to citizens in need. Kyrgyz users have active discussions on current events on Facebook and Twitter.

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

Even without reliable studies on the impact of media consumption habits on citizens, panelists agreed that consumers are easily influenced by misinformation and disinformation. Most consumers do not have access to media literacy training on critical thinking and can be easily manipulated. Kloop's Kapushenko noted this was especially problematic during the Covid-19 pandemic, when citizens sought out chat groups and obtained misinformation about virus cures and protections, instead of looking to official medical recommendations about the importance of masks and vaccinations. She said that many people still believe conspiracy theories and health misinformation even after the pandemic eased.

"Often, people's behavior does not depend on high-quality, analytical information, but on the recommendations of relatives and friends," said Vesti.kg's Temirchieva.

Ismanov noted that misinformation has a major impact during pre-election periods, and often, unreliable information determines the outcome of elections. "False information spreads quickly and is manipulative," he said. "Because of this manipulation, people form a negative attitude towards democratic values, freedom of speech, and maintaining a civil society."

WhatsApp messenger promotes a heavy amount of unverified

information on political, social, and religious issues, and government officials often use this tool during election campaigns.

According to 24.kg's Niyazova, different population groups rely on their own "trusted" media sources. Kyrgyzstan's rural population in the north form their views from national television, while the south has widespread pro-government media outlets that are very influential, he said.

> **"Panelists agreed that state authorities not only fail to respond appropriately to information on human rights violations, but they commit violations as well.**

Sydykov with the Media Policy Institute observed that misinformation leads people to act against public interest, particularly with regard to environmental issues. For example, the air quality in Bishkek is highly polluted and poses a health risk. Yet, he pointed out, many citizens do not know that they should use catalytic converters to reduce car emissions.

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

Panelists recognized the Kyrgyzstan NGO sector for its key contributions to developing democracy, freedom of speech, and other human rights and freedoms, including the upholding of justice and the rule of law. Panelists also said that a large number of nonprofit groups significantly improve life of the local community. For example, NGOs raised public awareness about the causes of smog in Bishkek, and taught consumers how to monitor the level of air pollution in the capital daily. Meanwhile, authorities don't act to save the environment.

However, NGOs have limited ways to spread their information in a publicly accessible form, and their collaboration with the media is fragmented. "Civil society is more responsible in how they present information, but NGOs are far removed from their beneficiaries," said Kapushenko. "The information they disseminate is often difficult to understand. NGOs' production of up-to-date research and information often attracts the media to make interesting content based on the work. But the problem is how NGOs collaborate with the media."

Until recently, NGOs did give journalists exclusive information and only asked them to write news stories based on their reports, according to Semetey Amanbekov, editor-in-chief of independent news outlet Elgezit.kg. Niyazova agreed and noted that communication between and among NGOs and the media is broken, without adequate information about each sector's activities. For example, the government is developing a law against NGOs, and during public discussions, NGO representatives could not provide information about their activities in order to campaign against the law, Niyazova said.

Panelists agreed that 2022 marked a turning point when Kyrgyzstan media signed a symbolic partnership with NGOs to counteract the negative government trend of restricting freedom of speech and violating citizen rights. The memorandum specifies that the parties will exchange information, hold consultations, plan joint events, develop and implement projects, and create expert platforms for the exchange of views. This agreement has resulted in many successful programs on social issues, ranging from the cost of school lunches to environmental issues and public health.

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

Generally, the Kygyzstan government does not seem interested in communicating with the population or explaining its policies or decisions, according to the panelists. Officials might convene occasional meetings with civil society groups or the media, but these meetings do not often yield quality information, and participating in the meetings requires significant effort for activists.

State agencies usually have institutionalized mechanisms of interaction with the media, including press conferences, briefings, and press services, and offer information on department websites. But in 2022, state bodies held press conferences less often. For example, the chairman of the National Bank of Kygyzstan did not hold a single press

conference in all of 2022.

"Press conferences have practically become obsolete as a way of presenting information," Amanbekov said. Most government officials use social media platforms to disseminate information and often they use misleading information to cover up corrupt practices by the authorities, according to Amanbekov. "They do not refer to specific factual and empirical data," he said, "They are using more and more methods of manipulation, disinformation, and the use of hate speech."

Even if government agencies organize press conferences or briefings, officials avoid journalists' questions and often do not give answers. Agency representatives frequently manipulate facts and only voice information that benefits the government. For example, on October 4, 2022, during the Batken and Tajikistan border clashes, presidential adviser Cholponbek Abykeev published a Facebook post about the situation. Bulak.kg journalists discovered that Abykeev's post contained false data and manipulated information. Temirchieva agreed that Abykeev has repeatedly used false information.

The content of most government agencies' websites has deteriorated, and the Kyrgyz parliament's once-exemplary website is a prime example. The website often excludes information on pending bills, draft law texts, and even the text of documents that parliament has approved. Panelists noted that journalists are more likely to learn information about the parliament's laws from the personal online pages of deputies, in particular MP Dastan Bekeshev. Panelists noted that journalists also have difficulties interacting with department press secretaries; everything depends on the personality of the secretary.

Kyrgyzstan media's ineffective reporting has become a general trend. Usually, government agencies pay no attention to journalists' investigations or critical materials—for example, the December 2022 exposé on the president's plans to lease a private aircraft for official business, costing millions of dollars. State media repeatedly published fake stories throughout 2022 that sometimes breached the rule of law in government decision-making. Concerning some of these reports, Kapushenko recalled, "If authorities made decisions based on data and analysis, they would not have spent so much money to build the presidential building.[7] They wouldn't have bought an expensive business jet but would have spent the money on coal instead of taking out a loan."

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

Legislation aimed at combating corruption has radically changed under President Japarov's administration. His government revised nine articles of the nation's criminal code, including those providing for criminal liability for illegally enriching oneself through corruption. Now anyone committing this type of crime can pay compensation for harm caused and avoid criminal liability and punishment. The law "On Amendments to Legislative Acts on Economic Amnesty," which panelists called "Japarov's bill on amnesty for corrupt officials," effectively puts an end to implementing anti-corruption measures in the country, they noted.

These legal changes show the government's inadequate response to the media's corruption investigations, panelists said. Generally, officials accused of corruption deny everything and launch harassment campaigns and pressure investigative journalists that reveal their crimes. Sometimes, even after investigative media reports, corrupt officials have been released without punishment. The panelists referred to Bolot Temirov's high-profile expulsion to Russia as how authorities respond to investigations of officials' corrupt family businesses: crackdowns and prosecution of journalists and their teams. As Niyazova further explained, "The reaction of the authorities is the opposite—those who talk about corruption are brought to criminal responsibility" instead of the criminals themselves.

Panelists agreed that state authorities not only fail to respond appropriately to information on human rights violations, but they commit violations as well. Dzhaparova did note that the Interior Ministry has become more responsive to certain problems, such as press reports of bride theft, the rape of minors, and other instances of gender-based violence. She said that perhaps the ministry provided a more effective

7 https://rus.azattyk.org/a/31914528.html

and rapid responses due to several high-profile criminal cases involving the deaths of young girls. Those cases caused major protests and unrest in the country. However, as Niyazova pointed out, "The activity of citizens in response to obvious human rights violations is decreasing. There is less and less resistance in society—marches, rallies, and protests no longer gather a large number of people."

As mentioned earlier, Kyrgyzstan has no reliable research showing how citizens are impacted by information quality. But the panelists held that availability of quality information does not guarantee the preservation of democratic values.

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

Semetey Amanbekov, editor-in-chief, *Elgezit.kg*, Bishkek

Elima Dzhaparova, journalist, *Internews* , Bishkek

Sanjar Eraliev, journalist, *Azattyk Media*, Bishkek

Almaz Ismanov, independent journalist, Bishkek

Anna Kapushenko, editor-in-chief, *Kloop Media,* Bishkek

Dina Maslova, editor-in-chief, *Kaktus Media,* Bishkek

Mahinur Niyazova, editor-in-chief, *24.kg,* Bishkek

Nurbek Sydykov, lawyer, *Media Policy Institute,* Bishkek

Gladys Temirchieva, editor-in-chief, *Vesti.kg,* Bishkek

Marat Tokoev, deputy director, *Public Association of Journalists,* Bishkek

Ydyrys Ysakov, investigative journalist, founder of YouTube channel Ydyrys live, Osh

Daniyar Sadiev, founder and director, *Tursunaliev/TMG-Media,* Osh

Bakyt Orunbekov, instructor, Manas University, Journalism Dept., Bishkek

Erkin Ryskulbekov, blogger, TV journalist, Bishkek

Meerim Sadyrbaeva, journalist, *Azattyk,* Bishkek

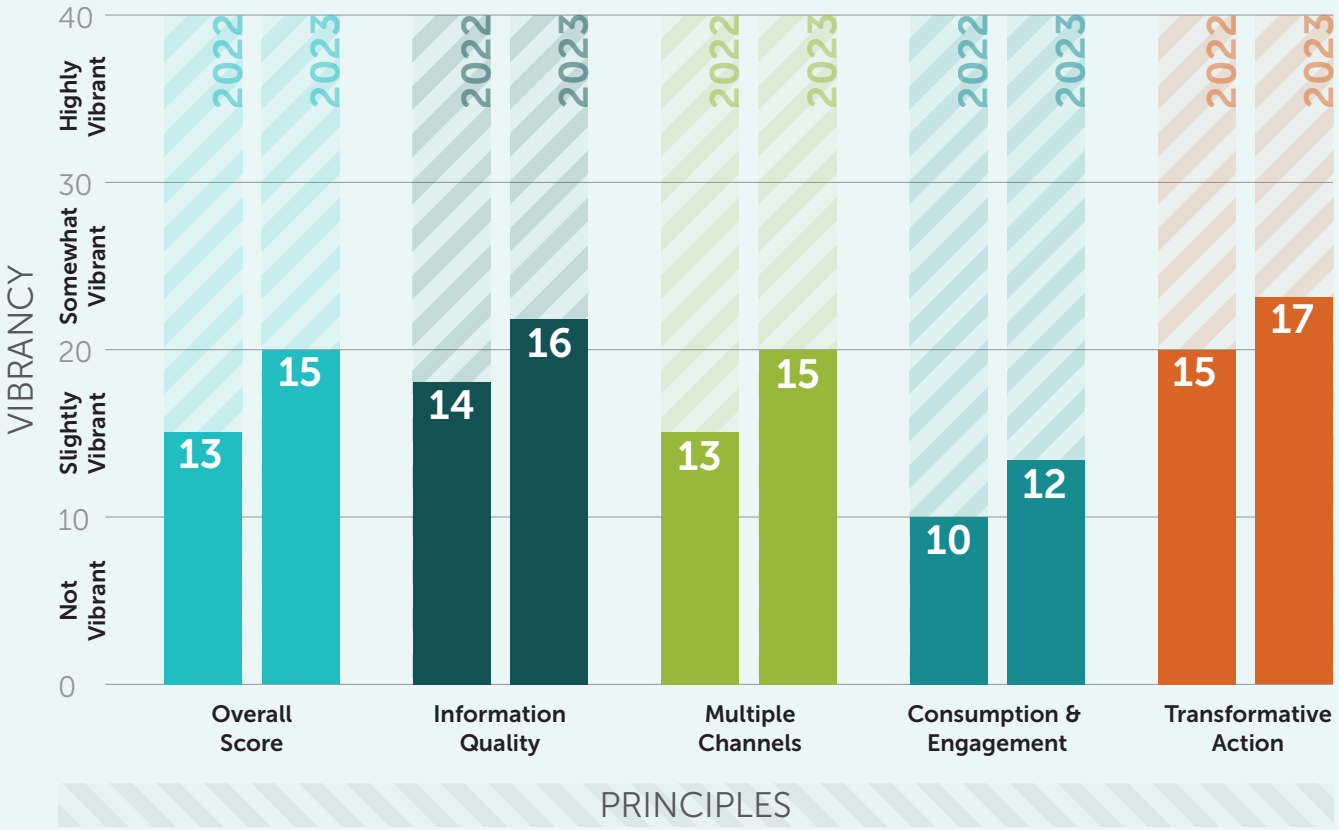
TAJIKISTAN

Vibrant Information Barometer

2023

USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

IREX



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
15

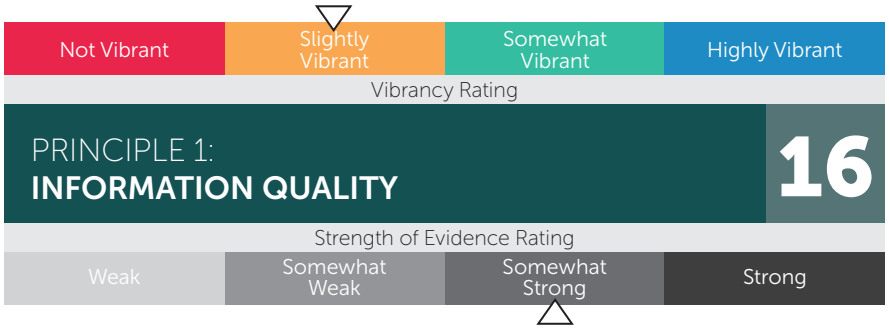
During 2022, pressure on international democratic values—freedom of speech, movement, choice, and religion—increased in Tajikistan. Dissent was harshly suppressed. It was especially hard on journalists and bloggers, seven of whom received sentences of seven to 25 years on trumped-up charges after they criticized the authorities and aired public problems on YouTube and other social media.

The quality of information has not improved and remains poor. Some professional media dispense dubious content based on speculation in hopes of reaching large audiences. Many journalists use unnamed sources, which undermines credibility but is often necessary to protect people from inquiries from authorities. Misinformation is the norm.

The repression of journalists, public figures, and human rights defenders has intensified since November 2021, when another round of periodic unrest in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) kicked off. The violence began with the killing of an arrestee and spiraled when police killed two more people at a protest over his death. In 2022, almost all the bloggers who wrote honestly about the events in Gorno-Badakhshan and the activists who organized the rallies were arrested and charged with fomenting anti-government riots, calling for the overthrow of the government, and treason. During closed-door trials, information was withheld even from relatives of the accused, whose lawyers were forced to sign nondisclosure agreements.

Tajikistan's State Committee for National Security (SCNS) and Directorate for Combating Organized Crime conduct constant surveillance of independent journalists and accredited foreign media, whose phones are tapped and emails and social media posts are monitored. Journalist Zavkibek Saidamini was prosecuted for liking social media posts by opposition politicians, especially those from abroad who belong to parties, such as the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan and Group-24, which are banned in Tajikistan on extremism grounds. The arrests and trials of journalists and bloggers have provoked great public outcry and criticism from Western countries and international organizations, including the United States, the EU, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and the OSCE, whose free-press advocate called one verdict "a blow to media freedom." As a result of attacks on journalists, many Tajik news producers began to leave their jobs and have migrated or entered new professions.

Tajikistan's overall VIBE score went up two points, from 13 in 2022 to 15 in 2023 due to increased cooperation with NGOs and new development of social networks including blogging and podcasts, which has helped to produce content that reflects a more diverse point of view. However, government repression remains high, and quality of information remains low. The indicator on media literacy also scored low, along with rights to freedom of speech. Access to officials was reduced this past year with government press conferences held just twice a year now instead of quarterly. Repression of journalists coincided with a crackdown on ordinary citizens: Tajikistan police continually use the government's law giving law enforcement agencies the right to follow citizens' internet use. The law criminalizes the use of the "like" or "share" function for backing certain opposition sentiments on social media, which could result in prison sentences.



This principle went up two points for 2022, from 14 to 16. Panelists pointed to increased training opportunities from two universities. However, the overall quality of information in Tajikistan has declined because of self-censorship and a certain level of unprofessionalism among some journalists, according to panelists. In addition, state media journalists knowingly present disinformation as facts due to the government's full control of media outlets. Indicator 5 on sufficient resources scored low because state and party media are subsidized by the government, leaving independent media struggling to find financial support from grants and foreign funders.

Tajikistan has more than 300 newspapers and magazines, 15 state television channels, 10 state radio stations, 20 independent television stations, and 22 independent radio stations, according to the Committee on Television and Radio Broadcasting of the Republic of Tajikistan. However, panelists point out many of these media outlets deal in misinformation.

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

Content and media producers do not always adhere to ethical standards, especially in the separation between editorial content and promotional material.

Some media are full of dubious content based on speculation and rumors, without proof or references to the original source, aimed at reaching a larger audience. The content has different ideological orientations and often low production values. "Creating content that opens consumers' eyes to reality has become extremely dangerous," said panelist Abdumalik Kadyrov, who leads the Media Alliance of Tajikistan.

Zarina Ergasheva, a panelist and data journalism expert, said the widespread practice of not naming sources has undermined trust in the press, but it is often done at the request of sources seeking "to avoid problems." Niyazov noted that a lot of upbeat content is published with the aim of supporting government policies.

Other regular media transgressions include publishing photos of violent scenes, fatal car accidents, and children, and disclosing the names of victims of harassment. Media consultant Nabi Yusupov said most violators are in unapologetic pursuit of larger audiences, which violates standard ethics and international standards of journalism. While ethical violators are sometimes summoned to the Press Council, the only complaints are from those whose photos were used without consent, who complain in comment sections.

Generally, the government is not accountable to the media; even official requests for information from editorial boards and journalists are rarely answered on time and are often simply ignored. Panelists said officials see any attempts by the media to hold government agencies accountable as attempts to smear them in the international arena.

Panelists agreed that virtually no media in Tajikistan retain editorial independence. "The media rarely raise topics related to the president's family or his entourage, and they don't criticize law enforcement agencies and the special services," said Bakhtiyor Rakhmonov, deputy editor-in-chief of the *Kulyabskaya Pravda* newspaper in southern Tajikistan.

Media analyst Negmatullo Mirsaidov said government agencies regularly meddled in the editorial policies of private media last year, mostly about coverage of the border clashes and tumult in Gorno-Badakhshan. Panelist Bakhmaner Nadyrov, editor-in-chief of the Asia-Plus news service, said the news agency has stopped covering the events in GBAO because pressure from the special services and the General Prosecutor's

Office has made it impossible to report on them objectively.

Apart from the Radio Ozodi, the Tajik service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, no media deal with the topics of dissidents from Tajikistan and opposition figures living in the West.

Among the new formats, podcasts are now available from at least five media outlets. Nabi Yusupov said they feature "experts, analysts, psychologists, medics, figures of science and culture" who discuss topics of interest to various segments of the population, including social issues, culture, environment and education.

The law throws up no obstacles for media to create content in Tajikistan, but before independent TV and radio stations can get a license, or print and online publications can do the required registration with the Ministry of Culture, they must get permission from the State National Security Committee, a significant hurdle. That permission must be renewed regularly, creating a "lever of pressure on independent media," said Zinatullo Ismoilzoda, chair of the Union of Journalists. Panelists said officials use this accreditation process to pressure foreign journalists. It is especially difficult for journalists from Radio Ozodi to get or renew their accreditations.

> **"Panelists agreed that virtually no media in Tajikistan retain editorial independence.**

Most media outlets that do not have a firm foothold in the marketplace are not interested in gaining new knowledge and opportunities by offering training. Many training programs charge fees, so not all independent media participate in them, since the participants themselves pay for the travel if it is outside the country or city where the media is located. The state-owned media are generally not very interested in training their journalists—if a journalist is poorly educated, it is easier to lead or manipulate them.

