

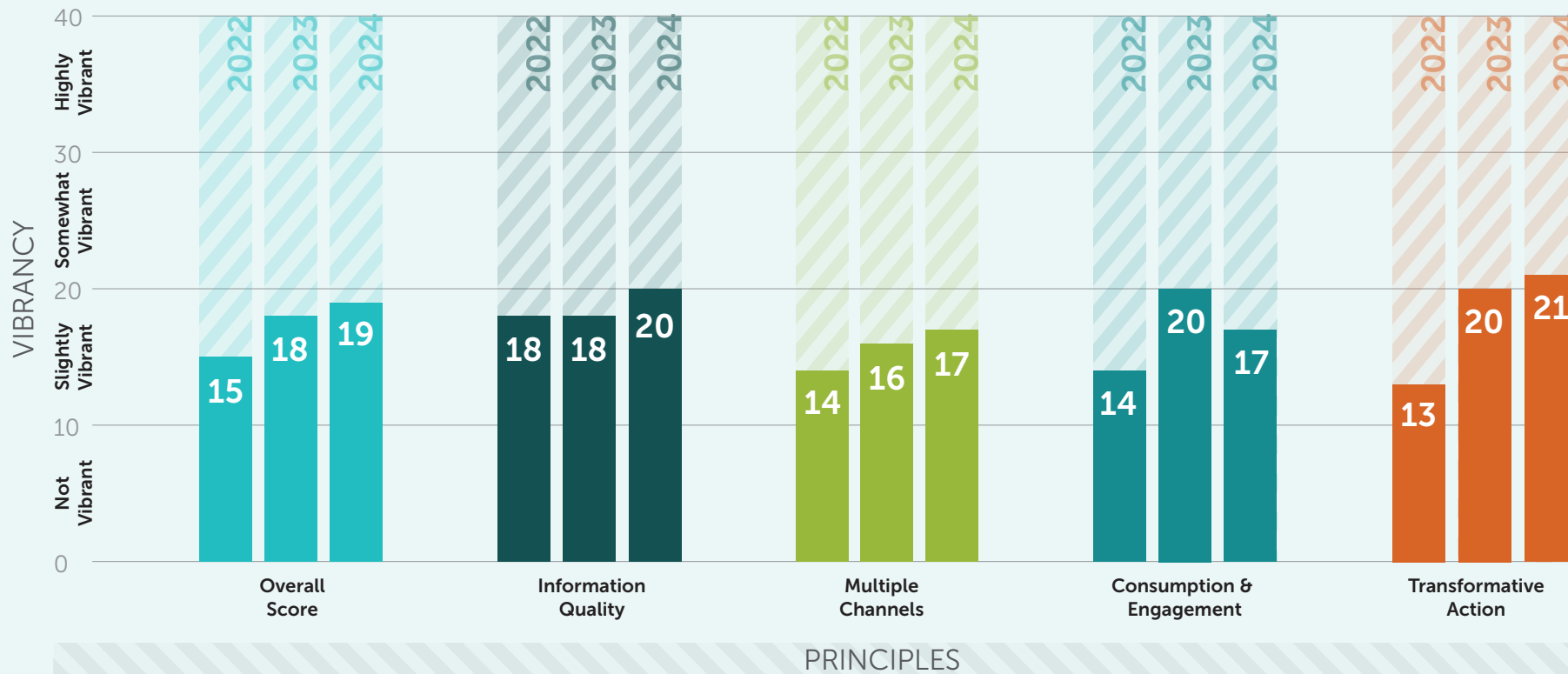
KAZAKHSTAN

Vibrant Information Barometer

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Photo by: Petr Trotsenko/Radio Azattyk



PRINCIPLES

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.

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.

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.

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.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL SCORE

19

Events over 2023, including elections for the lower house of parliament (the *Mäjilis*), the entry of new laws on public control, and the return of illegally acquired assets to the country impacted Kazakhstan’s media landscape. During the elections in March 2023, self-nominated candidates participated for the first time, in line with President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev’s push for political modernization—despite criticisms about the electoral process from the OSCE and the European Union.

In 2023, Kazakhstan introduced a new Constitutional Court. For the first time, citizens can appeal to the court if they believe their constitutional rights have been violated. The court represents a crucial step forward in terms of human rights work. Additionally, the government officially ended former President Nursultan Nazarbayev’s ceremonial title as *Elbasy* (leader of the nation), which meant he could no longer address parliament or the people. However, he still has immunity for actions taken during his presidency.

Major events that impacted Kazakhstanis in 2023 include the world’s largest forest fire in the Abay region, which exposed corruption in the emergency services sector and showed the state’s lack of preparation when responding to large-scale disasters. Domestic violence cases also reached alarming levels, leading to the deaths of 67 women and seven children during the year. The public demanded stricter punishment for these crimes, and lawmakers began working on bills to address domestic violence.

After the January 2022 unrest due to rising gas prices, the government arrested more than 9,000 activists and sentenced many to six to 10 years in prison for organizing mass riots, accepting bribes, and joining a banned extremist group.

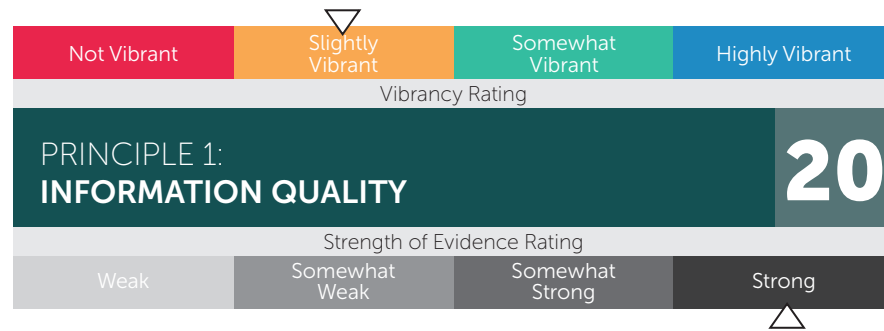
In 2023, journalists faced a slew of hacking and physical attacks, including office break-ins and damage to apartments and property. Officials promised an independent investigation, but instead, a show trial occurred. The nephew of a well-known

oligarch was held accountable for these attacks at the trial, but the court found him insane and sent him for compulsory treatment at a psychiatric hospital instead of to prison. His accomplices received suspended sentences, which caused outrage in the journalism community, as essentially no one was held accountable and received adequate punishment.