The country's two leading universities for journalism training, the Tajik National University and the Russian-Tajik (Slavonic) University, have good video and radio training studios, but the teachers are ill-equipped to train multimedia journalists, said Nuriddin Karshiboev, director of the National Association of Independent Media. Khurshed Niyazov, editor-in-chief of the *Farazh* and *Samak* newspapers, said journalism departments are heavy on theory and employ few practicing journalists.

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

Content and media producers try to be ethical, but there is no separation between editorial and advertising material. Amateur content producers often do not even try to ensure that their product complies with the law, regulations, and Tajikistan's Code of Ethics adopted in October 2009."The negative effects of [nonprofessional producers'] activities this year have been particularly devastating. And this also affected the activities of professional content producers," Yusupov, the media consultant, said.

Panelists said Tajik journalism has suffered significant personnel losses, which have led to a significant decline in morale, credibility, and financial fortunes.

Some journalists, nonprofessional content producers, and all state media and government agencies spread unverified or false information, including on the events on the border with Kyrgyzstan and in Gorno-Badakhshan and the war in Ukraine, and few citizens are aware of this. For example, Mirsaidov said, there is still no reliable information on the number of deaths resulting from the border clashes or the unrest in GBAO.

Shakhodat Sokhibnazarova, creator of the factcheck.tj website, said journalists do not call out state agencies disseminating false or incorrect information. Although it is illegal in Tajikistan to knowingly disseminate false information, Karshiboev said government media often do so about opponents of the authorities without any legal repercussions, unlike independent media, which are subjected to pressure from authorities, even for random errors.

In 2022, few fact-checking resources in Tajikistan existed. Only one site, factcheck.tj, worked, but few people know about it. Online resources are

available to check facts, but most Tajiks do not know of them and are not media literate, creating fertile ground for the spread of fake information and phishing attempts. Ismoilzoda, of the journalists' union, said media and social networks cannot prevent the spread of false information and provide 100 percent moderation, and often they themselves are tricked by fake news.

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

The groups that face the most persecution and criticism by the media are women, especially artists whose behavior seems provocative. Sexual minorities, representatives of small religious denominations, and opposition members living abroad also face harmful media scrutiny.

> "Media outlets struggle to make a profit, and most journalists leave the profession or look for additional ways to earn money.

Foreign media in Tajikistan do not spread disinformation and do not interfere in Tajikistan's foreign policy. Only Radio Ozodi criticizes the authorities and gives the floor to opposition leaders and disgraced politicians.

In May and April, the Ukrainian Embassy in Tajikistan posted appeals on its Facebook page for Tajikistan's journalists to oppose Russia's war on Ukraine. It later posted an appeal for recruits to fight for Ukraine. After the intervention of the Tajikistan Foreign Ministry, Ukrainian diplomats deleted these posts.

Panelists agreed that nonprofessional content producers are not regulated. They produce flawed work that sometimes includes, intentionally or not, misinformation or information aimed at inciting hatred, said panelist Lola Khalikdzhanova, an editor for IWPR.

Rakhmonov, of the *Kulyabskaya Pravda* newspaper, said items are posted on Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram that spur arguments, insults, and attempts to humiliate opponents. Panelists said this is especially true on posts about family and religious issues.

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

In Tajikistan, publications appear in the Tajik, Russian, and, to a much lesser extent, Uzbek languages. However, there is little quality news and information content in Tajik, which is the only language most people speak. Citizens get diverse information from social networks and the internet, while state media is homogeneous. Panelists said the language of informational materials mostly corresponds to people's needs, but there are questions about how much people use them. Panelist Nosirjon Mamurzoda, press secretary to the governor of the southwestern Khatlon region, said Tajikistan's 2 million ethnic Uzbeks "feel that there is very little media and broadcasting in their language," while the country's Russian speakers decry the narrowing space for their language.

Freedom of speech and access to information are at their most constricted in a decade. Few opportunities arise to hear a wide range of opinions and ideological views, and departures from the state's ideology are persecuted as dissent.

Gender and sexual minorities are reviled in Tajikistan. They have no media representing their interests and generally stay hidden. There is no opportunity for people in Tajikistan to learn about how people of all genders live and think.

The panelists said professional media do not cover the lives and views of all population groups. "Marginalized groups aren't represented in the mainstream media," Kadyrov said. "If there are alternative ways and platforms for presenting their views, they're invisible to the mass consumer."

As for gender balance among professional content producers, Yusupov said that information is missing from official statistics, which count "media employees in general, which includes the editorial offices of newspapers, magazines, and printing houses, and the entire staff is

taken into account." However, panelists said more women than men work in the media, especially in the state media. In Tajikistan, four women own media outlets: Lailo Tagaeva of Limu Media, Mukhae Nozimova of zira.media, Nargis Kasimova of Dast ba dast, and Kristina Borodavko of dialog.tj.

The country's few female bloggers tend to cover fashion or celebrity news, typically on TikTok and Instagram, while male bloggers favor Facebook and Telegram, said Ergasheva, the data journalism expert. Male bloggers mainly write about topics such as politics, the problems of the state language, poverty, and migration problems.

The gender composition of nonprofessional producers is an even bigger question mark, with no clear picture of the domestic blogosphere.

Even though more than 98 percent of Tajikistan's population practices Islam, the media often write about various religious groups, such as Orthodox Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'is, Avestanites, Adventists, and Krishnaites. Khalikdzhanova said lately the media "only write about the Christian Church and the Avesta, and if they write about others, then only critically or to call for prohibiting their activities, such as Jehovah's Witnesses."

Rano Babadzhanova, a member of parliament and a journalism professor, said women's participation in Tajikistan's public and political life is officially supported, with quotas for the number of women lawmakers, but they are half as many as men. For example, only two of the government's eight ministers are women. Moreover, despite the fact that officially Tajikistan is a secular and democratic state, most men and women follow a version of Islam that discourages women from studying and working outside the home. Sexist epithets, statements, and abuse are common in press releases and TV programs on state and social networks.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

By subsidizing only state and party media, the government has badly tilted the playing field in Tajikistan. Professional content producers lack sufficient resources to cover operating costs and produce high-quality content. As traditional sources of income, such as subscriptions and advertising, wane, professional producers are beginning to find alternative ways of making money, including presenting paid public relations material as news and holding various contests.

During the pandemic, the number of advertisements and spots in the local media plunged. Nadyrov said domestic advertisers have significantly cut back on their use of domestic media and are increasingly placing spots on their own websites, social media, and messaging apps. "Local advertising companies have significantly reduced the placement of advertising in local media and are increasingly using other forms of advertising for this purpose, including their own websites, pages in social networks, sms-mailing, etc.," said Nadyrov. Karshiboev, of the Independent Media Association, said evaporating funding sources have killed many outlets.

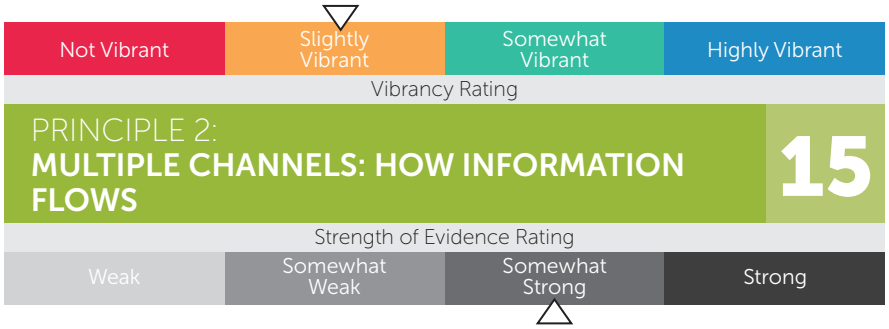
Independent media in Tajikistan have never been sustainable without the help of grants and other financial assistance, panelists said, and the situation only deteriorated with the emergence of the pandemic and the imposition of sanctions against Russia, Tajikistan's main economic partner. The sanctions financially impacted Tajikistan's independent media since the cost of supplies—paper, paint, fonts—is bought in Russia and prices skyrocketed. Also, the salaries of independent media employees have not increased, despite the fact that prices for products imported from Russia have increased drastically along with a rise in gasoline prices.

In November 2022, Tajikistan's media lost a major supporter of content production, as the Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation - Tajikistan, pulled out of the country. Panelists said many media also slashed freelance payments and staff during the pandemic, with a resulting cut in content. Mamurzoda, the press secretary in Khatlon, said regional media depend on subscriptions and support from local authorities.

The opaque and politicized distribution of state subsidies and advertising contracts distorts Tajikistan's media market.

Media outlets struggle to make a profit, and most journalists leave the profession or look for additional ways to earn money. Rakhmonov said journalists are driven away by paltry salaries, ranging from 1,000 somonis to 3,500 somonis (about $100 to $350) monthly, to work with multiple media outlets, and the quality of the content suffers as a consequence. Ismoilzoda, the union chair, said salaries vary across the country's seven state television channels, and Babadzhanova, the lawmaker, said that despite government support, funding for state media has not kept up with inflation.

Mirsaidov, the media analyst, said that almost all editors of private (independent) newspapers have to travel to the regions and conclude PR contracts. All independent newspapers are in a difficult financial situation, due to the rise in paper prices. In addition, some readers prefer to read information on the websites of these newspapers. But in the regions, many readers want to receive newspapers by subscription. In addition, regional leaders pay money to newspapers for advertising in their district, for positive articles about their activities through PR contracts.



This principle went up two points from last year's VIBE report due to a slight uptick in government responses to citizens' requests for information. However, all other indicators maintained low scores—the government continually undermines citizens' rights to create and obtain information, and self-censorship among journalists has continued to rise from last year's VIBE report. Media that criticize government policies or officials are monitored, and internet providers are pressured to block content that officials deem inappropriate. Many citizens cannot afford internet access and in rural areas, and TV and radio are still the most common forms of communication.

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

The freedoms of speech and press are protected by law in Tajikistan, but the government actively tries to undermine these freedoms, via illegal and legal means, using overt and covert censorship. Journalists who cover potentially controversial or sensitive subjects risk prosecution and ultimately fines or imprisonment. Moreover, while libel has been decriminalized, insults and criticism of the government and its officials remain criminalized. Journalists themselves typically do little to defend their professional rights.

Laws protect the confidentiality of sources of information, but they are unfairly applied. There are no laws that can be used to harass journalists and citizens who openly express their opinions, but harassment happens. The number of independent journalists "interviewed" by security or law enforcement agencies increases arithmetically every year, and content producers practice self-censorship for fear of the possible consequences. The special services—the State Committee for National Security and the prosecutor's office—summon journalists for questioning who cite anonymous sources and threaten them with arrests and fines.

"Self-censorship has intensified, the professional level of Tajik journalists has fallen sharply, and journalists who come to the field have little professional training and no particular desire to learn," Yusupov lamented.

"Even free media giants like Asia Plus and Ozodi practice self-censorship. The presidential administration even refused to cover the events in GBAO," said Kadyrov, of the Media Alliance.

In 2022, seven journalists and bloggers were sentenced to prison terms ranging from seven to 21 years. They were convicted of spreading false information, participating in an extremist community, and cooperating with banned organizations, all of which they deny. The number of

arrests rivals the period of Tajikistan's civil war, from 1992 to 1997, and the severity of the sentences suggests the government is increasingly determined to control public opinion. "This indicates a lot of pressure on freedom of thought, dissent, and criticism," Kadyrov said. "The consequence of this will be increased self-censorship, and Tajikistan will lose positions in international rankings, which will hold back the country's development."

In February 2023, the Ministry of Justice ordered the Independent Human Rights Advocacy Center to close. Karshiboev, of the Independent Media Association, believes the move was in retaliation for lawyers from the center defending two of the convicted bloggers, Abdullo Gurbati and Daler Imomali, in court. In addition, a television director in the northeastern city of Penjikent was fined TJS 100,000 ($9,000) for a conflict with a representative of Avangard, a youth movement linked to the Interior Ministry, Kadyrov noted.

Babadzhanova said parliament has been working since last year on new laws aimed at protecting the rights and interests of journalists and other media employees.

Mirsaidov, the media analyst, cited "unspoken threats, summonses, and explanatory statements by security agencies and prosecutors," putting pressure on media that criticize the authorities or officials, especially those close to the president's family. Sokhibnazarova said internet providers often block or throttle sites that officials deem undesirable. Internet service providers (ISPs) are usually instructed to block sites of such media or reduce the internet speed to a critical level so that the media cannot post information on them or have feedback from users

> "Journalists who cover potentially controversial or sensitive subjects risk prosecution and ultimately fines or imprisonment.

Panelists reported that many journalists complained that their phones were frequently confiscated before entering the Department for Organized Crime Control and the State Committee for National Security. If the phone uses a complex two-step password, then authorities do not return it for several days.

On May 17, journalists from Radio Ozodi were attacked after leaving the house of journalist and human rights activist Ulfat Mamadshoeva in Dushanbe, whom they had come to interview. The unidentified assailants took their equipment and cell phones, beat one of the journalists, and threatened to shoot them. Four months later, Mamadshoeva was sentenced to 25 years in prison for allegedly organizing the unrest in GBAO that followed the death of a man while being arrested.

Over the past three years, Ozodi's Dushanbe office has had two directors and has lost four of its correspondents to other foreign media because the Foreign Ministry did not renew their accreditation.

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

Tajikistan's information and communication infrastructure does not meet the needs of most people, including people with disabilities and those who do not speak the major national languages. Telecommunications and internet infrastructure do not cover all areas of the country, and most people cannot afford to use information channels, including the internet and social networks. Regulation of the internet and digital broadcasting does not provide open and equal access for all users and content producers.

The country's internet is plagued by slow and unpredictable speeds and higher prices than in neighboring countries. In the event of an outage in the basic telecommunications infrastructure, such as TV, people can access other systems and devices for receiving and exchanging information, such as mobile internet and radio. State-mandated limits on wintertime energy consumption, however, mean mobile operators and internet providers cannot ensure uninterrupted operation of their towers, noted Mamurzoda.

For several years, all internet traffic has gone through a government-controlled, central switching center, allowing officials to block sites

with or without the knowledge of service providers. Karshiboev said Tajikistan's government has been banning websites since 2015. For example, the Ahbor.com news website is inaccessible, and Asia-Plus has been available only via proxy servers for five years, he noted.

Sokhibnazarova, the fact-checker, said twice in early 2022, the authorities ordered providers to turn off the internet in GBAO, allegedly due to a terrorist threat. Newspapers, too, are becoming less useful sources of information, as many have reduced their frequency and offer less timely news, Ismoilzoda pointed out.

Women in Tajikistan face no legal barriers to going online, but Babadzhanova said, "In rural areas, women, even students, family members, or married—their husbands don't allow them to use the internet."

In rural areas, radio and state television channels are often still the only sources of information.

> "Internet providers often block or throttle sites that officials deem undesirable.

The Khatlon region, where most of Tajikistan's residents live, and the eastern Rasht region and GBAO have no internet-based publications or independent TV and radio companies. "Therefore, the population of these regions has no access to alternative sources of information, [unless they could have access to] the internet," where they can access non-government information on various websites and social media, said Rakhmonov, the *Kulyabskaya Pravda* editor.

Television still does not fully cover the country, particularly in the border areas with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, where the channels of those countries are broadcast. Mirsaidov said people along the border with Uzbekistan prefer the television programming from that country.

Tajikistan has no TV channels in the languages of its national minorities, only newscasts in Russian, Uzbek, Arabic, and English in addition to Tajik. There are also problems because each media interprets the norms of the Tajik language in its own way, using different dialects and jargon, which is not always clear to most audience members; the information consumers are worried about the complication of the language of some publications.

Panelists said Tajikistan's transition to digital broadcasting has been expensive, and Ismoilzoda called the cost of a broadcasting license for private channels, which unlike state channels receive no public funds, "unbearable."

Yusupov said Tajikistan's media struggle to meet the information needs of people with disabilities, noting that only two TV channels, state-run First and Jahonnamo, offer sign-language interpretation.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

Tajikistan has a freedom-of-information law, but its guarantees are not backed up by practice. It is also often narrowly interpreted, as when the courts closed the trials of the seven bloggers last year without explanation. Lawyers who reviewed the cases have found no reason why they should have been classified and panelists noted this as an example of an infringement on the media's right to access information.

Babadzhanova, the panel's member of parliament, said government officials often ignore the country's law on access to information. Ismoilzoda, noted Tajikistan has no reliable website for checking facts related to the activities of state bodies.

Almost all state bodies have press secretaries or information services charged with responding to media inquiries, but they offer limited information, supportive of their agencies. They sometimes simply avoid answering inconvenient questions from journalists. Media representatives, in turn, rarely press their right to information, lest they spoil relations with government agencies as potential sources.

Panelists said it becomes more difficult each year to get up-to-date, official information, for which some experienced journalists resort to using personal connections in ministries and agencies.

Citizens have ways to get information about the work and decisions of government agencies, but there is no evidence that they are aware of them, Niyazov pointed out. “And what good would knowledge of these mechanisms do if the population as a whole has little interest in the activities of government agencies?” he wondered.

Babadzhanova said government information disseminated via state media is usually propaganda.

Ministries and departments use their own by-laws and instructions, almost all of which conflict with the freedom-of-information law, to refuse requests for information, Kadyrov said. That practice has kept secret data on military conscription and on mining of the country’s considerable natural resources.

Panelists noted that press secretaries are sometimes more of a hindrance than help to journalists. For example, Mirsaidov said, the Health Ministry “in every possible way avoided answering questions regarding the problems of the coronavirus,” as did the State National Security Committee on the border conflicts with Kyrgyzstan.

Panelists pointed out that during that fighting, officials were late in posting press releases on the website of the state news agency, Khovar. Kadyrov, of the Media Alliance, contrasted this with the experience of media in Kyrgyzstan, which “constantly received operational information from the press center of their border guards and worked from the first day of the conflict at the border areas where hostilities were taking place.” Journalists in Tajikistan did not get official access to the area until after the fighting ended, he said.

As a result, media in Kyrgyzstan were able to essentially write the story of the events. “This led to the fact that we lost the information war, which the authorities later accused us of,” Kadyrov said.

Ismoilzoda said the Union of Journalists last year held a series of seminars for press secretaries in law enforcement agencies on cooperating with the media promptly in times of crisis.

Yusupov said almost all ministries and departments have their own websites, but only about one-quarter of them--including those of the press service of the president, the national bank, the Interior Ministry, and the Commission for Emergency Situations--are kept up to date. It has been 12 years since the president called for the adoption of e-government in Tajikistan, Nadyrov, the Asia-Plus editor, noted.

“The population has begun to use social networks (Facebook) and the newspapers *USSR, Farazh,* and Asia-Plus more often to contact government agencies, which creates more resonance,” Niyazov said. Officials monitor publications and posts in newspapers and social networks, and with pressure from the large number of users and comments, they are forced to officially respond to them or take action.

Tajikistan citizens can request information from the government by email, with an electronic signature and their address and phone number. But even though the law requires a response within three days, responses sometimes take three to six months, Ergasheva said, and the information is often poor or incomplete.