In the media sphere, the *Mäjilis* drafted a law on mass media, and journalists and media experts actively participated in this process.

Most VIBE principle scores increased slightly over last year’s study, with the exception of Principle 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement), which saw a decline of several points. Kazakhstanis are not limited in channels for obtaining information (mass media, social networks, specialized media). In the media market, serious inequality in financing and excessive government participation can be noted. Independent media have few sources of income. The laws are very strict, which means that journalists are often attacked, arrested and harassed. Internet use is increasing and remains the main platform for discussing the most important topics in the country. Independent mini-media outlets are emerging, covering narrow topics (such as finance and oil, gas, and mining industries) and providing quality expertise.

While still receiving lower scores in this year’s VIBE study, the level of media literacy is increasing thanks to the work of human rights organizations and independent media. Discussions in the media occur frequently, but they are not always constructive, since participants tend to believe manipulative information. Election campaigning is not fair and competitive: election results are usually known in advance. There are no ethical and moral standards for government officials in the country, which allows officials to remain in their positions even after scandals.



Kazakhstanis can obtain information from journalists, social networks, and specialized channels focusing on specific topics. As a rule, ethical norms are not respected on the internet, although journalists act responsibly by offering quality information. While the public is demanding more information on such topics as finance, politics, and society, which led the panel to score the related indicator highly, outlets' coverage of issues related to gender, LGBTQ+, and human rights is sparse. Indicator 5, on whether content production is adequately resourced, received the lowest score in this indicator because the media market has serious financing disparities, and advertising is often politicized. As a result, independent media outlets do not have many sources of income.

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

In 2023, a large number of micro-media outlets cropped up on social networks, including Instagram, Telegram, and YouTube channels. These do not require an expensive or complex infrastructure to launch and run, and they are the most popular source of information for most people. Print media are losing ground, giving way to internet publications, while television remains the most expensive content production, mostly funded by the state. A 2022 [Internews study](#) shows that most Kazakhstanis get their news from social networks (46 percent), with internet sites second (43 percent), and television ranked third (30 percent).

The number of university journalism teachers increases every year, but this does not indicate an increase in quality. According to Gulnar Assanbayeva, independent media expert and a teacher with KIMEP University, currently 30 teachers and three departments of journalism exist at universities in the country. Freelance journalist Chingis Ualikhan believes that universities provide education on media literacy, ethics, and hate speech but do not teach functional civics literacy—how government agencies work, how laws are passed, etc.

In addition to journalism courses, which almost every regional university offers, organizations including the Legal Media Center, Internews, MediaNet, and Cabar Asia provide a variety of courses and training seminars aimed at improving professional qualifications, which are accessible to almost all journalists, bloggers, and students.

However, content producers do not always adhere to ethical norms; usually, only professional journalists do. Panelists noted that journalists became more cautious during 2023, and ethical codes have appeared in some regional newsrooms. Bloggers often do not follow ethical norms, which is especially noticeable during high-profile events that contain sensational reports.

During tragic events in 2023, such as the wildfires in the Abay region or the coal mining explosions in Karaganda, bloggers often sacrificed information verification for speed. In situations involving leaking personal data, some bloggers publish personal information on their accounts, making funny videos, thus gaining a larger audience.

Unfortunately, violations of ethical norms do not lead to serious consequences; violations are discussed on social media and quickly forgotten. The government and media have no institution to monitor ethics and false information in the country. However, awareness of copyright protection, with many legal proceedings, is rising. A notable case is the ongoing [Orda.kz](#) website lawsuit against journalist Dmitry Shishkin. After Shishkin accused the site of plagiarism, the site accused him of damaging its business reputation, which led to a lawsuit.

Despite the wide range of topics covered by the media, important issues are often bypassed. For example, state-owned publications do not

cover every topic—coverage of strikes, rallies, and protests are found only in independent media. According to Jamilya Maricheva, head of the anticorruption site [Protenge](#), Telegram channels contain good coverage of social issues with more experts and expertise on economic and political issues. Still, most media pay little attention to LGBTQ+, gender, and political issues because they are sensitive topics, and journalists try to avoid covering them. The main socially relevant topic that Kazakhstan media covered in 2023 was domestic violence, panelists noted. Due to a huge number of incidents, the media started to cover this subject almost daily. However, panelists pointed out that coverage consisted of mostly news reports that lacked depth and seriousness.

A Pikasa Analytics [data study](#) showed the 50 largest media outlets in Kazakhstan had a significant discrepancy in audience preferences and the thematic content of the media. The most popular topic in the media is politics, accounting for 45.8 percent of the coverage in all outlets. However, sports at 21.2 percent, culture at 14.9 percent, and opinion journalism at 14.4 percent receive the most engagement.

It is difficult to call coverage of the state bodies' work objective because of how media are financed. In 2022, state investments in the media amounted to KZT 242 billion (\$42 million), according to a [Kazakh Telegraph Agency news report](#). Maricheva believes these funds influence editorial policies, distorting or “adjusting” news according to where outlets get their funding. Timur Gafurov, editor of the [ng.kz](#) news website, said many regional mass media get most of their income from competing with other outlets for state funding. “Recently, two regional newspapers, *Kostanay News* and *Nash Kostanay*, reduced their publishing from two to three times a week to once a week,” Gafurov said, “The editors attribute this to financial problems. But it can be assumed that this is due to the government abolishing a requirement to produce several issues per week.”

Independent publications are increasingly working with state documents and the government procurement website, as well as conducting

investigations, to draw public attention to the problems of government corruption. Some cases lead to changes in legislation. For example, after a series of investigations into government officials using luxury goods that had been seized, in 2023 the Ministry of Finance [changed the rules](#) for luxury items confiscated by the state. Journalist Askhat Niyazov and his YouTube channel [Obozhau](#) became the scourge of *akims*, heads of local governments, this year. He gained renown for reporting on regional *akims* by interviewing them and asking uncomfortable questions.

Media outlets cover very little international news. For example, the full-scale war initiated by the Government of Russia in Ukraine is not covered at all. Kazakhstan maintains a neutral stance on major world events, which is reflected in the media.

In February 2023, a Russian court summoned the Kazakhstan website [Arbat.media](#) to [appear in court](#), claiming it “discredited the Russian army.” Kazakhstan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs defended the site, stating that it is outside the jurisdiction of Russian courts so [Arbat.media](#) did not violate any Russian laws. The outlets [Inforburo](#), [Ratel](#), and [NewTimes](#) received similar summons.

Editorial independence in Kazakhstan is not guaranteed by law and is not standard practice across all media in practice. In state media, editorial offices and journalists are under government control, and officials check and approve editorial materials before publication.

Another problem is that news often lacks analysis or contextualization, leaving the audience with a limited picture of events. According to Yelena Tsoy with the nongovernment organization (NGO) [Adil Soz Foundation](#), “It is not always clear what is being discussed in a particular story; you have to look for additional information.”

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

Pro-government media outlets, such as TengriNews and [Nur.kz](#), usually present only the state's position, panelists pointed out. According to Ualikhan, pro-government media act as the authorities' press service, not allowing other viewpoints to be heard. For example, during the Zhanaozen oil workers' strikes in Astana, [state media created false narratives](#) about the strike, giving the public negative portrayals of the workers and their mission.

Unfortunately, both professional and nonprofessional content distributors, as well as officials, periodically disseminate inaccurate information. For example, Kazakhstan's Minister of Digital Development, Bagdat Batyrbekuly Musin, publicly stated that Astana's internet connection quality is higher than Tokyo's.

Journalists fact-checked his statement and proved the opposite was true. Additionally, former Finance Minister Yerulan Zhamaubayev, when talking about state assets, commented on a [hotel in Turkey](#), while different media mentioned different names for the hotel. As a result, it was unclear which hotel the minister was referencing. One extreme example of the public receiving incorrect information occurred in September when the government [released a list of individuals](#) receiving foreign funding. Journalists referred to them as "foreign agents," even though this term does not legally exist in Kazakhstan. This served as a trigger for comments with hate speech about foreign agents.

However, according to Olga Didenko, a media lawyer with Internews Kazakhstan, fact-checking is more important than speed for professional media outlets, so all possible methods are used—sending requests, obtaining expert comments, checking information in open databases, etc.

In 2023, Kazakhstan lawmakers adopted new legislation on online advertising and online platforms, introducing a fine of up to \$2,000

in administrative liability for spreading manipulative information. According to parliamentarians, this law aims to reduce the amount of manipulated information by nonprofessional content producers, who often publish facts without proper verification. Several court decisions have ended up fining outlets, including one [decision](#) against Radio Azattyk (RFE/RL's Kazakh Service).

In addition, there is criminal liability in Kazakhstan for spreading knowingly false information and for insults, and there is administrative liability for libel. These deter bloggers and journalists from creating manipulated information.

Fact-checking resources exist, but their reach is small. As a result, in the majority of cases, most citizens do not find out about debunked fake and false information. According to Assel Karaulova, president of the

Kazakhstan Press Club, only one website, [www.factcheck.kz](#), is operational, but ordinary consumers know little about it.

Some editorial staff moderate content, but it is easier to disable comments on websites, move them to social media pages, and shift responsibility to social

media administrators. For example, the Nasha Gazeta website has two moderators, but the editor must constantly deal with user complaints about other commenters and what they perceive as unfair moderation. However, news outlets still have problems surrounding publishing comments, and lawsuits against media editorial offices alleging defamation, libel, dissemination of personal data, and violation of state secrets are common.

It is difficult to know if mechanisms to remove unreliable information on social networks are effective. According to Elzhan Kabyshev, director of Digital Paradigm, algorithms to counter the spread of false information are mainly used in large English-language outlets, with no warnings about liability for false information in local publics.

“ The financial situation of private media and journalists who work for them is unstable and unsustainable.

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

Hate speech is quite common on social networks. If it is in the form of a comment, media outlets simply delete it instead of providing a rebuttal or clarification.

Representatives of the Russian government regularly make false statements on Russian political talk shows that cause controversy in Kazakhstani society. According to Timur Gafurov, the start of the full-scale war in Ukraine saw a significant rise in the number of manipulative facts and information aimed at inciting hatred from representatives of the warring states. “As a result, on www.ng.kz, the discussion of events related to the war took up 80 to 90 percent of total user comments,” Gafurov said. But the editorial office devotes only five to 10 percent of outlet’s content to the war, usually only in connection with its influence on Kazakhstan, he added, noting that, “There has been a sharp polarization of the audience. Users even threatened physical violence against opponents, which complicates moderation on the site.”

Nonprofessional content producers do not fact-check; they often sacrifice verification for the sake of the speed of publication. Moreover, they often spread information aimed at inciting hatred.

Overall, formal media outlets do not deliberately disseminate propaganda or manipulative information because editorial offices are responsible for fact-checking and offering accurate information. However, government agencies or public officials sometimes pass along manipulative false information, which press services refute.

According to Protenge’s Maricheva, Kazakhstan’s government seeks to consolidate society and does not welcome hate speech. The president continually relays this message in his addresses to the nation.

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

The news agenda of state media is under government control, and the government regulates all issues that appear on media outlets, including the list of experts to appear and the topics that are covered. Therefore, not all population groups have equal access to the media to disseminate opinions and information. However, groups create and actively use blogs, websites, and Telegram channels, which become small media outlets on social networks. One example is [Batyr Jamal](#), which covers women’s rights. Other outlets include Qumash on Telegram ([@qumash_kz](#)), which addresses students’ rights; [Arman Borisov](#) who blogs about living with cerebral palsy; and [nemolchi.kz](#), which covers domestic violence issues.

Regional print media do not represent the opposition’s viewpoint on the current government. Instead, it appears on online sites. Panelists say this is because not many who follow the opposition live in regional areas.

Regional media also have very little representation of sexual and religious minorities and marginal groups. Assanbayeva points out that no balanced content on gender issues exists, even in professional media. Kabyshev notes that Kazakhstan society still experiences gender stereotypes, inequality between the sexes, and violence, and some information materials may be sexist or homophobic or ignore gender diversity. Coverage of various ethnic groups and religions mainly focuses on celebrations or religious or national conflicts.