The only way for journalists to ask questions of high-ranking officials in person is at a regular, biannual press conference, which media consultant Yusupov noted media are permitted to broadcast or stream live, including on social networks.

All heads of ministries and their deputies have days when citizens can meet with them, but unspoken rules put up barriers. “To get an appointment with the minister, you must first talk with his secretary, who will find out the topic of the appeal, and if it is acceptable, then the minister can invite the visitor,” Niyazov said.[1]

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Foreigners cannot own media in Tajikistan, but they can advertise in the country’s media—although the market is so small it attracts few international advertisers.

Media outlets must register with the Ministry of Culture and the tax

1 https://nansmit.org/index.php/ru/novosti/116005-pochemu-glava-khatlona-ushel-ot-vstrechi-s-zhurnalistami-video

office, with general information on ownership but not necessarily disclosure of the ultimate beneficial owners. In 2022, the State Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasting issued no new TV or radio licenses. The licensing process, which stations must undergo every five years, is complex, and the committee can reject an application without explanation. Frequencies are usually awarded to their existing users, making it difficult to create new broadcast media.

The state operator Teleradiokom monopolizes television and radio broadcasting in Tajikistan.

Since the end of 2021, all radio stations have been obliged to coordinate with the licensing committee on content not in the state language, private broadcasters must give 1 percent of their profits to the committee, and the cost of a broadcasting license has doubled, from $600 to $1,200 per year, Ismoilzoda noted.

The law allows anyone to launch internet or print media, but without registration with the Ministry of Culture or approval by the State Committee on National Security, an outlet cannot operate, Kadyrov said.

Three independent cable and IPTV channels in Dushanbe broadcast Russian, Uzbek, and Iranian TV channels, but they do not produce their own content. There are no public media in Tajikistan because there is no law on public media, despite years of efforts by civil society.

Sokhibnazarova, of factcheck.tj, said internet service providers restrict users' access to certain sites. During conflicts, providers block access to communications and the internet in a particular region, district, or city.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Under pressure from the State Committee on National Security, prosecutors, and the Interior Ministry, neither private nor state media enjoy editorial independence. Government agencies that grant licenses and frequencies to media and telecommunications companies are politically biased. Media owners and advertisers, as a key source of income, also influence editorial policy.

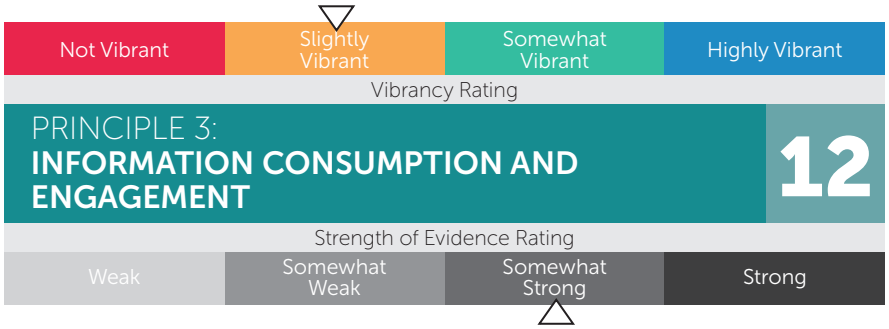
Sources of income, including advertising and investments of the owners, affect the editorial position of the media, as advertisers set their own conditions for signing contracts, stipulating that they will not be criticized no matter what, according to Yusupov. "There's a conflict of interest," he added.

In the professional media, the work of the editorial and business units is not separated, and political interests clearly influence the management and content of private outlets. Mamurzoda, the regional press secretary, said many journalists look for advertisers themselves to make up a portion of their income. "There are more and more cases of hidden advertising and PR materials being published in the media without [being marked]," Nadyrov noted.

State-owned media have exclusive access to certain sources of information and data, and they get preferential treatment in other ways, including licensing. Not all private media have access to certain sources of information, such as important statistics on the implementation of government policies, the country's anti-terrorism strategy, or government officials; the ones that do are loyal to the government. Ismoilzoda said that although Tajikistan has no official censorship, the heads of regulatory bodies that oversee media or other information channels are appointed by the government.

On all media editorial boards, journalists know the unwritten list of forbidden topics and practices, including criticizing advertisers and publishing or airing spots for those advertisers' competitors.

Nadyrov said it used to be that only sales employees thought about the interests of the advertiser, but financial pressure has pushed journalists to make concessions to advertisers.



This principle scored the lowest of all in this year's VIBE report even though it rose two points from last year, from 10 to 12. Indicator 12 on media literacy scored lowest, because the country's leaders do not make any attempts to instruct citizens on best media use practices. People who live in urban areas with access to the internet and social media are somewhat informed about fakes and fact-checks. However, most Tajiks believe that most web sites tell the truth.

> **"The state-owned media are generally not very interested in training their journalists—if a journalist is poorly educated, it is easier to lead or manipulate them.**

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

Tajikistan has laws protecting people's personal information, but privacy and digital security are far from assured. Panelists said officials and government organizations—such as the State Committee for National Security, the Department for Combating Organized Crime of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Prosecutor's Office—routinely violate people's privacy and free-speech protections, eavesdropping on them and tracking their digital activity, citing the demands of national security. Basic digital security literacy is held by only a small part of society. Ismoilzoda said there are many digital-security education programs for media and other professional content producers, but state media are not interested, and many private media cannot afford them.

Media and other professional content producers have "no reliable mechanisms for digital hygiene, and their sites are poorly protected," Sokhibnazarova said. The emails and personal social media pages of journalists and activists are regularly hacked. Rakhmonov said many regional media sites are not secure because their founders and top editors do not take site protection seriously or cannot afford the added costs. He also noted that 2022 saw virus attacks on several websites of local representatives of state authorities in the Khatlon region.

Ergasheva noted the public lacks basic skills in information and digital literacy and security, and is ignorant of the ways in which social media use their personal data to target them. "In general, people don't take these issues seriously," she said, "The simplest password is often used for all accounts, which is easy to crack."

Lacking in digital savvy, panelists said, social network users are easily led to fake news and posting their personal data online.

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

Whether by omission or design, the country's leaders do not promote media literacy, which is higher among educated people in Tajikistan. The concept entered the country's discourse in some circles in 2018, when Internews launched its Central Asian Media Program, and along with Homa and NANSMIT, held several trainings for the media and journalism teachers. Subsequent courses by news and other organizations have had little effect.

Media literacy is taught at the Russian-Tajik (Slavonic) University and Khujand State University (KSU), and Babadzhanova said a textbook on media literacy by two well-known journalists was incorporated into the curriculums at KSU and Tajik National University in 2022.

While most people in Tajikistan are not media literate, city-dwellers who

have access to the internet and social media are somewhat informed about fakes and fact-checks. However, most people believe everything they see on the internet, especially on social networks, according to Internews Media's 2021 report on Tajikistan.[2]

Yusupov cited Sociological Research on Media Consumption and Media Information Literacy in Central Asian Countries, a survey in which eight percent of respondents said they would like to become more media literate or find alternative sources of information, as they currently rely on Radio Ozodi website reports. He said the development of the internet has promoted media literacy and that the percentage of the population that can distinguish between high-quality and low-quality information is growing, though it depends on education, profession, and place of residence.

> "The emails and personal social media pages of journalists and activists are regularly hacked.

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

Journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens have been intimidated into largely ceding their rights to free speech and access to information. Although most people consume objective and fact-based content at least once a week, there are no platforms or mechanisms for public debate, such as public hearings, academic discussions, or talk shows, on the work or policies of the government. Kadyrov said the only place where people in Tajikistan can speak out a bit more freely than in the media is on social networks.

But Karshiboev noted that legislators changed the law last year to allow prosecutors to bring criminal charges over online content, expanding the law's scope from print and broadcast media and tightening law enforcement's control over the media and bloggers.

Such cases are frequent in Tajikistan, so activists, journalists, and representatives of civil society organizations increasingly self-censor, even on their personal social media pages. "If someone in the country tries to exercise his right to freedom of speech by criticizing the authorities, the consequences can be devastating," Mirsaidov said. Civic activists have gone underground and are heard from much less often.

Karshiboev said there are many online platforms for varied public discussions, primarily on the pages of leading online media and on social media pages of various groups and channels. Yusupov agreed, in part. "There are platforms for public debate in the country, but not for discussing political issues," he said, "People are apathetic, indifferent to what's happening in the country." Public debates take place during Media Camps, special programs for debaters.

Panelists said the arrests and sentences of the seven journalists and bloggers have made journalists fear taking risks and demanding their rights. There are public hearings in parliament, but the mechanisms for public discussion are not open to all; that is, there are no platforms for ordinary people to exchange opinions in practice except on social networks.

The internet has empowered journalists and citizens, increased the flow of information and its audience, bypassing the authorities' restrictions; they are not typically used to discuss issues related to health, music, and social life. Citing Tajikistan's strict laws against it, panelists said there is little content aimed at inciting hatred on open digital communication platforms. Mis- and disinformation is monitored by the State Committee for National Security and the Organized Crime Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs

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

Media and content producers are trying to better understand the needs of their audiences through qualitative research. Notably, 2022 saw the release of an ambitious study conducted by the Media Consulting Center

2 https://drive.google.com/file/d/10gt9SjyNcHyZd6wof0HAwuEMK_tGf3uB/view

to determine which types of media people in Tajikistan prefer.

Some organizations conduct surveys of their potential audiences, but there is little follow-through and trust-building. Cooperation between the government and civil society is weak and limited to a few areas of the economy, with the glaring omissions of politics and economics. Large media outlets often conduct their own analyses of their audiences' engagement and interests.

Panelists said there are practically no large audience studies in Tajikistan, especially for television and radio, as the country lacks the appropriate measuring tools. Internews released a USAID-funded study in 2022 (the research for which was done in 2021) on media consumption and media literacy in Tajikistan. It showed that 77 percent of respondents noted that most often they receive information about life in the country through television, 41 percent get information from internet sites, and 19 percent from radio. More older people get news from television while younger Tajikistan citizens turn to internet sites and social networks.

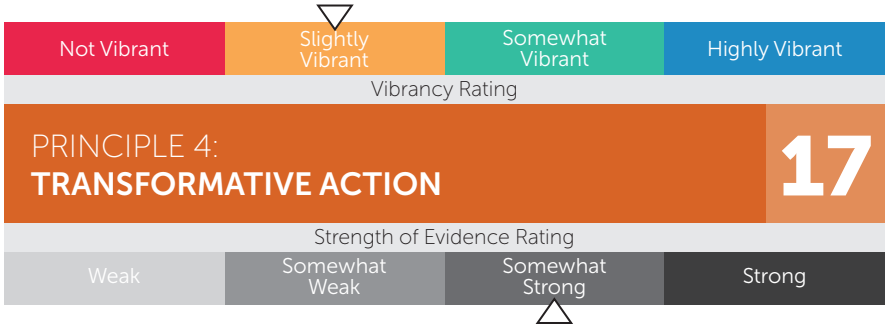
Due to strained budgets, only Asia-Plus has a marketing staff. Competition constrains the media from cooperating or exchanging information, except when covering extraordinary events like accidents or natural disasters..

In 2022, the Media Consulting Center released another study on the popularity of television, radio, print media, websites, social networks, and electronic messengers. Yusupov said much of the study concerned how widely used the newer technologies—the internet, messengers, and email—have become, but how little the population uses them. Mamurzoda said media outside the cities cannot afford to conduct audience research.

Niyazov, of the *Farazh* and *Samak* newspapers, said his journalists sometimes get direct feedback: "Readers often come to the editorial offices and ask us to publish more articles on social topics," he said.

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

There are no community media outlets i Tajikistan. Authorities quashed an effort to launch local radio 10 or 15 years ago by refusing to issue licenses.



Although this principle rose two points, from 15 in 2022 to 17 in 2023, scoring the highest of all principles in this chapter, the situation in Tajikistan concerning transformative action and press freedoms has not dramatically changed. Indicator 16 looking at whether media outlets encourage cross-ideological information sharing reveals that Tajik citizens do not have opportunities to engage in public debate offline. However, the indicator stands out because a few nonpartisan producers of news have been able to make inroads in the country's media market with online coverage of social problems and podcasts.

State media tends to dominate distribution channels and even in discussions on social networks, most Tajiks avoid politics for fear of running afoul of authorities. Indicator 19, concerning the government using quality information in making public policy decisions, received low scores because in 2022 the government scaled back press conferences to just twice a year.

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

Tajikistan media do not offer a wide range of opinions and ideologies, with the exception of a few independent ones, including Asia-Plus and Farage Media Ltd. State media has many TV and radio channels, along with print newspapers, with which citizens must have subscriptions. Therefore, government-backed media dominates the information space.

There are not many nonpartisan producers of news and information in Tajikistan, but enough neutral media outlets exist that people can be exposed to different political orientations. A small number of nonpartisan news and information content producers offer entertainment newspapers, tabloids and nonprofessional bloggers, and they have large audiences. Some Tajik nonprofessional bloggers have an audience of more than one million.

Some producers of nonpartisan news content are representatives of foreign media who do not sympathize with any of the political parties. However, they most often write information about the ruling party, ignoring the opposition, so that they do not have problems with the authorities. A few publications try to be nonpartisan, but they depend on grants and projects funded by international organizations and tend to stay neutral to survive. The domestic, state-funded media comply fully with the government's orders. Officials make liberal use of administrative resources during campaigns to manipulate the outcomes.

> "With external and self-censorship on the rise, most outlets focus on social, economic, and cultural issues.

"The consumers of information are free to choose," Yusupov said, noting that most watch and listen to Russian media, "Those who don't know other languages are forced to watch and listen to and read domestic media, and their worldview is formed on this basis."

Panelists lamented that people in Tajikistan have no opportunities to engage in offline debate. Even in discussions on social networks and media websites, people carefully avoid politics, Ismoilzoda said.

Some panelists said all private TV and radio stations in the country could be classified as apolitical, as the licensing State Television and Radio Committee does not allow the production of political content, and they limit themselves to entertainment programs and short news segments. Producers of apolitical content also include entertainment, sports, medical, scientific, and other specialized publications, Yusupov said.

In the Media Consulting audience preference study, one-third of respondents consumed some media in 2022, down from 47 percent in 2019. Of those, 96 percent watched television; 39.7 percent listened to the radio; 32.4 percent read newspapers, down from 41 percent in 2019; and 7.6 percent read magazines, down slightly from 2019.

Sokhibnazarova, the fact-checker, said citizens cannot participate in an open discussion of quality news and information content.

Panelists said only government and pro-government parties remain active in Tajikistan, with their activities covered by government media. With external and self-censorship on the rise, most outlets focus on social, economic, and cultural issues.

"In the last three years, apolitical producers of news and information content, including Limu.tj, Halva.tj, and Zira. media, have been successfully operating in Tajikistan's media market, covering social problems and producing podcasts," Ergasheva said, noting that they have up to 50,000 subscribers.

The expanding reach of apolitical news and information content producers "shows people's indifference to the life of society, shifting the spectrum of their interests in the direction of easy reading," said Mirsaidov, the panel's media analyst.

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

In Tajikistan, people get most of their information from television, primarily from nine state channels that presumably form the basis of

their opinions on political, economic, and social issues. With a dearth of other sources, it is difficult for viewers to know whether the content they present is factual and reliable. With no incentive to become politically engaged, most people focus instead on their daily lives.

There is no concrete evidence that citizens use quality information when interacting with their representatives in parliament on issues of concern to them. In any event, those interactions are rare: Parliament is a rather closed institution. Most constituents do not trust their representatives, whom they rarely see after elections.

"To say that people in Tajikistan understand the importance of quality information would be a clear exaggeration," Ismoilzoda said, given that they are as likely as not to consume unreliable and false information.

Panelists said there are no quality materials produced for Tajikistan's elections, which are pro forma and opaque, and the country has no democratic foundations.

The COVID-19 pandemic, whose dangers the government downplayed, showed a breakdown in how information about health and safety reaches the public. During the crisis, parliament changed the law to allow fines against the media or individuals for disseminating "unofficial information,"—that is, not from the Health Ministry—about cases of the coronavirus, Karshiboev noted. As a result, Babadzhanova said, "The media misled the population by publishing the Health Ministry's assertion that no cases of the virus had been registered in Tajikistan. And citizens, in turn, based on false information, put their lives and their loved ones at risk of infection." Only Radio Ozodi and Asia-Plus tried to give alternative statistics about deaths from COVID-19, to denials from the Health Ministry. The public was also not warned about the side effects of some vaccines for people with chronic diseases and were misled by the Ministry of Health.

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

Tajikistan's civil society is weak overall—its cities have some active NGOs, including the Coalition Against Torture, and groups focusing on human rights, women's rights, and children's rights that work actively with the media and disseminate reliable information.

Cooperation between civil society organizations and the media has deteriorated in recent years, as government agencies have prohibited some groups from providing the media with information or research from projects and studies. One high-profile example of cooperation is the factcheck.tj website, where journalists work to counter false and unreliable information in a joint project of the Ravzana (Okno) and Rasonanigor (Media Critic) organizations.

Civil society organizations use quality news and information materials, or official information, in their own work for distribution to the media or other recipients. For these groups, being caught spreading false or unreliable information could mean prosecution or a loss of their donors' trust.

Nongovernmental organizations often use the work of researchers, journalists, or other respected and well-established nonprofit organizations.

Yusupov said interaction between the media and NGOs is limited to issues that pose little risk of blowback for the organizations and media outlets, which he said are selective in their coverage of human rights violations. At the same time, Niyazov said, some NGOs use "the bits of alternative and objective information that are published by the Tajik media" to develop strategic plans. Karshiboev noted the influence of civil society is limited to a few issues, such as "legal protections for citizens, or domestic violence or environmental problems." The media cooperate only with some NGOs on socially significant topics. Most NGOs, especially outside the major cities, rarely turn to the media to disseminate their information.

As part of their mission, NGOs share quality information with citizens by publishing reports on their activities within their projects on social media pages and their websites on the internet. This is the standard way of operating by NGOs dealing with the disabled, and those who provide legal services for free.

"NGOs are practically not involved in the government's discussion and adoption of socially significant decisions. And if they are involved, then they're loyal to the authorities," Nadyrov said.

Panelists lamented that the government has brought Tajikistan's civil society to heel through a requirement that groups report their financial activities to the Justice Ministry, ostensibly to monitor for signs of terrorist financing or money laundering. Still, the groups work hard to push reforms.

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

In Tajikistan, ministries and agencies hold regular press conferences infrequently—twice a year, down from a quarterly schedule a few years ago—for them to be useful and relevant. Journalists have their share of blame for this, having shown up for many press conferences unprepared and ill-equipped, asking duplicative and irrelevant questions, or focusing on issues in which they had some personal stake. Journalists complain that officials soak up press conference time by reading long reports out loud, and officials complain about the quality of the questions asked.

In political discussions, parties refer to facts and empirical data, and they sometimes knowingly use false information. Objective information is rarely heard in political debates in the interest of pleasing authorities. For journalists, press conferences are the only opportunity to question the leaders of ministries and departments, but they do not always get straight or complete answers. Frequently, heads of ministries and departments will read a report for the majority of the press conference, leaving some journalists no time to ask questions. Still, Ismoilzoda said, "Despite their shortcomings, these press conferences remain one of the real tools of interaction between representatives of government agencies and representatives of civil society and the media."