A large amount of information is presented in the Kazakh and Russian languages, and the audience can choose any format—print, electronic, audio, or video. Citizens can also access newspapers in Uzbek, German, and Uigur languages.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

The financial situation of 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, and Telegram channels, which creates unfair competition. Private media, which do not take money from the government in principle, are forced to look for additional sources of income. According to the Advertising Association of Central Asia, the Kazakh advertising market is shifting increasingly away from traditional print and broadcast media to the internet.

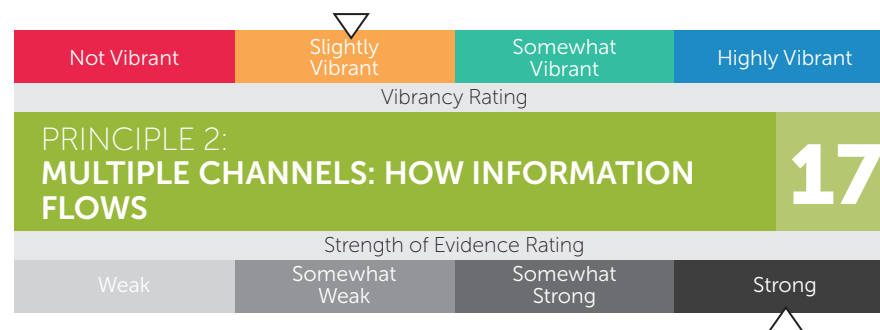
Funding sources are limited, and panelists said the finances of regional media outlets are deteriorating. Revenues allow them to stay afloat but do not allow for access to and maintenance of technical equipment and salary increases. Grants from international donors still help: Media outlets can use them to purchase mobile phones, cameras, and other equipment.

The government's budget is distributed in an opaque and closed manner, making it impossible to talk about fair competition. A state audit by the Supreme Audit Chamber of the Republic of Kazakhstan revealed inefficient and irrational use of budget money to support state media. Panelists say the government poured huge sums into national and local media which has distorted the media market, corrupted employees of state-funded media, and created inequality in the media market for the few remaining independent media outlets. The advertising market volume in 2023 amounted to KZT [85 billion tenge](#) (\$187 million), while the total budget was KZT 62 billion (\$140 million).

In essence, advertising remains almost the main source of income for Kazakhstani media. However, no publications have paid content; some publications and media projects use a system of collecting payments from their audience to conduct investigations or prepare a series of reports or documentaries. However, advertising placement is politicized; sometimes advertisers are "asked" to withdraw advertising or terminate advertising contracts with national and regional media outlets that express criticism or oppose the authorities. Many advertisers prefer to place ads in media loyal to the authorities, as well as invest some in regional media.

Maricheva said the government does not welcome Kazakhstani business participation in any media that write about flaws in the sociopolitical

structure of the country. As for foreign advertisers, government officials prefer advertising on television and with lifestyle bloggers, avoiding media that are critical of the government. Given this situation, resources for independent journalism are very limited.



Formally, Kazakhstanis have the right to produce and receive information. In practice, however, journalists are repeatedly attacked, arrested, and prosecuted. Journalists and bloggers are often held accountable under various laws. The new law on online platforms and advertising introduced liability for the dissemination of false information. Internet and communication channels are available to almost everyone, but in remote areas, there is not always a network. There are quite a few online resources and tools for interacting with the population. However, although the related indicator was scored highly by the panel, the problem of access to information, especially in the budgetary direction, remains an issue. Indicator 6, on the rights to create and share information, and Indicator 10, on independent information channels, scored the lowest because the legislation that interferes with the free dissemination of information remains quite strict, and most media outlets depend on the state for financing and guidance.

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 2023, lawmakers developed a new draft law on mass media, which was supposed to provide protection for journalists. However, in practice, it does not provide legal guarantees and does not improve the situation for media outlets or nonprofessional content producers, who are often arrested or harassed. According to Gulmira Birzhanova, a lawyer with the Legal Media Center, the law is not progressive, does not guarantee the safety of journalists, and remains a mix of two old laws that address mass media and only broadcasting, not journalists' rights. At the end of 2023, the *Mäjilis* approved the draft law on mass media in the first reading, and it will be adopted in mid-2024. The law now provides a one-year statute of limitations to file a claim and transparent procedures for state financing of the media. However, the concept of “mass media” includes professional media outlets and all internet sites. A general victory for the media community was the cancellation of press cards for journalists in the draft law, which had been used to segregate journalists and encourage favoritism.

Experts—including media NGOs, media lawyers, and journalists—are attempting to promote progressive norms, such as introducing liability for obstructing the legal activities of journalists, mandatory identification of state budget-sponsored materials, developing the concepts of “public figure” and “public interest,” and ensuring guarantees of editorial independence and noninterference by state bodies. “The overall atmosphere remains the same as it was—government control over the information space, limited freedom of action for journalists, and weak legal guarantees for their protection,” according to Didenko.

Some Kazakhstan journalists, bloggers, and freelancers—including Dinara Egeubaeva, Roman Egorov, Vadim Boreyko, and Samal Ibraeva—were attacked during 2023. In November, a court found Arkady Klebanov, the nephew of Kazakh oligarch Alexander Klebanov, [guilty of organizing these attacks](#). However, he was eventually declared insane and sent to a psychiatric hospital for compulsory treatment.

“**Journalists and editors practice self-censorship because many topics are still taboo in the media, including corruption investigations into the enrichment of politicians, oligarchs, judges, deputies, and local akims.**”

Journalist Duman Mukhamedkarim, creator of the “Ne Deidi” YouTube channel, was arrested and detained for 25 days for allegedly protesting against so-called falsified election results. A [Freedom House report](#) revealed a rise in the number of attacks in Kazakhstan against online media workers and the media in general, as well as harassment and surveillance of targeted journalists. Criminal cases were initiated against [Mahambet Abzhan](#) and Mikhail Kozachkov. A police officer accused a [journalist from Shymkent](#) of libel, but she was found not guilty by the court.

In July, the government sentenced journalist Aigerim Tleuzhan to [four years in prison](#) for allegedly plotting to seize the country's main air terminal during political unrest that unfolded in January 2022. Tleuzhan [launched a hunger strike](#) protesting her imprisonment in November.