> "Corruption, cronyism, and regionalism are rife in the country.

Even important events do not usually prompt officials to hold press conferences outside the regular schedule. The exception is the Foreign Ministry, which conducts briefings before important visits or major international conferences. Nadyrov noted, for example, that on September 19, directly after the end of hostilities on the border with Kyrgyzstan, Deputy Foreign Minister Sodik Imomi gave a briefing[3] where he spoke frankly about what had happened. "This was an exception, since the Foreign Ministry had been silent about all border conflicts," he said.

Official reports on the situation on the border in April and September 2022 were slow, and Tajik journalists were forced to cite unofficial sources from the conflict sites, which were not always objective and verified.

Panelists said that lying is becoming a normal way of doing business for some government officials. Ergasheva noted that officials rarely cite their sources of information, and they move quickly to silence reports of corruption.

Yusupov said he could not recall an instance when officials cited the work of the media or civil society in explaining a decision. Instead, he said, they refer to their own internal data, which is not always correct. NGOs, in contrast, conduct anonymous surveys of the population that measure public opinion.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

How the government reacts to reports of corruption depends on where those reports come from: if from government officials, then they could lead to proceedings. However, in 2022 bloggers' and journalists' reports of wrongdoing cost them their freedom.

In Tajikistan, no one knows the true extent of corruption, or whether it is on the rise or decline, since reports most often concern minor cases. Rarely will an investigation result in some action, such as

3 https://www.mfa.tj/ru/main/view/11046/brifing-o-sobytiyakh-na-tadzhiksko-kyrgyzskoi-granitse

firing an official, tearing down a building, or otherwise punishing the perpetrators.

"The country has long been mired in corruption, and the authorities have paid little attention to this issue. Especially in power structures, where corruption has become a way to promote and strengthen one's position," Yusupov said.

In covering corruption, Tajik media rely on information provided by official bodies, in particular the anti-corruption agency, and sometimes use information from social networks. In this way, journalists are vulnerable to being used in political or professional vendettas among officials. Investigative journalism is rare; there was none in the domestic press in 2022. Investigations are carried out only by individual journalists and are published in international publications, for example, on the Radio Ozodi website[4], but there is no public reaction from the authorities.

Karshiboev said the state gives short shrift to concerns of human rights, civil liberties, and clean elections. "As long as that's true, it's difficult to talk about the development of the media, civil liberties, and the formation of public opinion," he said.

State media carries virtually no coverage of human rights violations, and in the independent media, the topic surfaces much less frequently than it used to.

Khalikjanova said the authorities often do not respond to criticism and ignore quality information about corruption and violence against children and women, contributing to a growing level of violence and corruption in the country. "The authorities' failure to respond to family violence has led to an increase in divorces, suicides, and murders of daughters-in-law, mothers-in-law, and husbands," she noted.

Panelists said officials react vehemently to quality information about human rights violations, and they pressure those who assert their rights, especially those who sue for violation of their rights, for example, during the demolition of their homes, the death of loved ones due to medical error, etc.

Quality information does not affect the course of elections, at the local and national levels, as most people know in advance which parties' candidates will be allowed to win.

Corruption, cronyism, and regionalism are rife in the country. This imposes its own specifics on decision-making in government bodies. For example, people from the same region as the minister or his relatives are appointed to public office. In addition, bribes are given for certain positions.

4 https://www.mfa.tj/ru/main/view/11046/brifing-o-sobytiyakh-na-tadzhiksko-kyrgyzskoi-granitse

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

Rano Babadzhanova – member of parliament and journalism professor

Zarina Ergasheva – data journalism specialist, Internews-Tajikistan

Zinatullo Ismoilzoda – chair, Union of Journalists of Tajikistan

Abdumalik Kadyrov – secretary general, Media Alliance of Tajikistan

Nuriddin Karshiboev – chair, National Association of Independent Media of Tajikistan

Lola Khalikdzhanova – editor, IWPR in Tajikistan

Nosirjon Mamurzoda – press secretary to the governor of the Khatlon region

Negmatullo Mirsaidov – freelance journalist, media analyst

Rajab Mirzo – director, Akhbor Baroi Afkor (Food for Thought) Facebook blog

Bakhmaner Nadyrov – editorial director, Asia-Plus

Khurshed Niyazov – editor-in-chief, Farazh and Samak newspapers

Bakhtiyor Rakhmonov – deputy editor-in-chief, Kulyabskaya Pravda newspaper

Shakhodat Sokhibnazarova – creator, factcheck.tj

Nabi Yusupov – director, Media Consulting NGO; editor-in-chief, nuqta.tj

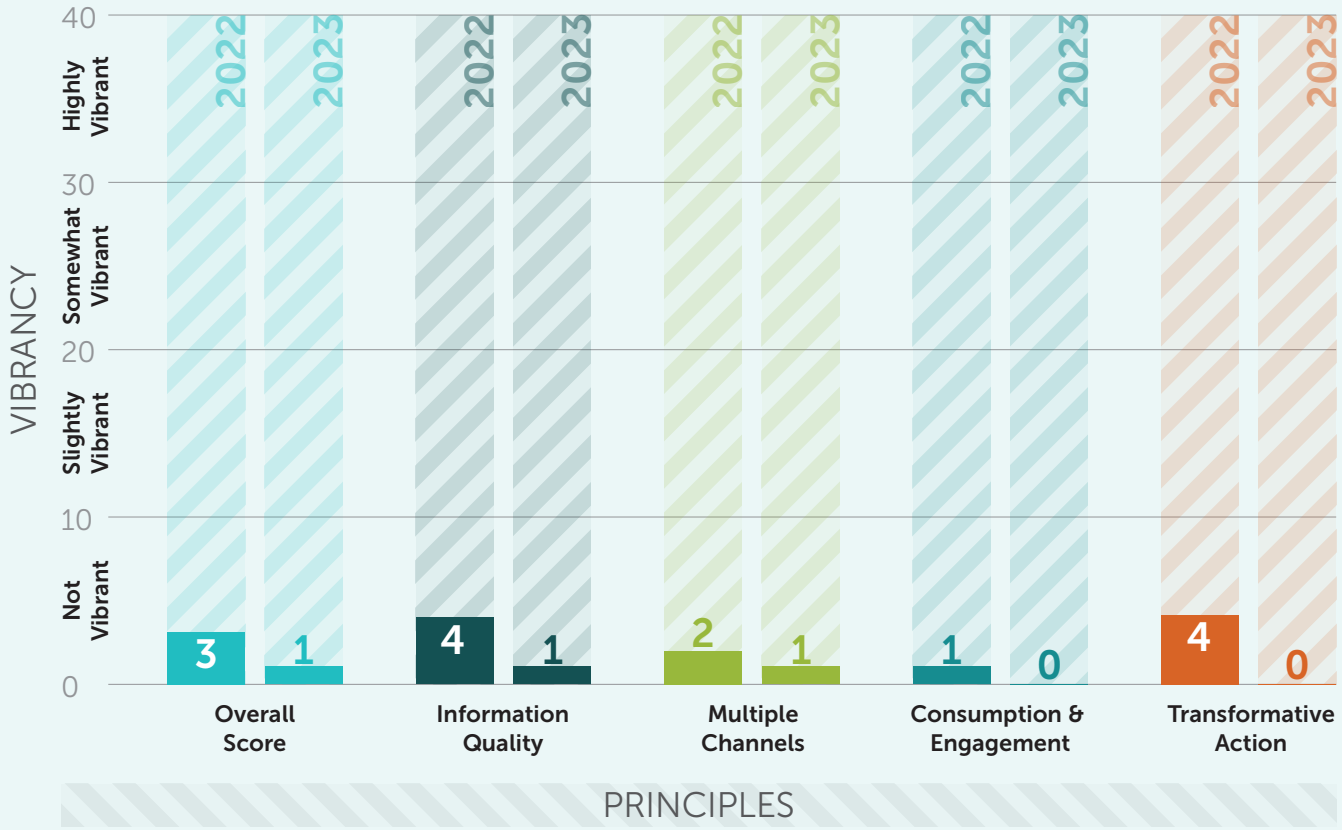
TURKMENISTAN

Vibrant Information Barometer

2023

USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

IREX



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
1

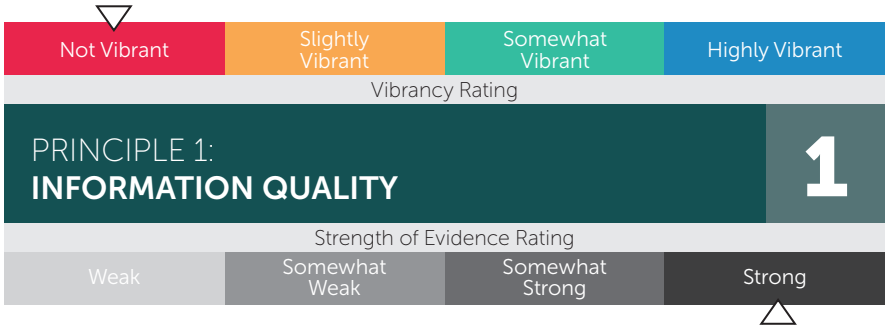
Turkmenistan's authoritarian government that uses an effective domestic security apparatus to maintain control over all facets of society commonly draws comparisons with North Korea. Socio-economic problems have been continually worsening over a number of years. The difference between the Turkmenistan portrayed by state media and the actual living conditions for most of the country's citizens widened in 2022.

State media is the only media operating within Turkmenistan. The Ministry for National Security (MNS) works to block all foreign websites with content that conflicts with the state's narrative that there are no problems in Turkmenistan--assertions that are far from the truth. As a result, Turkmenistan's people are uninformed about events outside their country and misinformed about what is happening inside. Panelists noted that state media's main purpose is to spread propaganda about alleged achievements of the government and the president.

During 2022, there were protests that turned deadly in three Central Asian countries, two of which – Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan – border Turkmenistan, Russia launched a full-scale war in Ukraine, and the Taliban consolidated power in Afghanistan, Turkmenistan's neighbor to the south. Inside Turkmenistan, an informal campaign was launched on women's appearances, which was accompanied by an increase in gender-based and domestic violence; basic goods such as flour, sugar, or cooking oil became even more difficult for most people to obtain; and jobs continued to be hard to find. Problems with reliable supplies of heating, electricity, and water seemed to grow worse. State media did not cover any of these foreign or domestic topics.

Instead, the president continues to dominate state media coverage, but a new president was elected in March 2022: A transfer of power from father to son, as President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, in power since late 2006, stepped down from that post, and shortly after, his son, Serdar, won the snap presidential election. State media has to divide its reporting between the new president and his father, as the latter retained his position as chairman of the Halk Maslahaty (People's Council), the upper house of parliament.

Turkmenistan's overall country score dropped two points, from 3 in the 2022 VIBE study to 1 in this year's. Given the chokehold the government has on the information flow within the country, Principles 1 (Information Quality) and 2 (Multiple Channels) each received a score of 1 each, while Principles 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) and 4 (Transformative Action) each received scores of 0. While it remains possible for mobile phone owners to use VPNs to get around state censors, police can check people's phones on the streets, workplaces, and educational facilities. Those found to have visited Turkmen opposition websites operating outside the country or liking material deemed by authorities to be counter Turkmenistan's interests could face charges of treason. In such a media environment, it is impossible to share information across any platform unless it is first vetted by censors, leaving Turkmenistan's people without the means to independently verify or balance what state media tells them. State media's task is to praise the leadership and portray the president, and now also his father the former president, as making decisions that are moving the country forward, socially, economically, and politically, even though Turkmen citizens see their socio-economic situations are becoming worse.



The quality of information in Turkmenistan remains extremely low. State media is the only media that operates within Turkmenistan. Its purpose is not to report the news or inform the public, but to project the image of Turkmenistan as a happy and prosperous country, led by the wise president, and prior to 2022 his wise father. State media says Turkmenistan is leading country in terms of economy, technology, and innovation. To create such an image, which is so clearly at odds with reality, state media embellishes, distorts, and often invents information to fit the government narrative. State media do not report on the long lines for limited amounts of bread forming outside state-subsidized stores hours before opening time, or about people rummaging through garbage bins searching for something they might be able to sell, or increasingly for scraps of food to eat. The MNS watches over content disseminated by domestic media and works to block information penetrating the country from outside, leaving the government with total control over information available to the country's people.

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

It has never been possible to obtain quality information on a variety of topics in Turkmenistan. The technology and materials exist, and media outlets--whether print, radio, television, or Turkmen media websites--have access to them. However, panelists explained that the state censor watches over every article that state media reports, and the MNS works to prevent citizens from gaining access to information originating from outside Turkmenistan.

There are Turkmenistani universities that have journalism courses, and at times western organizations working in Turkmenistan conduct training seminars. However, the space for practicing journalism is so restricted that journalists must conform to state-approved topics and methods of coverage. Some of the more promising journalists might get hired at one of Turkmenistan's media outlets that is dedicated to broadcasting outside the country, usually in Russia, and there are Turkmen websites and satellite television channels that report in English, French, Chinese, and Arabic. However, the scope of reporting at these outlets largely conforms with policies for domestic media.

The panelists all noted that journalism training is not the problem. One panelist said, "Journalists know they must engage in propaganda." In January 2018, then-President Berdimuhamedov signed a law banning sex, violence, and bad habits in films and TV programs. The law obliges stations to report on constructive developments in Turkmenistan and show programs that create a positive image of the country. MNS censors ensure this occurs in all media reports.

Journalists keep their jobs by reporting the government's narrative of Turkmenistan as a prosperous country, led by a wise leader, and inhabited by happy people. Those deviating from the state-approved version of events face ramifications, so reporting on social or economic problems, or even natural disasters, is forbidden.

State media does regularly cover government meetings chaired by the president, but the activities of ministers or members of the parliament do not often feature in reports. Local, national, regional, or international news is not covered unless Serdar or Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov are somehow involved. Although Serdar is regularly included in media reports, he seems not as comfortable in front of the camera as his father was and still is.

State media did not cover any of the major international stories of 2022. Those in Turkmenistan dependent on state media for information would not have known about widespread unrest in neighboring Kazakhstan in January 2022, the first-ever deployment of troops from the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in Kazakhstan to

help restore order, Russia launching a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, or violence in neighboring Uzbekistan's western Karakalpak Republic on July 1. State media has not reported on the Taliban's return to power in neighboring Afghanistan, or about Beijing's campaign against Muslims in China's western Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

Journalists cannot hold government officials accountable. There are few press conferences, and those happen only occasionally when a foreign head of state visits Turkmenistan. Officials, with the exceptions of the president or the Halk Maslahaty chairman, shun the media and journalists are not encouraged to seek out local, regional, or provincial officials for comments.

> "One panelist said, "Journalists know they must engage in propaganda."

As a result, there is no possibility for editorially independent media in Turkmenistan. Topics for coverage need approval, and censors check content before information is released to the public. Media outlets and journalists are aware of the restrictions on what is reported and craft their coverage to meet the state-approved standards. There is no attempt to contextualize news and events for the audience. Media outlets are specifically tasked with providing positive coverage of Turkmenistan and that often involves exaggeration or outright invention to portray the country in a positive light. There is no attempt to explain the news stories; people are simply expected to believe what they see, hear, or read, even though depictions in state media often contradict the grim reality of life most people in the country experience daily.

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

The norm for information from state media is that its veracity is often questionable. The purpose of Turkmen media is to make state policies look good, which is challenging in a country with declining living standards and limited future prospects. State media often distorts the truth and at times simply invents information that is unproven or patently false. One panelist explained, "No facts and evidence are provided. Journalists simply do not write information that does not fit the interests of the authorities."

Turkmenistan has no non-professional content producers. Only state media has permission to disseminate information inside the country, so there is no possibility for non-professional content producers within the country to disseminate false or misleading information.

The government creates false information, and it is the task of state media to disseminate this information to the public. For example, state media reports on planting and harvesting of crops without explaining to the public why there are shortages of flour--or, as a report from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Turkmen service claimed in November 2022, why flour that was part of the state ration package, the paik, in the Mary Province was unfit for human consumption.

State media shows the president visiting towns and cities, and there are nearly always groups of happy workers--usually dancing or singing, or both, and praising and thanking the president. These workers are reportedly forced to rehearse during their free time in preparation for the president's visit.

State media showed festive crowds in Ashgabat turning out for Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov's birthday on June 29, 2022. Hronika Turkmenistan, an independent media outlet operated by exiled Turkmenistanis in Europe, reported in June that hospitals in Ashgabat were filled with "hundreds of students, employees of public institutions, artists and musicians involved in mass events in connection with the [birthday] of the ex-president" who were suffering from the effects of being outside with temperatures of 47 Celsius (116 Fahrenheit). State media reported the celebrations but not the hospitalizations.

There are no ramifications for creating or spreading false news. According to one expert on the panel, this is because state media reporting "is not intended to describe news events or incidents, there is no liability for substandard or false material."

It is nearly impossible for Turkmen citizens to verify whether information provided by state media is correct or not. The internet inside Turkmenistan is no help. The sole internet provider in Turkmenistan is

Turkmen Telecom and its subsidiaries, and part of their duties is to block foreign news and information websites. A report from turkmen.news in October said Turkmenistan successfully blocked some 1.2 billion IP addresses, roughly one-third of the IP addresses worldwide.

Internet speed inside Turkmenistan is among the slowest in the world, trailing countries such as Yemen or Afghanistan. The World Bank reported fewer than one-third of Turkmenistanis have an internet connection in their homes.

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

There has never been any information that foreign governments or their proxies have attempted to create or disseminate information inside Turkmenistan that was intended to cause harm. Given the efforts that Turkmenistan's MNS has put into blocking information from entering Turkmenistan from outside the country, it would be a difficult feat for a foreign or foreign-backed party to spread malicious information inside Turkmenistan. In any case, no government or non-state actor, with the possible exception of the Islamic State of Khorasan Province in Afghanistan, has ever shown any interest in targeting Turkmenistan.

> **"Journalists keep their jobs by reporting the government's narrative of Turkmenistan as a prosperous country, led by a wise leader, and inhabited by happy people.**

The Turkmen government and state media do not engage in hate speech. Authorities certainly would not allow hate speech directed at groups inside Turkmenistan as that would shatter the image of social harmony authorities and state media have worked for decades to build. Nothing in state media promotes hatred of any particular group or country.

The information the government disseminates is often inaccurate and intended to glorify the president or chairman of the Halk Maslahaty, but it is not directly intended to harm. However, omissions in reporting can cause harm, such as when it fails to inform about the public about contagions or environmental problems, such as drought or the methane gas leaks that NASA reported in October 2022.

Those selecting topics for media coverage are aware of the restrictions on reporting and conform with the state-approved style for preparing and disseminating information. A long as media outlets and journalists work within this tightly regulated framework, they face no repercussions for their reporting.

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

Nearly all information from domestic sources inside Turkmenistan is in the Turkmen language, though some print media, including government websites, use Russian. Domestic media and state media are not available in other languages, and state media does not report on the situations of ethnic minorities—such as Uzbeks, Russians, and Kazakhs--in the country.

Panelists agreed that all information from media in Turkmenistan is propaganda aimed at promoting the good image of the state. There has never been any attempt to present any information, alternative views, or suggestions that there is more to be known than what is presented by state media.

People in different regions and cities of Turkmenistan gain very little information from state media about what is happening in their own region or other areas of the country. While state media does not cover ethnic or religious minorities, these groups reportedly communicate about non-political topics, such as community events, in chat groups on social networks.

State media also does not cover the activities of urban, rural, or regional groups or organizations except when these groups are participating in some government function.

Gender issues are not discussed in state media. Turkmenistan's media did not cover unofficial regulations on women's appearance and clothing in 2022. Shortly after Serdar Berdymukhammedov became president, independent media outlets covering Turkmenistan from outside the country reported that beauty salons around the country were being warned against providing cosmetic services to women, such as Botox or collagen injections, lip tattoos, or artificial fingernails. Business owners who disregarded the unpublicized ban risked fines or being put in jail for up to 15 days.

In mid-April reports came out on rus.azathabar.com of beauty salons closing in some areas of the country, along with information on an informal ban on women wearing jeans or tight-fitting clothing. Men were also prohibited from wearing shorts, and nightclubs began closing.

Reports in rus.azathabar.com also arose on authorities sending inspectors to workplaces, including hospitals and schools, in the capital Ashgabat, and in Lebap and Mary provinces, to check if female employees were wearing makeup or showed signs of a recent visit to a beauty parlor. Women faced dismissal from their jobs if they violated these prohibitions. In Mary Province, female state employees had to attend lectures about "natural beauty."

A June 19, 2022, podcast by Radio Free Europe's Majlis series reveals misogyny is frequent on internal social networks, along with questions about why gender-based abuse is allowed to continue in a country where the internet is closely monitored by the security service.

After the informal policies on women's dress an appearance started to be enforced, violence against women increased. A video posted on the internet in August showed a man, reportedly a woman's husband, bursting into a beauty salon in Ashgabat and beating a woman in front of the salon's employees and customers. There was no information about whether police investigated the incident.

Some panelists said friends and family still in Turkmenistan told them the problem of violence against women became worse after the informal rules on women's appearance started being enforced.

None of this has been reported by state media.

No data exists on the ethnicity of owners, management, editorial staff, journalists, and other content producers. Given the majority of Turkmenistan's population are ethnic Turkmen, and that vetting processes for top positions include a genealogical check--in some cases back seven generations to establish the purity of Turkmen lineage--it is likely nearly all, if not all, of the owners and management are ethnic Turkmen. Although there is also no available data on gender balance, anecdotal evidence indicates that women are employed in the media sector.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Since all media in Turkmenistan is state media, the government provides funding for all media outlets. This financing is adequate for television, radio, print, and internet outlets. Funding for print media is also supplemented by subscriptions, though how subscription revenue is used is opaque and it is similarly unclear how that money is divided and distributed. In 2022, citizens complained they had been forced to subscribe to newspapers and magazines, according to a May report by RFE/RL Turkmen Service, and also that managers often simply withhold money from paychecks as money towards subscriptions.

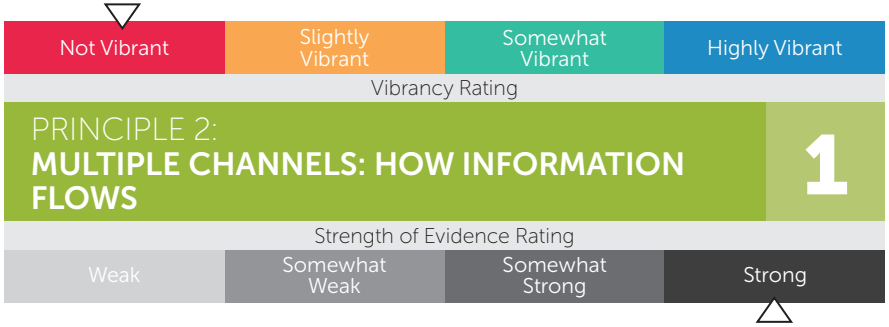
While content producers have sufficient financing and equipment, they are still subject to the restrictions state censors put on all state media. Topic of reports and how those reports are presented first need review and approval to ensure information contained in reports conforms with the government's narrative of events.

There is no option and really no possibility of seeking alternative or private funding for media outlets. Media outlets must be registered with the state, and authorities would never register an outlet that was not wholly dependent on the government for its operations.

Turkmenistan's media does carry advertisements of domestically produced goods; however, the process for advertisers is not clear. With such strong control over media, the government likely selects which

companies and which products are advertised. It is also uncertain if advertisers pay to have their products appear in media and, if so, what the rates for advertising are.

None of the panelists could say if journalists' salaries are sufficient, though one panelist said wages are "not high," and another noted anecdotal evidence that suggested salaries were so low that some journalists needed to take another job.



Turkmenistan's constitution and laws on the media and internet use do provide for the unfettered ability of the country's citizens to receive and impart information, but in practice this has never been true. State media is the sole source of information in Turkmenistan and the information state media disseminates is dictated by the government and overseen by the MNS. As one panelist explained, "Despite the law on freedom of the media and freedom of speech, it is impossible in Turkmenistan to speak one's opinion, let alone publish it."

> "It is impossible to register an independent media outlet in Turkmenistan.

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

Nothing is published or broadcast in Turkmenistan until MNS censors have checked and approved it. Authorities do not respect freedom of speech, and people who openly challenge the government narrative or criticize the state risk losing their jobs, being fined, or being imprisoned.

Citizens who have installed virtual private networks (VPNs) on their mobile phones and are caught accessing Turkmen opposition YouTube channels--such as TurkmenYurt, Erkin Turkmenistan, the Democratic Movement of Turkmenistan, or independent media outlets outside Turkmenistan such as Turkmen.news or RFE/RL's Turkmen service--face fines or even charges of treason. Turkmenistan's authorities have warned people caught with VPNs on their phones that accessing prohibited websites from outside Turkmenistan could carry severe consequences.

In late January 2022, the MNS checked the phones of students at the Turkmen State Architecture and Construction Institute to see if any had been looking at banned websites and warned the students they would be expelled if they were caught accessing banned websites or social networks. A January 27 article on the RFE/RL website shows Turkmen students caught accessing such sites were offered a choice of cooperating with the MNS in identifying other students who were accessing such sites.

Panelists remarked that journalists working in Turkmenistan understand the boundaries of news coverage and exercise self-censorship. The cost of straying from the government narrative when reporting is at least dismissal with no chance of ever working in state media again.

Media outlets reporting from outside Turkmenistan that do carry alternative views to the state coverage inside Turkmenistan have stringers or sources who provide information. However, these people must exercise extreme caution and avoid being uncovered by the authorities, as penalties for providing information that runs counter to the state narrative carry severe punishments. Such journalists have in the past been imprisoned, and one was even beaten to death shortly after being put in prison.

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

The government actively works to ensure the people cannot access

channels of information except for state media.

The country's information and communication technology infrastructure remains rudimentary with the exception of mobile phones. While many citizens of Turkmenistan own televisions, there are only a few channels, and they all show news and cultural programming. There is no data for how many people own computers; however, given the overall operating environment the percentage could not be high. Those who do own computers find many foreign websites blocked, leaving them with the domestic websites that only offer government-approved content.

Rural areas are poorly connected to the telecommunications and internet infrastructure, and in the case of the internet, there appear to be only a handful of people is some remote districts that have access. Again, mobile phones are the exception, as a large percentage of Turkmenistan's people have them.

There is no information about the authorities making efforts to meet the information needs of vulnerable groups, such as the disabled. Additionally, no effort is made to address the information needs of people who speak languages other than Turkmen or, in some cases, Russian.

As mentioned, most people do have televisions; however, state television programming does not provide necessary information to communities. State television does not warn people of emergencies--such as impending storms or high winds--and, post-disaster, does not provide communities with information on whom to contact or what steps can be taken to alleviate their situation.

> "The government actively works to ensure the people cannot access channels of information except for state media.

No evidence exists that entire communities or groups of people are precluded from accessing information due to social norms. Like all citizens in Turkmenistan, they are limited in accessing sites the authorities have deemed potentially threatening to the regime or the government's narrative of events. Internet governance and regulation of the digital space are strict. It is nearly impossible for users and content producers to access the internet without state approval.

It is unclear what would happen if there were a disruption to the telecommunications system in Turkmenistan. There appears to be no backup plan for reestablishing communications with the population, other than sending officials to check on the situation and relaying that information back to the proper authorities as has happened in the past when natural disasters cut communications to areas. The media plays no role in this since the task of state media is to report positive information and, as a result, there are no reports about the effects of the disasters on communities.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

On paper, the right to information exists. There are media laws and guarantees in Turkmenistan's constitution that do conform with international standards. However, these rights are completely ignored by officials. In the opinion of one panelist, "There are no free media in Turkmenistan, and no independent journalists whom the people would trust."

While citizens can access state website to learn about government policies, the decision-making process within the government is opaque and authorities offer no means for the public to question them about decisions. Government officials have no obligation to explain their decisions to the population. Turkmenistan's citizens do not ask questions as they do not wish to attract the government's attention. This long-established pattern has contributed to general political apathy among most of the population and acceptance of the status quo.

Only the president holds press conferences and even then, only when there is a visiting leader or other dignitary. Serdar Berdymukhammedov did not hold any press conferences in 2022 after he was elected president.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

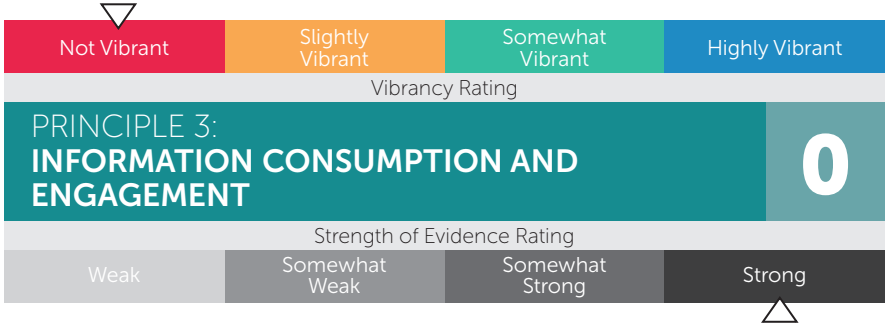
The concept of public service media does not exist in Turkmenistan. Media is meant to serve the leadership by spreading propaganda about alleged achievements and advancements taking place in the country.

Since there is only state media, there are no laws about foreign ownership of a media outlet, and foreign ownership of media is not permitted. There are also no laws requiring transparency in media ownership, except for information specifying the various ministries and unions that founded some of the country's newspapers.

It is impossible to register an independent media outlet in Turkmenistan. There were attempts in the early months after independence in 1991 to register independent newspapers, but authorities were quick to reject registration and anyone trying to create an independent media outlet would face consequences. More than three decades have now passed, and no one has tried to register an independent media outlet.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

There are no independent information channels inside Turkmenistan. Authorities have made it clear that they will not register any independent media organizations. All media is state media, and as such it follows the orders of its owner, the government. There is no editorial independence. There are no apparent alternative sources of funding outside state funding, since advertising remittances are opaque—if they exist at all. State media has a monopoly on the information that is disseminated to the public, and there is no regulatory body that oversees the media except for the MNS and its censors.



Given the heavy hand that the MNS has in controlling Turkmenistan's information space, panelists gave most of the VIBE indicators under this principle scores of zero. With lack of internet penetration throughout the country, limited bandwidth, and a dearth of computers, it is safe to assume many, if not most, of the country's citizens do not have knowledge of online safety and security. Moreover, the government has essentially declared war on the use of VPNs in the country, using fear and intimidation to restrict their use. The government has no interest in supporting media literacy, and most of the information available in the country has little value to people's daily lives.

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

It very difficult for foreigners to physically enter Turkmenistan, as Turkmen authorities grant very few visas to visit the country. It is equally difficult for information to enter Turkmenistan via the internet. There are numerous problems, from the MNS working to block foreign websites to Turkmenistan having the slowest internet speed in the world. The MNS closely monitors internet activity inside Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan's people know this and avoid any political conversations on social networks; they are also wary of trying to open sites that might contain material the MNS could deem as being antigovernment content. One of the panelists summed up the situation saying, "Citizens cannot freely use social networks. Everything is under the control of the [MNS]," who are watching for anyone "opening an 'unreliable' site…"

While there are laws that guarantee citizens' right to privacy, including on the internet, the MNS does not abide by these laws. The MNS seeks out any suspicious conversations or even specific words on the internet.

Word spread in Turkmenistan that VPNs would help get around state censors, but after Turkmen authorities discovered the growing popularity of VPNs use, one campaign after another has been launched to shut down VPNs inside the country. The state's campaign to block VPNs picked up pace in 2022. There were reports in early January of increased efforts to block VPNs in the northern Dashoguz Province after widespread protests started across the border in Kazakhstan, a Radio Azatlyk report on January 7 noted. By July, authorities seemed to have partially succeeded in blocking VPNs since reports on Russian news sites such as TASS, RIA Novosti, Azerbaijani news site Trend.az, and foreign news and information websites could not be accessed using VPNs according to Radio Azatlyk.

> "The state's campaign to block VPNs picked up pace in 2022.

The extent to which the population has basic digital and data literacy skills is unclear. It is likely low since some 70 percent of the population is not connected to the internet, making it also likely that most of the population is unfamiliar with algorithms and the ways personal information can be utilized to target digital users.

Media employees, particularly those working at websites that disseminate state information to an audience outside the country, probably receive some training in digital security.

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

Turkmenistan's government prefers to keep its people in the dark about what is happening inside and outside the country, so media literacy is not even a consideraton. What the government wants, and what is taught in school and reported in the country's media, is that Turkmenistan is a great country, advanced, prosperous, and a wonderful place to live--all thanks to the president--though after the change of president in 2022 much praise was also directed to the president's father, who is also chairman of the Halk Maslahaty.

> "There is no freedom of speech or rights to information in Turkmenistan.

Turkmenistan's people know this is not true. However, they are not able to fact-check the information the government and state media provide. The close watch the MNS keeps on the country makes it dangerous to look for information that would counter or discredit the official narrative.

Turkmenistan citizens who have traveled outside the country, such as the many who work or study in Turkey or Russia, surely see a difference in the way news is presented in Turkmenistan and abroad. However, most Turkmen citizens reside permanently in Turkmenistan and while they might understand their state media is propaganda, they probably have not seen high-quality news and information.

A July 15, 2022, article from Progres.online lamented, "[i]t seems that Turkmen youth, educators as well as the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Economy are not aware of the wide spectrum of possibilities the Internet provides both for personal and societal progress. For many Turkmens Internet means only social media such as IMO, Instagram or YouTube."

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

Most of the information available to Turkmenistan's people is not useful for their lives. State media does not report about increases in prices for, or shortages of, basic goods, looming job cuts, severe storms, expected drought, or many other issues that would be important for people to know.

There is no freedom of speech or rights to information in Turkmenistan.

Journalists are not free to report what they wish and must conform their journalistic activities to the topic and standards set by the government

and the MNS. There is no civil society in Turkmenistan.

Occasionally a Turkmen citizen does publicly vent their discontent over some aspect of government policies, for example by calling for a protest or writing an open letter to the president. All such people have been imprisoned. In 2022, there was no incident of anyone exercising their nominal right to freedom of speech by making a statement that would displease Turkmen authorities.

There is no platform for public debate or any support for it from the government.

Much of the information the state and state media release to the public is misinformation. The rosy situation in the country that the government and state media portray is a stark contrast to the grim lives many people in Turkmenistan are leading. While this information is false, it is not intended to do harm to any individual or group and hate speech has not been seen in Turkmenistan.

In theory, Turkmen citizens could report misinformation to their local representative, but it more than likely result is the person making the complaint would face consequences. Turkmenistan's people have learned not to bring any grievances to officials unless it is literally a matter of life or death.

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

"The concept of meeting the needs of the audience in Turkmenistan is completely absent," one panelist commented. The security service selects topics to be reported—and rarely are these issues helpful for Turkmenistan's citizens trying to understand the situation in their country and make informed choices about their futures.

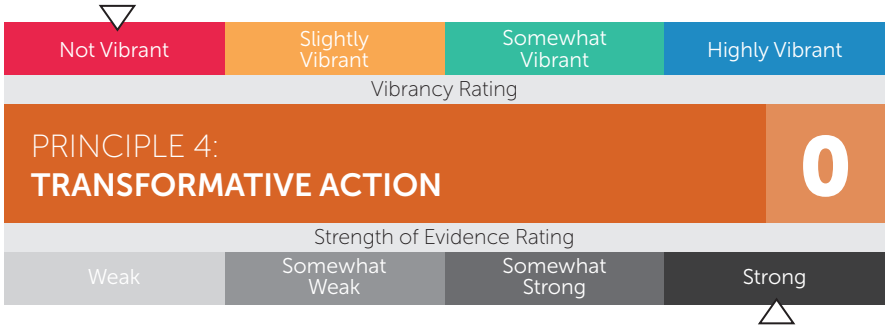
It is unclear if content producers use any quantitative data, and in actuality there is no reason for it. Turkmenistan's media is dedicated to propaganda and glorying the alleged achievements of the government. This has been true since independence and demonstrates that content producers are not interested in creating material that is genuinely popular with the people, only in continuing to spread propaganda.

Collaboration between journalistic media, content producers and government institutions exists only to the extent that they all need to ensure the information they release to the public conforms with the MNS' policies on topics and presentation.

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

Community media has never existed in Turkmenistan. The government has always discouraged its people from forming any group or organization outside of state-approved organizations. State media generally does not report community news.

The closest thing there is to community news would be local chat groups that meet on social networks. Such groups avoid political or religious topics, and no information is exchanged regarding gender rights or the rights of minority ethnic or religious groups.



In light of Turkmenistan's highly repressive environment, none of the indicators under this principle received high panelist scores. With the stranglehold that the state has on information and the flow of opinions, there are no nonpartisan sources of information in the country and, furthermore, no publicly expressed ideologies that differ from the heavily enforced state information. Citizens do not engage with their elected officials, and they are not exposed to fact-based health recommendations. Furthermore, there are no independent civil society

organizations operating within the country. Corruption of any stripe is not acknowleged by the state, unless the president calls someone out.

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

Every institution or organization in Turkmenistan works for and answers to the state. As such and as the panelists noted, there is no such thing as nonpartisan news and information sources in Turkmenistan with varying viewpoints. Under the current circumstances in the country, it is inconceivable that there could be a nonpartisan source of anything.

> “Generally, people cannot express opinions that disagree with the state narrative.

The government long ago placed restrictions on the importation of foreign newspapers.[1]

People with VPNs still can, to an unknown extent, access websites outside the country, but there is no data on what people read since the authorities forbid use of VPNs.

There are no town hall meetings or call-in shows. Generally, people cannot express opinions that disagree with the state narrative. The state discourages exchanges of any information that does not benefit the government.

> “There are no independent civil society organizations in Turkmenistan.

There is no evidence individuals engage in open and constructive discussions, and unless they have a VPN, they do not have access to quality news and information.

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

As noted throughout this chapter, state media is concerned with propaganda not information. Most of what state media disseminates is misinformation.