The July 2023 law on online platforms and online advertising defines “blogger” (influencer) and “user of an online platform,” along with their rights and obligations. The law also requires online advertising to be labeled, without specifying the details and mechanisms of enforcement. The law has a new procedure for filing and reviewing user complaints, as well as introducing administrative responsibility for spreading false information. Several cases have been recorded under this article, [including fining Azattyq.org](#) for stating that the Collective Security Treaty Organization is headed by Russia.

In December, several Kazakhstani media resources, including Protenge, Kursiv.Media, and KazTAG, were seriously hit by hackers. The Kursiv.Media Telegram channel was attacked by almost 90,000 bot subscribers, while Protenge lost access to its Instagram account. Moreover, the Azattyq website has faced “internet throttling,” a method used by internet providers that slows down access to web pages and is considered a form of internet censorship.

According to an [annual report](#) by the NGO MediaQoldau’s legal department, the top issues that journalists addressed in 2023 were related to copyright, defamation, and social network site blocking.

Journalists and editors practice self-censorship because many topics are still taboo in the media, including corruption investigations into the enrichment of politicians, oligarchs, judges, deputies, and local *akims*. Criticism and investigations into the former president’s family are increasing, likely due to political changes in the country rather than journalists and media outlets becoming freer from censorship.

Maricheva said authorities systematically restrict the work of critically minded journalists. For example, authorities detained journalist Sandugash Duysenova for alleged privacy violations. During her time in prison, she was [repeatedly harassed](#) by guards. Only after public intervention and human rights activists’ involvement, the prosecutor terminated the case.

Even though websites are considered mass media, the Ministry of Information blocks 95 percent of online content, and courts block the remaining five percent. Foreign media can be blocked without legal authorization (i.e., Daily Mail, Vice).

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

According to the Economic Research Institute, [internet penetration in Kazakhstan](#) as of May 2023 was 89.2 percent. However, panelists say a “digital divide” exists because broadband is still not available across the entire nation. Some remote rural areas do not have sufficient telecommunications infrastructure to provide uninterrupted internet access. According to digital expert Arman Abdrasilov, the government has no strategic vision to develop internet infrastructure because ministries’ financial interests are the top priority.

A 2021 [Internews study](#) shows the internet remains the most popular way for Kazakhstanis to receive information. In 2019, television was the main source of information, but it now ranks third (30.4 percent) after

social networks (45.7 percent) and internet sites (42.8 percent). Overall, the cost of the internet is reasonably affordable, but in the middle of 2023, mobile operators began significantly [raising prices](#) for services.

Public and private companies compete in the internet provider market. No such competition exists in the digital broadcasting market; the technical infrastructure belongs to JSC Kaztelradio, a state-owned company. Private television and radio broadcasting operators cannot form and offer their own networks, so the broadcasting audience has access only to national channels for free and to other channels for a fee.

Gafurov explains that the development of online platforms, like Instagram and TikTok, gives all the population, regardless of education level, the opportunity to obtain information. But the quality and reliability of the information consumed on these sites varies greatly, from very low to professional.

The current infrastructure allows most people, as well as minorities and people with disabilities, to meet their information needs.

According to Kazakhstan’s “On Communications” law, the government has the right and ability to temporarily block telecommunications services in certain cases, including during emergencies, which leaves journalists and the population without access to information. In early 2023, the government announced the creation of a “whitelist,” which is a registry containing resources that should not be restricted during internet shutdowns and emergencies.

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. In 2023, work on amendments to the law on access to information to ensure access to information for persons with disabilities; expand opportunities for obtaining information in the fields of education, health, and ecology; and strengthen civic participation in public discussion of draft bills.

At the end of 2023, the government published a new rule for dealing with restricted information on budget funding, salaries for civil servants, government funding to media outlets, and information related to the January 2022 uprising. The rule gives agencies the ability to classify any information as “For Official Use Only,” which contradicts the law on access to information. Typically, management approval is required to classify information as restricted. But now officials can restrict information on their own initiative, without permission from management. No time limitation exists for controlling access, and citizens cannot appeal access restrictions, even for official use.

“**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.**”

The same recurring problems remain around accessing information. Officials provide unjustified refusals to supply information; they hold closed meetings, deny journalists access to open meetings, and limit their access to online translations. In May 2023, journalists in the city Pavlodar were denied invitations to the local parliament (*maslikhat*) meetings. In December, the *akim* of the country’s largest city, Almaty, refused an interview with journalist Askhat Niyazov. National companies continually refuse to release information on finances to the news outlet Protenge .

In September, the government made it [more difficult for journalists to access press briefings](#) with officials. Now, only ministers whose issues are on an agenda will attend briefings. Previously, journalists could ask ministers questions in the corridors of government buildings, and they are speaking out against these changes, which make it more difficult to get prompt responses from heads of state bodies.

Citizens and businesses can use an online portal called E-otinish to obtain information.

In October, President Tokayev signed a [new law](#) that says the government will consider petitions with more than 50,000 signatures to

accelerate changes in the nation. However, panelists note that the law has many restrictions. Kazakhs will not be able to remove *akims* and

ministers from office through petitions, and petitions will not be considered on issues such as changing the form of government, changing the administrative-territorial structure and borders of the republic, justice, amnesty, and national security.

Karaulova believes citizens do not trust government authorities and structures, and information from government structures is often silenced or presented in a way that is

advantageous to them, as [evidenced by a report](#) from the Kazakhstan Institute of Economic Research.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

The law on mass media formally regulates the concentration of ownership in the media industry, both by national and foreign companies. This same law requires the disclosure of information about media owners to prevent hidden control over the media and ensure transparency. However, in practice, large media groups control a significant part of the market, including television, radio, and print media. At the legislative level, issues related to limiting ownership concentration in media resources—as well as issues related to public broadcasting, limiting media monopolization, and transparency in frequency allocation—are not discussed and have not been included in the media law draft.

The internet, rather than traditional and public media, is Kazakhstan’s platform for sociopolitical discourse. However, the government strictly controls the internet, which hinders freedom of expression.

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.

The government does not supply specific information about media owners or about the process of allocating frequencies.

Assanbayeva noted that most large nongovernmental internet publications in Kazakhstan are operated by officials or businesspeople affiliated with the government, who follow government orders.

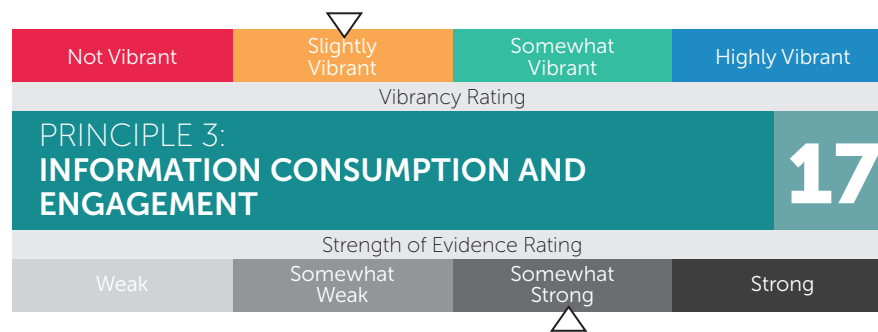
Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

About 95 percent of all state media organizations in the country receive government subsidies, which is the main source of income for most outlets. Panelists note that this funding system leads to media dependence on the government for funding and ideological direction.

According to Assanbayeva, “TV channels and journalists are afraid to lose government funding because people are not willing to pay for public TV channels and independent media. If they cut funding—for example, government funding worth billions, or millions—then these media will simply ‘die’ and that’s it.” Assanbayeva further noted that media outlets cannot live on advertising money alone because the amount of advertising is so limited, and with hundreds of people working for them, it is impossible to support them only with advertising.

According to Zhuldiz Abdilda, editor-in-chief of *Ulan*, state media submit monthly reports on coverage to officials, and any material that does not meet the state’s requirements is not accepted, and often, funding is cut. The government provides lists of speakers who can and should be involved as experts in news reports. It is common practice in Kazakhstan for officials to remove materials from websites after publication without explanation to the audience. Editorial offices practice internal censorship, denying journalists the ability to cover topics that affect the interests of different groups.

Editorial work and advertising departments are usually combined, which occurs occasionally in private media.



Kazakhstan has some mechanisms for protecting personal data, but in practice, data is still leaked. Government agencies themselves are not protected enough and therefore do not adequately protect people’s personal data. Attacks on websites occur quite regularly, and media outlets rarely have the ability to fight back. The level of media literacy is slowly increasing, thanks to the work of human rights organizations, independent media, and some government initiatives. Public discussions on various topics are rare. However, since media outlets are trying to develop ways to get feedback from their audiences, that related indicator received one of the highest scores in this principle. Conversely, panelists scored the indicator on community media low since it is not a developed segment of the media sector, although some community media use public pages on social networks and messengers to engage with audiences.

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

Kazakhstan law guarantees the protection of personal data. In practice, however, there are serious problems with its application: information leaks and website attacks often occur. Legislation on the protection of personal data has changed significantly recently which established a data protection regulator and included services to control access to personal data. However, there has been a rise in the number of cases of violating personal data protection. The government is discussing a ban on collecting paper copies of identity documents and introducing the concept of “personal data security breach.”

The state has used privacy protection laws to violate the rights of journalists. In August, journalist Sandugash Duysenov was [arrested and charged](#) with violating a citizen’s right to privacy. Officials claimed Duysenov published a document in a social network that revealed the individual identification number of a person suspected of murder. However, the identification number was already publicly available, and the charges were dropped.

Media outlets’ access to tools that protect against cyberattacks is not limited, but not many have qualified IT or cybersecurity specialists on staff to put them into place. Several media outlets were subjected to a [wave of cyberattacks](#) in 2023. “Unfortunately, in some cases, due to the sophistication of the attacks, as well as due to insufficient knowledge and resources, these attacks were successful,” Maricheva noted.

The government does not provide protection against cyberattacks on websites.

NGOs or open sources on the internet offer Kazakhstani media and citizens information about digital security and protection methods. In 2023, the country’s Information Security Committee of the Ministry of Digital Development and the police intensified efforts to help citizens recognize internet scammers.

“**Kazakhstan law guarantees the protection of personal data. In practice, however, there are serious problems with its application: information leaks and website attacks often occur.**”

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

The country’s level of media literacy is quite low but has seen a slight uptick during 2023. According to a [2023 Internews study on media literacy and consumption](#), the average level of media literacy rose from 14.6 points in 2019 to 16.2 in 2023, on a scale of 35 points. The number of respondents with low media literacy decreased from 31 percent in 2019 to 23 percent in 2023. The share of respondents with average scores on media and information literacy remained stable at 64 to 65 percent of

respondents. The group of respondents with high scores increased from six percent in 2019 to 13 percent in 2023.

The research also shows that a third of Kazakhstanis do not verify the accuracy of information, saying they do not understand how to fact-check and how social media algorithms work.

The government has some projects on media literacy but no national strategy for developing this area. Although media literacy is not integrated into the education system, schools have an elective—not mandatory—course on media and information literacy. Moreover, the course is not often taught by professionals. Different schools use different teachers—some are computer science teachers, some are psychologists, and some are those with smaller workloads. NGOs, universities, and some private schools teach media literacy on a regular basis.

Karaulova believes the level of digital literacy among citizens is extremely low, which is evidenced by the spread of manipulated information and a lack of critical thinking. In December, a scandal rocked the nation when the so-called [“Aika list”](#) was leaked online, containing the names and personal information of wealthy clients who paid for high-priced escorts in Almaty. Panelists note that people were

keen to know who was on this list, but few were outraged by the illegal dissemination of personal data.

Although Kazakhstan has the fact-checking website [www.factcheck.kz](#), people still find it difficult to distinguish verified information from false or manipulative information. The country is also heavily influenced by Russian media, which spreads false, misleading information.

With so much news, real and manipulated, surrounding the war in Ukraine, users of the website [www.ng.kz](#) proposed changing the website’s rules to have contributors provide sources for their information. The editorial board agreed with the proposal. However,

Gafurov noted that the perception of information as reliable or fake is often influenced by the commentators' confidence in their presenting the facts, not by critical thinking.

Panelists pointed out that developing media literacy in the nation is impacted by the government's wariness toward independent NGOs working in the field, the lack of a unified national strategy for promoting media and information literacy, and society's distrust about NGOs promoting media and information literacy. Restrictions on freedom of speech and a lack of trust in the government after the January events also affect the quest for media literacy. With the growth of AI-based technologies, panelists noted that traditional media and information literacy education needs to update techniques with algorithmic literacy.