Turkmenistan’s people do not engage with officials, whose election was really only a formality as most “elected” officials are unknown to their constituents. The presidential election in March 2022 was another example of how meaningless information is in determining the outcome.

At the February 11, 2022 extraordinary joint session of parliament, President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov said he was tired, and a snap presidential election was announced. The following day, Turkmenistan’s Central Election Commission set March 12 as the date for the election. As was widely expected, Berdymukhammedov’s son Serdar was a candidate, running against eight competitors who were largely unknown to the general public in Turkmenistan. Serdar won the election easily. According to the country’s Central Election Commission, Serdar won the election , receiving nearly 73 percent of the vote, which was a relatively low total considering his father took nearly 90 percent of the vote in 2007, and some 97 percent in the 2012 and 2017 presidential elections.

Serdar’s eight opponents in the election were all people who were unknown to most of Turkmenistan’s citizens. His father similarly competed against candidates who were previously not known to the Turkmen people.

Likewise, with earlier presidential elections in 2007, 2012, and 2017, and in parliamentary elections, nearly all constituents do not know of—and often had never even heard of—candidates competing for seats.

There is no evidence that people follow fact-based health and safety recommendations--quite the opposite. Turkmenistan’s people have been told by state media to use supposed home remedies championed by former President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, who is a dentist by training and has allegedly written books on Turkmen traditional

1 “2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Turkmenistan,” U.S. Department of State, https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/turkmenistan/

herbal medicines. For most of these traditional remedies, there is no scientific evidence to support their curative properties.

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

There are no independent civil society organizations in Turkmenistan.

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

It has never been clear what information Turkmenistan's government uses to make public policy decisions. One panelist wrote, |"I would argue that ONLY mal-information informs the government." The information the government provides to its citizens is therefore rarely helpful and often unreliable.

Officials can only refer to the government's version of events if they wish to keep their jobs.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic norms.

Information sources within the country never reveal corruption. Corruption is not a topic for state media, except when the president rebukes an official, usually at a session of the government, and reveals that individual has engaged in corrupt practices. The elder Berdymukhammedov did this, interrupting his reports or statements to single out a person and point out all the person's alleged shortcomings and illegal activities. Usually this is followed by news the official in question is on trial or already in prison. State media only reports on the corrupt activities after the president has exposed them publicly on television.

IREX did not conduct an in-country panel discussion because of Turkmenistan's repressive environment. This chapter represents desk research, interviews, and the result of questionnaires filled out by several people familiar with the state of media in the country.

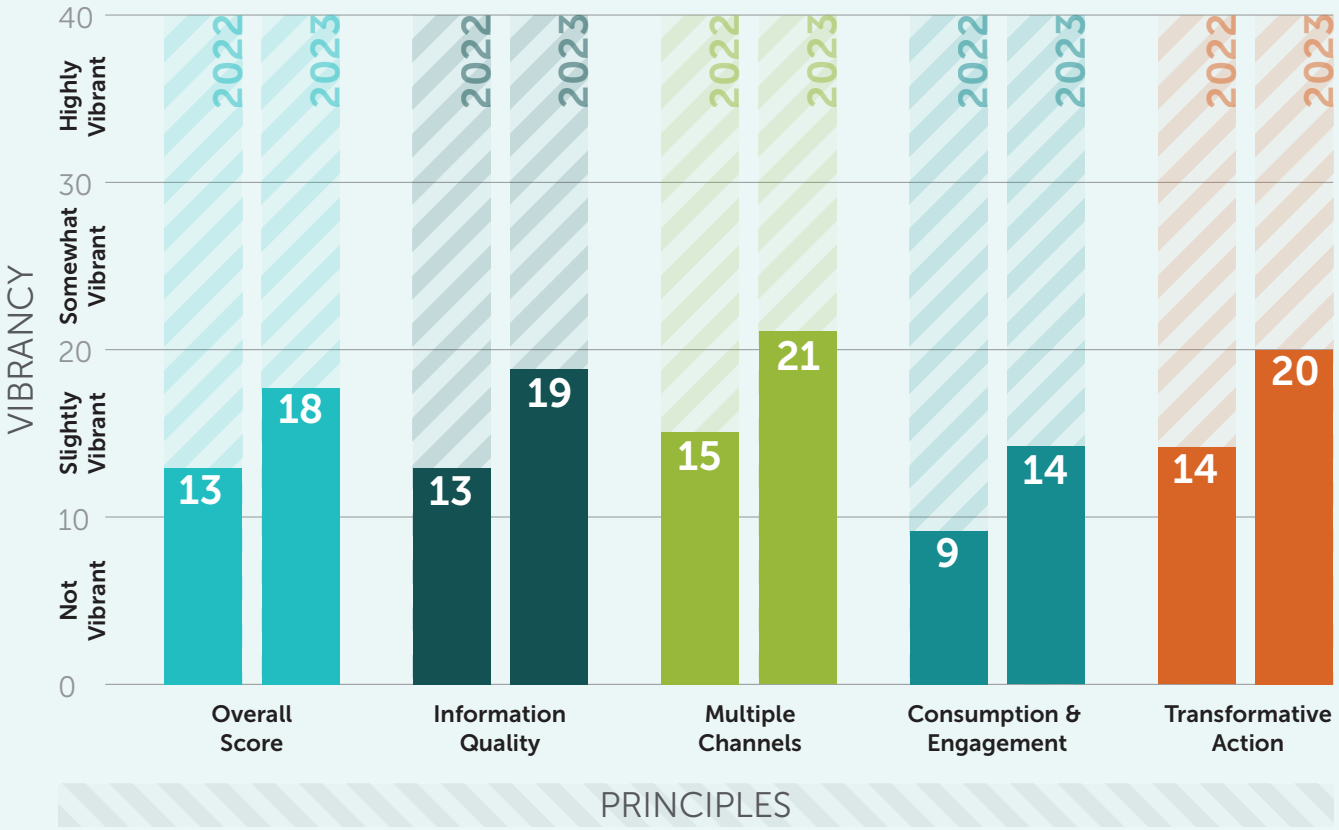
UZBEKISTAN

Vibrant Information Barometer

2023

USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

IREX



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
18

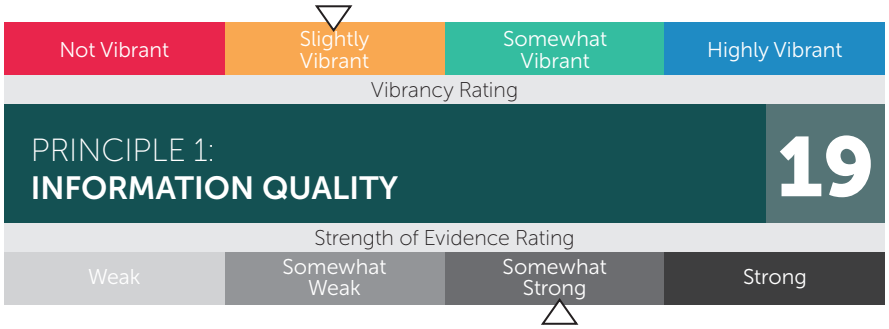
In 2022, Uzbekistan strained to maintain a steady supply of electricity and gas, fretted over a nearby war, and encountered public protests over autonomy in Karakalpakstan. These events set off waves of disinformation and fake news, and a flurry of reactions in social media. As content producers struggled to keep up with international, political, and social developments--and hold officials accountable for their actions--they faced new waves of repression and intimidation.

News coverage of Russia's invasion of Ukraine sowed information chaos and polarized views among Uzbekistanis. The global geopolitical and economic crisis hit the country's economy, which gradually recovered to prewar levels due in part to remittances from Russia. The influx of Russian businesspeople, IT specialists, and companies boosted the real estate, advertising, and IT industries as well as banking, hospitality, and catering. The war tested Uzbekistan's foreign policy, which sought to maintain cooperation with Russia, China, and the United States.

In June, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev proposed several amendments to the constitution, including the annulment of the current presidential term and the extension of presidential terms from five to seven years. In an interview with Kun.uz, the Senate's first deputy chairman, Sodiq Safoyev, confirmed speculation on social media that the changes would allow Mirziyoyev to run in presidential elections again, annulling existing term limits.

The government also adopted several laws and regulations that tightened control over the media: A law to ensure cybersecurity for state bodies can also be used to restrict freedom of expression online; a law on advertising can impede media advertising revenues; a new regulation controls the implementation of foreign-funded projects by media NGOs; and a new regulation bans posting photos and videos of traffic police online, thwarting attempts to stem corruption or abuse of power. In addition, the draft Information Code, if passed, restricts access to information during trials; makes content producers liable for distributing information critical of the government, along with the author of information; and proposes that journalists receive accreditation from government departments.

Despite these worrying developments, Uzbekistan's scores improved from the VIBE 2022 study. The Principle 1 (Information Quality) score increased, powered by an expanded telecommunications infrastructure and more diverse content, spurred by domestic and international events. Principle 2's (Multiple Channels) score was the highest of this year's Uzbekistan study: Lower costs and faster internet speeds broadly increased access to information, including for marginalized groups, to diverse channels of information in various languages. Moreover, due to new regulations, state entities share information with the public through regular press conferences. Principle 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) had the lowest score in this year's Uzbekistan chapter, reflecting weak media literacy and digital security skills, as well as restrictions on the free flow of information. Principle 4 (Transformative Action) scores also saw some improvement in this year's study due to instances of people using quality information to hold officials accountable and of the government engaging with the media and civil society to address issues.



Over the year, the Uzbekistan's media produced diverse and varied content, and more people sought out news of the conflicts in Karakalpakstan and Ukraine. Content producers tried to meet consumers' preferences for video reports and engaged with new audiences, who sought alternative news on social media platforms. Panelists assessed information as fact-based, free of harm, diverse, and inclusive, and scored the related indicators more highly. However, Indicator 5, which focuses on adequate resources, received the lowest score for this principle, recognizing that content production remains underdeveloped and under resourced.

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

Technologically and creatively, Uzbekistan's media landscape is transforming. In 2022, the telecommunications infrastructure expanded, and domestic and international events spurred a diversity of content. People switched from reading long texts to consuming audio and video in a variety of formats, including podcasts, short videos, interviews, and documentaries. Content producers created engaging headlines and visuals and streamed video on social networks to draw in new audiences.

However, fundamental impediments to the flow of reliable information remain, including widespread corruption in education, a challenging media environment, and low wages. Media ethics are underdeveloped, and journalists have little grasp of conflicts of interest or robust news analysis and investigative reporting. The Journalism and Mass Communication University of Uzbekistan and journalism departments at different universities fail to provide rigorous media education. Internews, which was refused government registration, offers selected media training limited in numbers and reach. Panelists said graduating students are poorly prepared, and many prefer better-paid jobs in advertising and public relations or to run their own blogs on social networks. Panelists said bloggers have more freedom to produce content, are not pressured by deadlines, and earn more than reporters. Sloppy and unethical practices may go unnoticed unless they discredit officials who take journalists and bloggers to court for libel.

Online media responded to the public's growing appetite for news on the protests in Kazakhstan and Karakalpakstan and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Older and rural residents got their domestic and international news from official media, while their urban counterparts watched Russian television channels via paid providers. Panelists said most people received one-sided information due to their limited foreign-language proficiency and a lack of alternative sources of information, media literacy, and critical-thinking skills.

While official media remained silent about the political and military conflicts, bloggers set the tone for Uzbekistan's information space, with posts critical of Russian news propaganda and the government's inability to counter disinformation.

In March, television host Robert Frantsev of Russia 24 criticized Uzbekistani bloggers and the outlets Kun.uz and Gazeta.uz for reposting anti-Russia news from foreign media. He also accused Uzbekistani media of inciting ethnic hatred in multiethnic Central Asia. Later that month, Ukraine's ambassador to Uzbekistan, Mykola Doroshenko, asked Uzbekistani authorities to block Russian TV broadcasts, noting that "the information war waged by the Russian media is an integral part of the military campaign and is aimed at misinforming the global community." Additionally, during a September online news conference with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba and Central Asian media--including Kun.uz, Gazeta.uz, Repost.uz and Yep.uz--the minister asked journalists to "be critical of the information received from Russian sources. Today,

Russia uses propaganda to cover up its 'operations' in order to absolve itself of responsibility for crimes."

Authorities refused but expanded a list of foreign TV channels in December. Political analyst Kamoliddin Rabbimov said these channels counterbalanced Russian propaganda but criticized official media's lack of coverage and analysis of the war and government policy limiting the variety of opinions. Daniel Rosenblum, the former U.S. ambassador to Uzbekistan, also noted the "relatively little coverage of the actual atrocities that are being committed in Ukraine," remarking in an interview with the Alter Ego project that "the loudness of the voices we are hearing from the Russian media drowns out other voices."

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

Misinformation is minimal in state media, which gets checked by newsrooms and government censors, panelists said, but the official practice of providing limited information in order to thwart follow-up questions can give rise to misinterpretation or misinformation. Government statements, often terse, get reposted on online outlets.

Independent media try to provide varied, factual content to cement their reputations as trusted news sources and increase audience reach and engagement. Media outlets also verify their content lest they face lawsuits or lose their licenses. At times, professional content producers take shortcuts under pressure of deadlines or competition and unintentionally spread misinformation. In a wave of fake news in 2022, content producers struggled to verify information due to the absence of fact-checking tools. The only fact-checking resource, AntiFake.uz on Telegram, did few fact-checks.

> **"Mal-information and hate speech triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine divided Uzbek society, creating conflict within families, workplaces, and communities.**

The panelists noted an increase in social media misinformation about possible gas and electricity shortages and street rallies in the aftermath of the power cuts. Citizens themselves spread misinformation about the possible causes of power cuts and fretted about the duration due to limited and delayed government information on the first day. Eventually, the Energy Ministry provided regular updates at press conferences. Media outlets and digital platforms lack adequate mechanisms or processes in place for responding to false information by moderating content in a way that reduces misinformation.

Journalists might report in good faith, but facts are frequently contested in Uzbekistan.

When foreign media reported that Russia was recruiting Uzbek labor migrants to fight in Ukraine, authorities denied it and reminded Uzbeks abroad that it is illegal to join foreign militaries. In an October YouTube interview, Ukrainian journalist and blogger Dmitry Gordon said Iranian drones, which were attacking Ukraine, were being assembled in Uzbekistan. After the Foreign Minister denied the allegations and protested to Ukrainian officials, the journalist said he had meant to say Tajikistan. A month later, Uzbekistan's Foreign Ministry summoned Ukraine's ambassador over an alleged false claim by a Ukrainian defense official in an interview to *La Repubblica.* The claim stated that Uzbekistan was helping Russia to circumvent sanctions by selling spare parts needed for missile production.

During the Karakalpakstan events, images of injured people and what appeared to be blood in the streets circulated on social media. The government called them fake, while international news outlets shared them with the disclaimer that they could not be verified. One panelist said video presented on social media as being from the Karakalpakstan events was actually from January protests in Kazakhstan.

In April, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), a terrorist group in Afghanistan, fired 10 rockets at an Uzbekistani military base. Although the ISKP claimed responsibility, officials in Uzbekistan called reports of the attack "false" and urged citizens to trust only official news sources. Later, the Taliban confirmed the incident to Gazeta.uz. Another five

rockets fired from Afghanistan into Uzbekistan in July did not explode but damaged four houses and a stadium in the border city of Termez. Later that month, the Defense Ministry denied reports of a third missile attack from Afghanistan as misinformation.

With no formal education in journalism and ethics, nonprofessional content producers disseminate false information to boost their audiences and revenue. Bloggers targeted banks, publishing information on the banks' violations of clients' rights, hoping to trigger a panic and an exodus of customers.

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

Social media users in Uzbekistan increasingly resort to hate speech when posting or commenting on bloggers' posts and media reports on sensitive issues, such as gender-based violence, religious beliefs, and domestic and international conflicts.

The government monitors official and independent online media for mal-information, hate speech, and criticism of top leadership and state reforms. State and media reports of imprisonment of individuals for reading and sharing "materials threatening public safety and public order" online sparked angry comments among followers of Islam. Accounts of government raids, forced beard shavings, and hateful posts on women's dress flooded social media.

Professional content producers did not disseminate mal-information or hate speech for fear of legal and reputational consequences, but social media users responded with hate speech and stereotypes to video reports on minority groups. The media coverage of an October incident involving two women who shared a kiss during a soda marketing campaign in Tashkent provoked public discussion on social media.

On occasion, hate speech turned to intolerance and harassment, which moved from offline to online contexts and vice versa. In November, a man dressed as a woman was filmed being chased and beaten by a group of people. Bloggers and social media users called for violence and even made death threats against the LGBTQ+ community. According to a recent UN report, hate speech by religious and political figures and bloggers targeting activists, women, and members of religious and LGBTQI+ groups significantly increased in Uzbekistan from 2018 to 2022.

Hate speech targeted victims and survivors of gender-based violence in response to media accounts of three women who tried to sell their children and a woman who attempted to drown herself and her three children in a river last November, losing two children as a result. A few users on social media questioned the underlying causes while most blamed the women.

There are legal consequences for bloggers, social media commenters, or social media sites unless they regulate posts and comments by cleaning up hateful remarks. Otherwise, they receive warnings from the state media regulator. The protests in Karakalpakstan elicited hate speech on social media, with some ethnic Uzbeks calling the Karakalpaks unappreciative of what Uzbekistan has done for them. To remain in compliance with laws that criminalize libel and slander and hold owners of blogs and media sites accountable for the accuracy of their content, media outlets switched off their comments sections to preclude hate speech or deleted critical comments on their channels.

Mal-information and hate speech triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine divided Uzbek society, creating conflict within families, workplaces, and communities. Supporters and critics of the invasion attacked each other on social media. Many worried that the war would depress the remittances from family members working in Russia or Ukraine or that those relatives would be recruited to fight. Ferghana News noted bloggers' increased influence on their audiences and critical views of the Russian invasion. Security services asked bloggers and journalists to provide neutral coverage of the conflict or to report on less sensitive angles, such as the evacuation of Uzbek citizens and humanitarian aid to Ukraine.

Religious bloggers take an "anti-West" position and accused the United States, NATO, and its allies of bombing civilians in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and other countries.

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

Uzbekistan is home to 36 million people of 136 ethnicities and 16 religious denominations. Uzbeks make up 85 percent of the population with Tajiks, Kazakhs, and Karakalpaks the three next-largest ethnic groups. State-owned television remains the main source of information, and the National TV and Radio Company (NTRC), which owns 26 television and 16 radio channels, airs information in Uzbek, Russian, Tajik, Karakalpak, and English. In March, the NTRC and Piramida channel from Kyrgyzstan agreed to begin exchanging content. In December, the number of foreign TV channels available through paid digital providers expanded from 50 to 192 and includes major foreign networks. In June 2021, the Yangi Uzbekiston news site began publishing content in Tajik in addition to Uzbek, Russian, English, and Kazakh.

With nearly 20 million users, Telegram is by far the dominant social network in Uzbekistan, where its reach is second only to its Russian audience. It has 18,000 chat groups and 123,000 channels, classified by regions, cities, professions, news, and various themes, with music and blogs leading other categories. People use Telegram for entertainment, communication, and national and international news. Knowing that few households can afford laptops and Wi-Fi connection, online media outlets share information via Telegram channels, which most people access via their mobile phones. In comparison, Facebook and Instagram have a combined total of 10 million subscribers in Uzbekistan.

> **“Women are not fairly represented in the mainstream media, which present traditional views on the role of women and men in family and society.**

Despite vast coverage from communication infrastructures, marginalized groups’ access to information is still restricted by costs, utility outages, limited computer skills, and media and information illiteracy. A United Nations Development Programme in Uzbekistan survey conducted in 2022 found that both men and women primarily use the internet at home on mobile phones, with increased use in urban areas. Although smartphone ownership is higher among women than men, women lag behind men in digital skills, with older, poorer, and less-educated women particularly left behind. Other barriers include the lack of content in local languages, the lax security of messaging apps, and restrictions on social networks. Social norms and gender stereotypes hinder women’s and girls’ access to information technologies, reducing education and employment opportunities in the industry. Female respondents from the Namangan and Kashkadarya regions said their families do not allow them to use smartphones and the internet.

Marginalized groups, including senior citizens, people with disabilities, and rural residents, use the internet for business, e-government, and payments far less. The study found that people with disabilities use smartphones to access the internet 10 percent less than those without disabilities.

Women are not fairly represented in the mainstream media, which present traditional views on the role of women and men in family and society. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women urged the government to raise awareness of gender issues, promote nondiscriminatory images of women in the media, and enlist the media in the fight against gender-based violence, among other actions.

Bloggers, journalists, and Nemolchi.uz, an independent, bilingual project with a presence on popular social media, reported numerous incidents of gender-based and domestic violence, including a woman beaten and shaved by four men in Kashkadarya, a 12-year-old girl who hanged herself in Ferghana, a 38-year-old woman who threw herself under a train in Bukhara, a woman who set herself on fire at the Fergana Oil Refinery, and a father who beat his 16-year-old daughter to death in Ferghana. In October, Kun.uz reported on seven women who were killed in one month by their husbands, and in one case by a father-in-law, leaving more than 10 children motherless in the Jizzakh, Ferghana, and Andijan regions. While some social media users called on the government to criminalize gender-based violence,

others expressed skepticism that the new legislation could help, given that existing laws are not enforced. The panelists said these accounts are evidence of the public's increased awareness of gender issues and demonstrate civil society and the media's commitment to combat domestic violence.

Owners, management, editorial staff, journalists, and other content producers are diverse and gender balanced. There is diversity and gender-balance among non-professional content producers.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

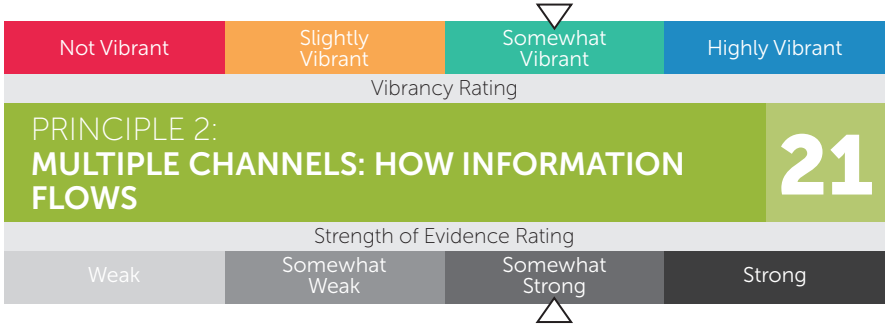
Professional content producers lack sufficient funds and staff to produce high-quality information. As a result, journalists seek extra work, and various news outlets often share the same content. Until mid-year, when the president signed a decree reducing the income tax rate for media by 50%, media outlets paid the same taxes as other businesses in relation to established tax rates. Income received from advertising revenues remains at the same tax rate, but the presidential degree exempted media equipment from customs duties.

Independent media depend on advertising and private funding, lacking traditional funding streams to be resilient to economic and financial pressures. "Our mass media have not learned to monetize their content and they do not have paid subscriptions and other sources of income except advertisements," one panelist added.

State-owned media are funded through subscriptions and subsidized by national and local governments. Some news subscriptions are compulsory. In November, a local district in Tashkent allegedly ordered a school to subscribe to 15 copies of Bektemir Haqiqati, its print newspaper, instructing school administrators to collect money for subscription fees from teachers.

The law on advertising, which was signed by the president in June 2022 and came into effect three months later, includes regulations on the content and language of advertised products, requiring they not discredit national symbols and individuals based on gender, nationality, beliefs, or social status. The law requires content creation to be primarily in Uzbek. Trademarks and logos of foreign products can be in their original language, but their costs must be displayed in the local currency. The law also bans the advertisement of drugs by celebrities or physicians, breast milk substitutes, fireworks, and alcohol--but allows limited advertising of locally produced beer and wines.

The demand for advertising on blogs has doubled. Advertisers seek long-term contracts with popular bloggers who are skilled in advertising and offer advertising formats for different budgets. Generally, advertising in blogs is proving more effective than placing spots in other media. Meanwhile, the influence of bloggers is expanding beyond social networks. They are invited to public and personal events or to give interviews, monetizing both their content and personas.



Expanded infrastructure, reduced costs, and faster internet speeds have broadened access for the public and marginalized groups to diverse channels of information in various languages. In compliance with new regulations, state entities have committed to openness and transparency of government data and share information with the public through regular press conferences. Panelists gave Indicator 8, on appropriate channels for government information, the highest score, citing adequate access to diverse channels. Panelists noted, however, that those channels are not independent, arguing that media distribution networks remain monopolized and heavily controlled by the state.

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

The constitution and laws ostensibly protect freedom of speech and freedom of the press, but the government imposes restrictions through legal and extralegal means, and the absence of regulations and penalties for obstructing journalistic activity leaves room for abuse. The current legal environment allows the state to control domestic publications, websites, channels, and ICT providers. That leaves out social networks, so officials instead order users and channel administrators to remove information that regulators consider illegal, typically content deemed to violate Uzbek morality or disrespect society and the state. Criticism of the government, officials, or political and socioeconomic reforms can be prohibited under this criterion. The Ministry of Digital Technologies and the Agency of Information and Mass Communications (AIMC) regulate and censor online content. If a media outlet does not address government notifications promptly, the state suspends the organization's license.

During the Karakalpakstan events, Gazeta.uz resisted pressure to remove news stories. When Kun.uz posted a Ramadan series of interviews with imams who explained religious rituals, the state fined the editor-in-chief for illegal dissemination of religious content.

One panelist said the lever of economic pressure is the most effective. Major businesses that buy advertising spaces are often affiliated with government officials. When instructed, these businesses can stop buying advertisements and shift them to other outlets. This is a financial tool to pressure media outlets, resulting in a loss of income. The state can also close channels so that a media outlet cannot advertise. The outlet loses its means of existence and closes itself.

Privacy laws cover state secrets, commercial secrets, and personal data. These laws are not fairly enforced, and most are outdated. The legislation lacks classifications for state secrets, rendering information confidential even after it has lost its significance. Journalists cannot access archived data or criminal cases since they are not considered open data and there are no procedures that regulate access to this type of information. A panelist noted that there are many violations of information-access laws. Requests are denied, incomplete, or provided in raw form, or agencies charge money for releasing information. There is no detailed register of open data. The law on open data is not fully enforced, and not all government bodies comply.

Media organizations did not operate freely in 2022, as the government exercised control over their coverage and held media outlets, individual journalists, and bloggers accountable for sensitive content, such as the war in Ukraine, the president and his family, and other officials. One panelist noted that media never sue a government body, rather, they are only ever defendants in lawsuits for defamation, libel, or damage to officials' reputations. Biased judgements are common, thanks to judicial corruption.

Panelists cited numerous violations of reporters' rights and interference in their work during 2022. Kun.uz reported that since 2019, authorities have discussed bills to impose liability for obstructing journalistic activity but have not done so. While several laws prohibit harassment and intimidation of journalists and the media, there is no penalty for noncompliance. On April 15, Rost24 journalist Anora Sodikova reported that she experienced government pressure and threats for an article linking 25 Uzbekistanis in the security services to the Pandora Papers. Summons and interrogations of journalists and bloggers and their family members by security services are also common practice.

Several times, law enforcement officers obstructed the work of content producers with impunity and seized their equipment. Andijan police prevented a Human.uz journalist from filming a report on the sale of sugar on his mobile phone and took the phone. Tashkent police prevented a Sevimli TV crew from entering a stadium to cover a soccer match and then detained the crew when they tried to film fans outside. After confiscating their press passes, a group of six or seven police officers began beating them and shocking them with tasers. An energy official in the Kashkadarya region choked a Daryo.uz journalist and tried to take his camera. An Andijan state electricity official allegedly beat blogger Fatima Jurayeva for questioning an increase in farmers' utility bills.

Several journalists and bloggers received fines and prison sentences. Blogger Olimjon Khaydarov was fined UZS 21 million ($1,800) after being convicted of spreading false information and illegally organizing a workers' protest at a natural gas plant during a shutoff. Blogger Sobir Boboniyazov was sentenced to three years in prison for posting video and audio content that insulted the president. Tashkent journalist Aleksey Garshin, known for his expose on a secret presidential mansion built with public funds on a nature reserve, received the maximum fine of UZS 108 million ($9,500) for insulting a blogger on social media. Garshin also reported pressure from authorities after livestreaming demonstrations in support of Ukraine outside the Ukrainian Embassy in March.

Journalist and lawyer Dauletmurat Tajimuratov, Makan.uz editor Lolagul Kallykhanova, and 12 protesters were tried on various offenses relating to demonstrations in Karakalpakstan, including organizing unrest and attempting to subvert the government. Human rights and media groups were denied entry to the courtroom. Gazeta.uz streamed the hearings for five days, until the court cut the online video feed. Tajimuratov was ultimately sentenced to 16 years in prison and Kallykhanova was sentenced to eight years of "restricted freedom."

In December, the AIMC posted a draft Information Code that would infringe on media freedom and freedom of expression, combining eight laws and many existing provisions. New measures would allow journalists to access government meetings and use drones, but they would also allow authorities to hide information, censor and punish the media, limit information during investigations and trials, and ban obscenities and information that promotes same-sex relations or insults or shows disrespect for society, the state, or state symbols. The AIMC received 80 comments by media professionals and organizations that are being reviewed by the Ministry of Justice. In 2023, the AIMC intends to send the document to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe for feedback and hold a roundtable to discuss it with media representatives before submitting it to parliament. Human Rights Watch urged the government to withdraw the bill, saying it is "discriminatory, violates freedom of expression, and is in breach of multiple obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights."

> "The government directly owns and indirectly controls private media outlets in Uzbekistan.

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

Uzbektelecom expanded telecommunications and internet infrastructure to remote locations in 2022, increasing internet speeds and decreasing the cost for providers by 25 percent, making it affordable for most people. According to Cable.co.uk mobile data pricing for 2022, Uzbekistan's prices ranked 15th globally ($0.37 for 1 GB of mobile data) and second in the Commonwealth of Independent States, after Kyrgyzstan.

In 2022, Uzbekistan had more than 31 million internet users and more than 29.5 million mobile internet users, respectively a 14 percent and 16.6 percent increase over December 2021. Total internet network bandwidth grew substantially, extending mobile broadband and mobile communications to more than 98 percent of the population. In the event of a disruption or electricity outage, people can access mobile internet.

In July, the Ministry of Digital Technologies and Chinese companies tested a 5G network in the Samarkand region and agreed to expand the network coverage nationally and increase mobile and internet speed in the eastern and western regions. Uzbektelecom received a new internet channel from Cogent, one of the world's largest internet providers, allowing the agency to improve internet services and provide transit channels to foreign providers.

The government owns all information and communications technology infrastructure and tightly controls its content. Authorities have the capacity to switch off all means of communication, as they did in Karakalpakstan during the July protests. The power cuts in the beginning and the end of 2022 caused another information vacuum that released chaos and disinformation in the media environment.

Marginalized groups, including women and people with disabilities, have limited access to information due to social norms and disabilities.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

The country's constitution and laws guarantee citizens' access to government information. Under a 2021 presidential decree, government agencies must place annual reports on their websites by March, hold press conference on these reports by April, and upload updates on public procurement, expenses, beneficiaries, and other topics on the government's open data portal beginning in July each year. Also in 2021, Uzbekistan launched an upgraded Open Budget portal, versions of which are used by governments around the world to encourage public participation in and monitoring of the budget process. In August 2022, Mirziyoyev signed a law stipulating fines for officials who violate the openness policy or fail to upload government information online.

Throughout the year, government bodies provided information and social services to the public though the president's Virtual Public Reception. The platform's utility is limited, though, because it requires basic computer skills, legal literacy, and a stable power supply and internet connection. Most people prefer to walk into one of the 201 public reception centers, single-window registration facilities that provide 148 types of services. In response to complaints of long lines and reports of lax and fraudulent services at the centers, the presidential office introduced regional assistants to coordinate the centers' activities. These assistants can pass citizens' complaints against local officials to courts, which can hold officials accountable for administrative violations. More than 99,883 violations were recorded in the public sector in 2022, most concerning missing deadlines, unlawful requests for documents, unjustified refusals, and failure to provide direct public services.

> "The media environment is warped by strong self-censorship, mutual distrust among content producers, and a fragmented and weak media community.

Uzbekistan ranked 37th of 192 countries in the 2022/2023 Open Data Inventory biennial report, an international, nongovernmental project, leading Central Asia and outperforming the Russian Federation. In the Global Data Barometer, an expert survey, the country ranked 58th of 109 countries. In the World Bank's GovTech Maturity Index 2022, Uzbekistan made progress in four indicators, including public service delivery and digital citizen engagement, and joined Group A countries that lead in digital transformation. Among 198 countries, the country ranked fourth in digital skills and innovation in public services and 43rd in public administration and services. The index highlighted the performance of the Single Portal of Interactive Public Services, an e-government platform where citizens and businesses can register, file, and make payments for services. Uzbekistan took these international indicators seriously and hosted an Open Data Week and UNESCO's Global Conference on Universal Access to Information 2022.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

There are legislative frameworks for licensing TV and radio broadcasts, with all legal and administrative issues regulated by subordinate government resolutions and decisions. Licensing procedures, which lack transparency and clear rules in the allocation of broadcasting frequencies and licenses, are subject to political influence. The National Council for Radio Frequencies under the Ministry of Digital Technologies meets ad hoc and allocates frequencies and licenses behind the scenes. Information on licensing procedures and government calls for bids on spectrum allocation are not available to the public. It is challenging to launch a radio channel since broadcasting frequencies have already been allocated. State-owned Uzbektelecom holds a monopoly on internet access and sells internet traffic to domestic internet service providers, which are prohibited from connecting to the international internet and maintaining satellites. Like Uzbektelecom, private internet service providers can filter and block websites.

The government lifted restrictions on Skype, Twitter, TikTok, WeChat, and Vkontakte in 2022, possibly as a result of staff changes in the

presidential administration, including the appointment of Sardor Umurzakov as the head of the administration and Allamjonov, the former media foundation director, as his deputy. These social networks were blocked in 2021 following the adoption of a law that required them to store personal data of Uzbek users on servers physically located in Uzbekistan. No social network is known to have done so yet. Former IT Minister Shukhrat Sadikov was dismissed for blocking the social networks but was named a deputy head of the prime minister's secretariat in February 2023.

In August, the Ministry of Innovative Development called for applications to develop a national social network and messengers, ostensibly to protect the personal data of Uzbek citizens. Some IT experts interviewed by Kun.uz called the move a waste of money, noting that 32 previous attempts to create a national social network went nowhere.

The government directly owns and indirectly controls private media outlets in Uzbekistan. There are 36 state and 38 private TV stations, which have state and/or private funding. Although a law prohibits media monopolies and requires that owners disclose shareholder information, that information is not made public.

In April 2023, AidData, a research lab at William & Mary's Global Research Institute, published a media ownership profile that analyzed domestic media ownership in Uzbekistan. According to AidData, one outlet had direct Russian ownership. The Uzbek government fully owns the fifth most-consumed channel, Yoshlar, and partially owns Mening Yurtim (MY5), the second most-consumed channel. Zo'r TV, the most-consumed channel in Uzbekistan, is owned by Ismail Israilov and Shukhrat Akhmetov, who both have business ties with the (now) ex-mayor of Tashkent, Jakhongir Artikhodjaev. Israilov owns shares in Pro FM and Akhmetov controls Vodiy Sadosi radio and the Tasvir publishing house.

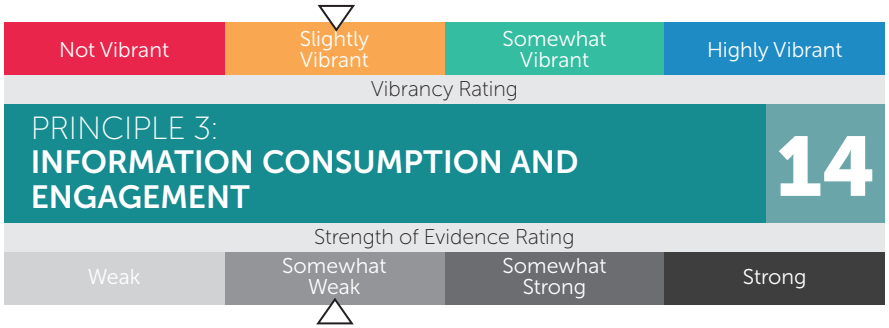
Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Financial precarity compels media organizations in Uzbekistan to depend on their state or private owners and tread lightly in covering the government. Funding sources, including advertising revenues and owners' investments, influence the choice of topics, constrain reporting, and blur the lines between newsroom and business operations. The government awards subsidies and advertising contracts mainly to state-owned media or friendly private media.

Because media outlets in Uzbekistan are homogenous or controlled by the government, there is little distinction between state and private media, with the second being critical of midlevel officials. The media environment is warped by strong self-censorship, mutual distrust among content producers, and a fragmented and weak media community.

Membership in regulatory bodies and their criteria and decisions on frequency allocations, licenses, and telecommunications services are not transparent or publicly available, contrary to the government's widely ignored policy on openness.

The government uses various means, including tax audits and health inspections, to pressure media. In fear of losing their licenses, owners dictate editorial stances and order articles removed following phone calls or warnings from authorities. In many cases, the owner and editor are the same person.



Even though people have adequate access to channels of information, their consumption of and engagement with information is limited by a lack of media literacy and digital security, and restrictions on the free flow of information. Panelists cited somewhat strong evidence that the public and the media lack the knowledge and skills to protect their privacy and security online. The panelists said that people of all

education levels lacked media literacy and rated that subindicator poorly. The indicator on community media received no score because Uzbekistan has no community media.

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

Laws and regulations aim to ensure data privacy and digital security, including the 2019 law on personal data, amended in 2021 to require the physical storage of user data in Uzbekistan. The country's first law on digital or cyber security, which tasks the Security Service with policing cybersecurity issues and safeguarding the information and security systems of state bodies, was adopted in April 2022. In October 2022, the government increased penalties for ICT fraud and required that personal-data processing receive four levels of protection from debit cards. The government uses protection of personal data as an excuse not to release public information.