In 2023, many government agencies created Telegram and WhatsApp channels to facilitate communication between citizens and authorities. This format provides consumers with faster information, services, and consultations.

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 citizens, including journalists, face restrictions in exercising these rights, especially through political activity, mass protests, and peaceful assemblies.

Independent platforms for discussions exist only in independent media. According to Karaulova, there are many government NGOs and experts. According to the 2023 Internews study on media consumption and media literacy, only 28 percent of respondents believe that media objectivity has increased in the past two years. Most respondents, at 55 percent, related that media objectivity has not changed over the past two years.

“**Constitutional guarantees and laws give everyone the right to freedom of speech without exception, but citizens, including journalists, face restrictions in exercising these rights, especially through political activity, mass protests, and peaceful assemblies.**”

Panelists note that citizens' civic awareness is growing slowly but steadily. In 2023, the Protenge project conducted three courses to teach Kazhakstanis how to work with open data on budget expenditures, how to formulate questions, and how to write requests to local authorities. Many were afraid to put their surnames on their requests, even though the queries were about money for repairing a children's playground.

Discussions on politics and social issues usually take place on social media. Citizens can discuss draft laws on the egov.kz website and parliamentary initiatives on the parliament's website.

Public discussions are not very common. In November 2023, blogger Askhat Niyazov invited all candidates for Rudny's *akim* to an [open discussion](#) with residents who work in nearby mines, which is unusual in Kazakhstan. However, only the current

akim of Rudny, Viktor Ionenko, came, while the other two candidates claimed they were unavailable. In August 2023, local government held [public hearings](#) on the possible construction of a nuclear power plant in Kazakhstan. Despite the fact that many are concerned about the plant, the hearings were not broadcast live and took place hundreds of kilometers from the city.

Complaints about media coverage are handled by the Public Committee for Media Self-Regulation, an NGO that also conducts ethics education, makes public statements, and promotes ethical standards.

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

To understand media consumption trends, audience research is mainly conducted by private media or international organizations.

Gafurov points out that professional research is unavailable to newsrooms because it is costly, but quantitative research is widely

used by website editors. Advertisers focus attention on the number of subscribers rather than the platform’s activity.

Outlets such as Factcheck, vlast.kz, and Vadim Boreyko’s “Biz Birgemiz” project actively collaborate with audiences. Many media outlets receive feedback from Telegram chatbots and through comments on social media. Readers of the “Nasha Gazeta” news site regularly report errors on the website—both grammatical and factual. The editorial team corrects mistakes and informs the audience about them.

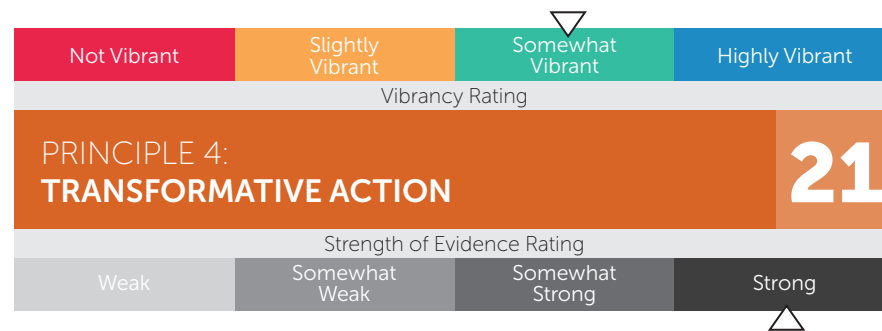
Karaulova believes that only independent media engage in open interaction with consumers. “In state media, there is no such thing. The audience is not studied; content is based on state orders and the preferences of founders, not consumers,” she said.

Askhat Yerkimbay, with the Minber NGO, notes that content producers rely on Google Analytics and Yandex statistics to develop their media and attract advertising. However, there is no clear tendency for media outlets to be transparent about their funding.

According to the Internews study mentioned above, the proportion of the audience with experience contacting editorial offices for reliable information, expressing claims, or providing feedback decreased from nine percent in 2019 to four percent in 2023. The overwhelming majority, 94 percent, have never contacted a media editorial office. This may indicate media have restrictions on direct interaction with audiences and insufficient resources to respond to audience requests.

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

There are no true community media outlets in Kazakhstan. The closest thing to “community” media are social media groups and WhatsApp groups, used to discuss local problems and share news.



Discussions in the media happen often, but they are not always constructive because participants tend to believe manipulative information. Pre-election campaigning is not fair and competitive: Election results are usually known in advance. Civil society is active online, leading panelists to give the related indicator the highest score of this principle. The country does not have ethical and moral standards for government officials, which allows officials to remain in their positions even after scandals. The last indicator on good governance and democratic rights received a low score because information and materials in the media rarely affect the level of corruption and quality of governance in the country.

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. Many producers rely on social networks, YouTube channels, and podcast platforms to get their messages out. In large cities, people read and watch a range of different media of varying political orientations. There are often lively discussions on the websites of media outlets, but they are rarely constructive. Opposition opinions are found on social networks but not in state media, which try to avoid political topics, especially on foreign policy. According to Gafurov, “The war [in Ukraine] has greatly polarized consumers. As a result, readers’ opinions are often formed not based on data but on selective emotional perceptions.”

Maricheva believes ideological pluralism does not exist in Kazakhstan's media because the country actively fights against any start of political opposition and the largest media outlets are more or less controlled by the state.

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

The digital age means Kazakhstan's citizens often form their opinions on unreliable or unverified information, according to panelists. Public pages or bloggers often give superficial information or a lack of understanding of various topics. Kazakhstanis have access to truthful information on fact-checking resources, news portals, or expert resources, but not every user can understand the content of the message.

With the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, the wave of unreliable health recommendations has declined, and the anti-vaccine movement is not as active. However, the Ministry of Health still claims that parents are refusing to vaccinate their children, which has led to a rise in measles cases. People are still inclined to trust nonscientific information regarding health and are vulnerable to taking action based on inaccurate information.

In March, the *Mäjilis* and *Maslikhats* (local councils) held elections. For the first time in years, self-nominated candidates participated. According to official data, 54 percent of the population voted, but panelists think this figure is, in reality, much lower.