Reports by the media and the Internal Affairs Ministry exposed the lack of digital security training and tools for the media, citizens, and government bodies, making them vulnerable to cyber threats and attacks. Hundreds of citizens suffered financial losses from online theft in 2022 because they lacked basic digital-security and data-literacy skills. In 2023, the Interior Ministry's Cybersecurity Center launched campaigns to educate the public about the risks of sharing personal information online. Still, there is no systematic approach to cybersecurity education.

> "The concept of media literacy is in its infancy in Uzbekistan.

The Cybersecurity Center recently counted more than 1.3 million cyberattacks in the national internet segment and found that only 14,000 of 38,000 active domains had security certificates. In August, the center named the Justice Ministry, Central Bank, and State Statistics Committee among the 10 state bodies with the best information and digital security systems. In November, hackers left a greeting for the Cybersecurity Center on the homepage of the Senate's website.

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

The concept of media literacy is in its infancy in Uzbekistan. Authorities have not introduced it in a systematic way in schools or more broadly. Although Allamjonov, the deputy head of the presidential administration, told a gathering in Geneva in April that Uzbekistan must cooperate with foreign organizations in order to help its journalists and bloggers become more "legally literate" and to increase its citizens' media literacy, officials have long refused registration to well-known international media organizations that promote media literacy.

As part of projects by USAID, ERIM (Equal Rights and Independent Media), and DW Akademie, dozens of journalists, bloggers, and civil society representatives conducted media- and information-literacy sessions for marginalized groups, including unemployed women and youth, senior citizens, people with disabilities, and incarcerated people. These activities were, as usual, sporadic, short, and limited in reach and coverage. A few enthusiastic public-school teachers integrated elements of media- and information-literacy into their lessons. Given Uzbekistan's top-down approach, if instructed from above, officials have the capacity to develop a national media- and information-literacy strategy and integrate it into the formal education system.

Acceptance of Russian propaganda about the war in Ukraine and widespread cybercrime suggest that both adults and youth seldom think critically or check facts. The lack of media- and information literacy and fact-checking websites make it difficult to distinguish trustworthy news from poor-quality news and information. People tend to obey social norms and refrain from questioning family traditions or the views of their elders.

The USAID-funded MediaCAMP survey, which assessed media consumption and media literacy in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in 2021, recorded a slight improvement in media literacy in Uzbekistan, where people preferred entertainment to news, and

television remained the primary source of information. The study found greater consumption of Uzbek-language domestic content and more loyalty to centralized official media on television, than to foreign or provincial outlets. The Uzbek-language segment of the internet is limited in quality and quantity. Urban residents with higher education were more likely to use the internet and consume Russian media than their rural counterparts.

Trends in media consumption were upended by the conflicts in Karakalpakstan, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine, which fed a growing demand for news in 2022, panelists said. They also said consumers sought alternative news from online media as official outlets kept silent about political developments. One panelist said their online outlet saw a jump in visits by users from neighboring countries during the protests in Karakalpakstan. Uzbekistan youth, who made up 40 percent of the foreign labor migrants in Russia in 2022, followed news of the war and worried about a possible loss of jobs and rumors about conscription into the Russian army. A panelist from a local media NGO said respondents struggled to cope with information overload and negativity on social media, and eventually tuned out.

> “Content producers seeking information experience bureaucratic hurdles, delays, and arbitrary refusals from authorities.

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

Most people engage with limited fact-based information they consume on social media. There are no platforms for public debate, which is discouraged to avoid criticism of government policies. With regard to political events or news posts, open debate on contentious issues on social media platforms turns to harsh rhetoric full of skepticism and angry statements by conflicting sides. Media consumers who report misinformation, mal-information, or hate speech to public councils, ombudsmen, or platform moderators are rare.

Media professionals and civil society activists cannot fully exercise their rights to information and freedom of speech to address social issues and report on the news. Content producers seeking information experience bureaucratic hurdles, delays, and arbitrary refusals from authorities. Kun.uz reported dozens of instances in which the General Prosecutor’s Office selectively responded to the outlet’s inquiries on the status of criminal cases opened against officials. Using specious explanations, courts repeatedly banned journalists from attending open hearings.

About 35 content producers at all levels were pressured or threatened and received fines and prison sentences for their activities in 2022.

On the deadly protests in Kazakhstan and Karakalpakstan and Russia’s war on Ukraine, security services and the Agency for Information and Mass Communications informally warned journalists and reporters to provide neutral coverage or none at all. Journalist Marina Kozlova reported receiving an official warning from the agency over a video interview with Mykola Doroshenko, Ukraine’s ambassador to Uzbekistan. “They summoned one of our correspondents, one of my deputies, then my business partner, and now they’re waiting for me,” the Kun.uz founder wrote on social media.

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

It is common for audiences to provide feedback in comments sections under news stories or blog posts, which are moderated by news sites and owners of social media channels. Even though media and content producers take steps to build trust with audiences and transparency in authorship, their reporting methods and publishing corrections are questionable and undermined by unethical practices.

Journalistic media, content producers, civil society organizations and government institutions rarely collaborate and network together. Productive information sharing is hindered by government attempts to control the media, content producers and civil society and frame information to align state narratives. The government rarely accepts and

considers feedback from the media and civil society.

For years, Uzbekistan's media did not comply with international standards and could not meet foreign advertisers' need for accurate audience measurements. That began to change in 2017 with the launch of the National Media Council and significant reforms. These reforms, however, have yet to transform the radio industry. Many stations are local and lack audience measurement tools.

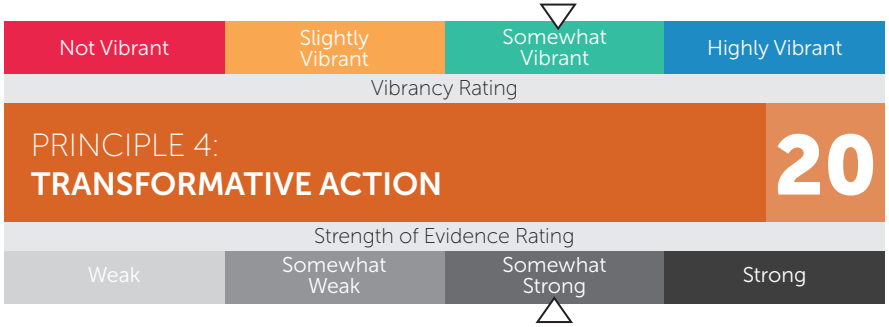
Television accounts for more than 30 percent of the Uzbekistan media market, and state-owned television is the single most dominant media, with national coverage and the biggest market share. In October 2018, TNS Central Asia (Kantar Media) received a five-year state contract to monitor 1,500 viewers in 550 households using stationary people meters connected to televisions. The ratings system sparked competition among channels, which began producing a variety of content in new formats. However, television lacks enough domestic content to fill the airtime and has to address unlicensed content, copyright issues for foreign content, and unclear regulations on advertising over-the-counter drugs and locally produced beer.

The digital media market has seen an increase in online video content. Videos adapted for mobile devices engage audiences on TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts. Digital media in Uzbekistan, however, have struggled to make money from their content. In March 2023, the government asked the U.S. ambassador to Uzbekistan, Jonathan Henick, to assist with acquiring access to YouTube (Google/Alphabet) monetization.

Independent news media struggle to stay afloat partly because they do not know how to market themselves. They have trouble attracting new advertisers, maintaining relationships with existing ones, and winning back past clients. They are slow to develop new commercial formats for special projects or to reach specific clients. Panelists said online news media also lack management expertise and financial literacy. Most media owners do not have knowledge of finance and business management and do not use accounting data to make informed decisions. Top media leadership and commercial departments have poor knowledge of the media market and limited engagement with customers. They do not apply customer-development approaches when launching new projects and do not consider the views of potential advertisers in developing new products.

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

Uzbekistan does not have community media.



People use social media to air views on various sociopolitical events, but the exchanges are not always open or constructive, especially on the Karakalpakstan protests and the war in Ukraine. Many users do not openly criticize the Uzbek government or Russia's motives for war, and content producers delete such criticisms from their comment sections for fear of legal repercussions.

Panelists scored indicators on information sharing, using information to inform actions and improve communities, and civil society's use of information higher. They cited instances of people using quality information to hold officials accountable and of the government engaging with the media and civil society to address issues. The indicator on good governance and democratic rights received the lowest score in this principle due to numerous media accounts of corruption and human rights violations.

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

State-owned media promote government propaganda that shapes public opinion. People tend to trust official media and treat online media — usually foreign — with suspicion due to the language barrier, lack of media literacy, and limited access to alternative and nonpartisan news and information. City-dwellers with higher education, foreign language skills, and stable access to the internet tend to consume multiple types of media.

> "State-owned media promote government propaganda that shapes public opinion.

Town hall meetings and call-in shows are not common in Uzbekistan. People meet and discuss political and social issues during a gap, an informal gathering of various social groups, including friends, colleagues, neighbors, and extended families. Even during these gaps, people refrain from openly criticizing the president and his family, given a deep-rooted fear for personal and family safety and mutual distrust. In an interview with the Alter Ego blog in August, Daniel Rosenblum, the outgoing U.S. ambassador, said that even though Uzbekistanis now feel freer to criticize the government and can more freely produce and exchange information online, people remain wary of discussing certain topics. "I think it has something to do with these red lines; people feel if they publish it or write about it, there will be consequences. And I can't call that freedom of speech," he said.

Social media users respond to a news story or a blog post and voice their opposing views and criticism of the government on social media platforms. However, their comments are scrubbed by the owners of the social media channels for fear of legal repercussions. A panelist noted that although the state does not regulate social media, "The government sends notifications to users and the administrators of channels asking them to clean up comments, not the posts, because that's where sharp critical views are usually found."

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

People's views on political and social issues are shaped by televised government narratives. Although the government does not necessarily engage in misinformation to explain its decisions, authorities often conceal or provide incomplete information on important issues.

Information during election campaigns is heavily controlled by the state. Limited quality information prevents people from making informed decisions. There is little analysis of candidates' agendas, no public debates or opposing views on media outlets, which are flooded with positive government narratives of a favored candidate. People strongly believe that their votes do not influence election outcomes or are convinced that ballots are replaced by pre-prepared ballots.

There were a few significant examples in 2022 of people in Uzbekistan acting on reliable information to affect, or prevent, change. In one instance, a public outcry followed a Kun.uz report that a construction company with connections to a former mayor of Tashkent, in a closed decision of the cabinet, won a state contract to consolidate three cancer hospitals. The public ultimately saved two of the hospitals.

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

Civil society organizations (CSOs) produce reliable content on the projects they implement, although they avoid sensitive topics and produce content that is in line with government narratives. NGOs cooperate with the media as part of their grant projects and invite the press to cover their project activities. However, despite some improvements including better cooperation with government officials, the operating environment for CSOs remains restrictive. Notably, the government passed a regulation in 2022 that forces any NGO receiving project funding from international organizations to inform

the Ministry of Justice, after which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs may or may not approve the funding and appoint a state agency to act as a "national partner," resulting in long delays in beginning projects. This assigned agency appoints a government official to, among other things, oversee the planning and implementation of the project, make recommendations, and devise a planning roadmap. The regulation challenges civil society's access to foreign funding and ability to report on sensitive issues, such as corruption and human rights violations.

Dozens of groups have asked that the regulation be cancelled, arguing that it "contradicts national law, international standards on human rights to freedom of association, and hinders the development of an independent civil society" in Uzbekistan. CSOs noted that the Ministry of Justice did not get feedback from civil society before imposing the regulation, which "violates the rights of NGOs and puts independent civil society institutions in a subordinate position from national partners in the implementation of their projects." CSOs wrote that despite progressive reforms, the state of civil society in Uzbekistan is still weak, due to the fact that laws often contradict each other, thus introducing additional bureaucratic obstacles and infringing on the freedom of association and activities. Gazeta.uz published their appeal in full.

The Ministry of Justice refused, but the state-run National Association of NGOs agreed to create a platform to discuss ways to foster better legal, economic, and social conditions for NGOs. Justice officials met with NGOs and agreed to create a working group under the association and revisit the rule based on recommendations.

> "People strongly believe that their votes do not influence election outcomes or are convinced that ballots are replaced by pre-prepared ballots.

Media and civil society did report on unlawful evictions and property seizures that displaced marginalized groups in 2022. In a recent push for urban development, the government demolished some houses without giving their inhabitants other housing or adequate compensation. According to the nonprofit Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project and the Central Asia Protest Tracker from the nonprofit Oxus Society in Washington, D.C., about half of protests in Uzbekistan since 2018 stemmed from development and property disputes, with utility shortages another major source of unrest. About one-quarter of these protests turned violent, when property owners attacked developers or self-immolated after losing cases in a corrupt judicial system. Developers often turned off gas, electricity, and water to evict homeowners from their properties.

Civil society and media, especially bloggers, reported on continuing forced labor in the education system, particularly school administrators forcing teachers and students to perform unrelated public works. During the year, teachers and the public reported incidents of forced labor via an online platform, @iamnotaslave_bot, which posted pieces documenting evidence of compulsory labor among teachers which were reposted by media outlets. As a result, in November the Ministry of Public Education issued a statement banning forced labor, and in early 2023 the president decreed stiffer penalties for forced labor and teacher assault.

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

In theory, civil society and media play multiple roles and serve as important sources of information for the government and the public. In practice, however, civil society and the media's roles are constrained in Uzbekistan, even though laws provide for freedom of speech and association, and the government has signaled readiness to engage and allow them to serve as a check on its power. A requirement that officials upload government information online and engage with civil society and media through press conferences by each July is observed.

The government rarely engages with civil society to make policy, as when it passed the regulation requiring NGOs to have a government partner when working on a foreign-funded project. There were no media or civil society reports on government engagement with civil society in developing the constitutional amendments of 2022.

There are no pluralistic debates among politicians, in parliament, or any other formal setting. Politicians do not use distortion or lies when presenting arguments; rather, they quietly go about completing the tasks assigned by their administration. Criticizing or presenting opposing views on issues is not in their nature. Outspoken politician Rasul Kusherbayev resigned in late December 2022 after he was denied participation in budget discussions, and Ulugbek Inoyatov, the deputy speaker, did not give him a chance to voice his opinions. Kusherbayev, who has gained exposure and popularity for his opposing views and comments on hot issues such as the cost to rent school textbooks, at one point wrote: "It is better not to have a deputy speaker who zips the lips of deputies."

There are examples, though, of officials acting in response to media reports or social media controversies. After years of homeowners' fights against unlawful land seizures and property demolition, heavily covered by online media outlets, President Mirziyoyev signed a law in June that governs the seizure of land and agreements with owners. In November, he signed another law that regulates the state registration of property ownership. Additionally, media outlets and bloggers reported on violence against emergency medical professionals by relatives of patients who claimed the physicians failed to provide immediate aid. Videos of violence and photos of injured nurses and physicians on social media sparked a public discussion. As a result, the president signed a law in 2023 that introduced additional fines and arrests for perpetrators, though laws against assault in general are not enforced.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

Human rights groups and online new sites reported significant human rights and civil liberty violations, unlawful evictions, gender-based violence, and the persecution and arrests of people on charges of religious extremism. The U.S. Embassy's 2022 report on human rights in Uzbekistan cited 75 deaths in detention facilities. In November, after a 15-year-old boy died at a Ferghana youth detention facility, Kun.uz wrote, "It is becoming common for law enforcement agencies, especially internal affairs bodies, to discharge the corpses of detainees out of their buildings." In 2022, several prisoners attempted suicide, including Alisher Yakubov, who described his experience of torture and harassment in his suicide note. Prosecutors dropped Yakubov's citing lack of evidence.

Since 2017, Uzbekistan has passed a series of anti-corruption measures, set up watchdog agencies, and allowed anti-corruption NGOs to operate. An anti-corruption plan seeks to facilitate civil society, media, and citizen participation in the investigation and prevention of corruption, among other measures.

The government's Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA) receives information and complaints on corruption cases, including embezzlement, fraud, and abuse of official power and bribery, from citizens through the President's Virtual Reception and public reception centers. Additionally, the National Anti-Corruption Council, a non-governmental organization founded in December 2021, works through its regional offices to investigate and report on corruption in national and local government bodies. The government responds to these cases with arrests and dismissals but has not managed to eliminate the underlying cause of corruption: abuse of power. In 2022, the ACA named healthcare, education, banking, and internal affairs the most corrupt sectors. Moreover, in 2022 Tashkent city courts reviewed 9,807 criminal corruption cases against 12,141 employees in the education sector. About 3,116 officials were prosecuted on charges of corruption last year.

With support from an international civil society coalition, the Uzbek Forum for Human Rights and Transparency International-Russia published a report on the country's progress in implementing the UN Convention Against Corruption. It found that the ACA, which issues warnings to state entities, is influenced by the president's office and lacks the independence and power to enforce those warnings. According to the report, authorities use government-organized NGOs (GONGO) to simulate civil society participation on anti-corruption issues. It also said the Justice Ministry hinders civil society participation through difficult registration and grant-authorization procedures for NGOs.

Despite these bureaucratic and political hurdles, people formed

informal community groups and posted videos on social media of illegal construction, tree cutting, and land seizures in 2022. The government responded to some of these cases, but it has no systematic and structured cooperation with civil society and community groups. In March, the ACA reported that 80 of 135 government bodies, 60 percent, did not disclose on their websites or the open data platform information on public procurement; the costs of business trips and receptions for foreign visitors; and information on licensing, permits, cars, and services. There was no discussion on My Opinion, a bilingual online platform meant to engage civil society, media, and citizens in monitoring public and state affairs.

Despite reforms in public procurement, conflicts of interest, and public contracting, enforcement of new rules is weak. Public procurement of goods and services to firms which officials indirectly own through their close contacts is common practice. An incident with a foreign investor shed a bad light on Uzbekistan's laws and investment climate. In 2022, the then-mayor of Tashkent was involved in a scandal with Murari Lal Jalan, a developer of two major projects in Tashkent. In a November 2022 interview with Kun.uz, the Indian businessman accused the the-mayor of extortion. "I was left with two choices: either to abandon one of my projects, for example, Lake City, or to deposit $100 million in the bank," he said. The then-mayor accused the businessman of defamation and appealed to the Prosecutor General's Office to review the case.

Due to increased self-censorship among content producers and limited training in investigative journalism, only a small number of independent journalists, media outlets, and bloggers report on corruption cases, and those who report on corruption receive threats and pressure to remove their content. Last April, Gazeta.uz wrote that Rost24.uz had been pressured to remove investigative content about Jakhongir Usmanov, whose name appeared in the Pandora Papers in 2021. The son of a late senator, former deputy prime minister in charge of trade and the head of the Football Federation and the National Olympic Committee Mirabror Usmanov, Jakhongir Usmanov launched a charitable foundation in 2017 which was exempt from taxes, received funds from foreign individuals and legal entities, and had financial transactions with offshore companies. Over the course of five years, the foundation neither published activity reports nor supported nursing homes, as was indicated in its charter. The Rost24.uz journalist removed the video content from the website and YouTube channel but published it on their Facebook page.

This chapter represents desk research, interviews, and the results from questionnaires filled out by people familiar with the state of media and information in the country. Participants will remain anonymous because of Uzbekistan's evolving environment.

This study is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, the United States Government, or IREX.