Independent observers reported [numerous violations](#) on election day: members of precinct election commissions restricted observers' movements and prohibited video recording. According to Azamat Sargazin, a representative of the Prosecutor General's Office, election day had 40 administrative offenses registered, with violations including "transferring ballots to another person," and 18 members of the election commission were held accountable.

Kazakhstan's citizens often form their opinions on unreliable or unverified information. Public pages or bloggers often give superficial information or a lack of understanding of various topics.

Panelists agree that the quality of pre-election campaigning had no significant influence on the election results. Karaulova noted that "elections are falsified, and information is provided only on 'approved' candidates," and the citizens still do not really interact with their deputies.

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

In 2023, NGO representatives became more active in legislative work, protecting vulnerable populations, and creating initiatives to review court decisions. Typically, they provide factual information about their work, providing data to back up information.

One of the active movements, *NeMolchi* (Don't Keep Silent), aims to raise awareness of domestic violence, along with legal and psychological support. The group holds child abusers and rapists accountable, and through its work, several court cases were reviewed. However, in November, Dina Tansari, leader of *NeMolchi*, was [charged with fraud](#), and authorities blocked her bank accounts so she could not seek asylum outside the country. Human rights activists said her arrest occurred ultimately to put pressure on NGOs and to silence the activist.

NGOs that address animal rights remain important in Kazakhstan, as they bear the main burden of enforcing the law on the responsible treatment of animals. Often, they conflict with local authorities, who cannot or do not want to enforce animal abuse laws. An example is [how officials resolved a conflict](#) between volunteers and the water utility in Rudny over a temporary dog-holding facility; the conflict was partially resolved when the city authorities allocated some of its budget to support the animal shelter.

Media NGOs assisted in developing the new media law by preparing recommendations and standards, communicating with parliament deputies, initiating appeals to the president, making open statements, and conducting a campaign to inform the public about the new law.

As part of the USAID-funded Central Asia Media Program (MediaCAMP), Internews has created several projects, including the ToiletApp campaign, which successfully raised awareness to improve school toilets.

Despite NGOs' positive work, panelists say their projects are not covered by media outlets. They use social networks to attract audiences, partners, and attention.

Kabyshev points out that authorities do not always listen to NGOs or follow their recommendations. "If there is no political angle, then NGOs are invited just for show, but the decision will be made in favor of the government or *akimat* (local government)," Kabyshev said.

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

Government agencies regularly hold press conferences, issue briefings in the Central Communications Service and Regional Communications Services, and send out press releases. But when journalists ask for an emergency briefing on a particular topic, authorities do not comply in about half of the cases. "The tactic of state bodies in Kazakhstan is to not disclose important information for society and to restrict access, despite the laws," Maricheva said, "This lowers the quality of communication between the state and society."

Unfortunately, when making decisions, officials rely on their own data and research. Independent expertise is not welcomed, which leads to distortion of facts and manipulated information. In most cases, government representatives refer to what are known as "instructions from the president," which creates the impression that officials do not have autonomy and therefore do not want to take responsibility for decisions.

When making decisions, officials rely on their own data and research. Independent expertise is not welcomed, which leads to distortion of facts and manipulated information.

Panelists said the government adopts laws without sufficient research and expertise, especially legislation related to prohibitions and control. For example, parliament passed a law banning electronic cigarettes, with penalty of up to five years imprisonment for import and distribution. But officials did not consider that the ban increased the risk of smuggling and did not take into account the possibility of economic restrictions through increased duties on imports.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

In 2023, Kazakhstan was again listed on Transparency International's [Corruption Perceptions Index](#) at 93 out of 180 countries, a rise of three positions since last year's index. Experts attribute the rise to the newly formed Asset Recovery Committee in the General Prosecutor's Office, which deals with the search and return of assets illegally taken out of the country. Through this initiative, Kazakhstan has recovered about KZT 1 trillion (\$2.2 billion).

Kazakhstan has seen a proliferation of anonymous Telegram channels publishing information on corruption, which often receives public reaction not from AntiKor, the anti-corruption agency in Kazakhstan, but from the subjects of the publications themselves. In particular, channels like Protenge and Obazhayu publish information on corruption and misuse of budget funds.

Government agencies sometimes react to human rights violation reports on social networks when there is a public outcry. For example, in September, a [video of guards](#) beating political prisoner Timur Danebayev in prison appeared on social media. This led authorities to launch an official investigation, citing employee use of "exceeding official authority."

According to Karaulova, "officials react much faster to social networks and bloggers, including scandalous topics, than to professional media publications."

Kazakhstan has no institute or laws regulating officials' behavior, so authorities do not assume guilt for their mistakes and do not resign even after public scandals. For example, the sons of parliament deputy and presidential candidate Zhiguli Dairabayev [were convicted of corruption](#) related to subsidies in agriculture. Dairabayev represents the Auyl party, whose program includes the development of the village where the crime took place, and he is also a member of the agro-commission in the parliament. However, he kept his position in parliament despite his sons' involvement in a criminal case.

This case echoes another in the country, when a [video](#) about the “indecently luxurious” life of the daughter of the *akim* of the Abay region spread on social media. She reportedly drove expensive cars and wore Cartier bracelets and Hermes bags, items which the *akim*'s official salary could never afford. But the exposé did not lead to any consequences for her father.

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

Zhuldiz Abdilda, editor in chief, *Ulan*, Almaty

Arman Abdrasilov, digital expert, Astana

Gulnar Assanbayeva, PhD, KIMEP University, teacher, independent media expert, Almaty

Gulmira Birzhanova, media lawyer, Legal Media Center, Astana

Olga Didenko, media lawyer, Internews-Kazakhstan, Almaty

Timur Gafurov, editor, [www.ng.kz](#), Kostanay

Elzhan Kabyshev, director, Digital Paradigm, Almaty

Assel Karaulova, president, Kazakhstan Press Club, Almaty

Ainur Koskina, journalist, QOS-live, Astana

Jamilya Maricheva, director, Protenge, Almaty

Ruslan Nikonovich, owner, Novoe TV, Karaganda

Yelena Tsoy, coordinator, Adil Soz Foundation, Almaty

Chingis Ualikhan, freelance journalist, Almaty

Tamara Vaal, journalist, [www.vlast.kz](#), Astana

Askhat Yerkimbay, trainer, NGO Minber Center for Supporting Journalists, Almaty

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