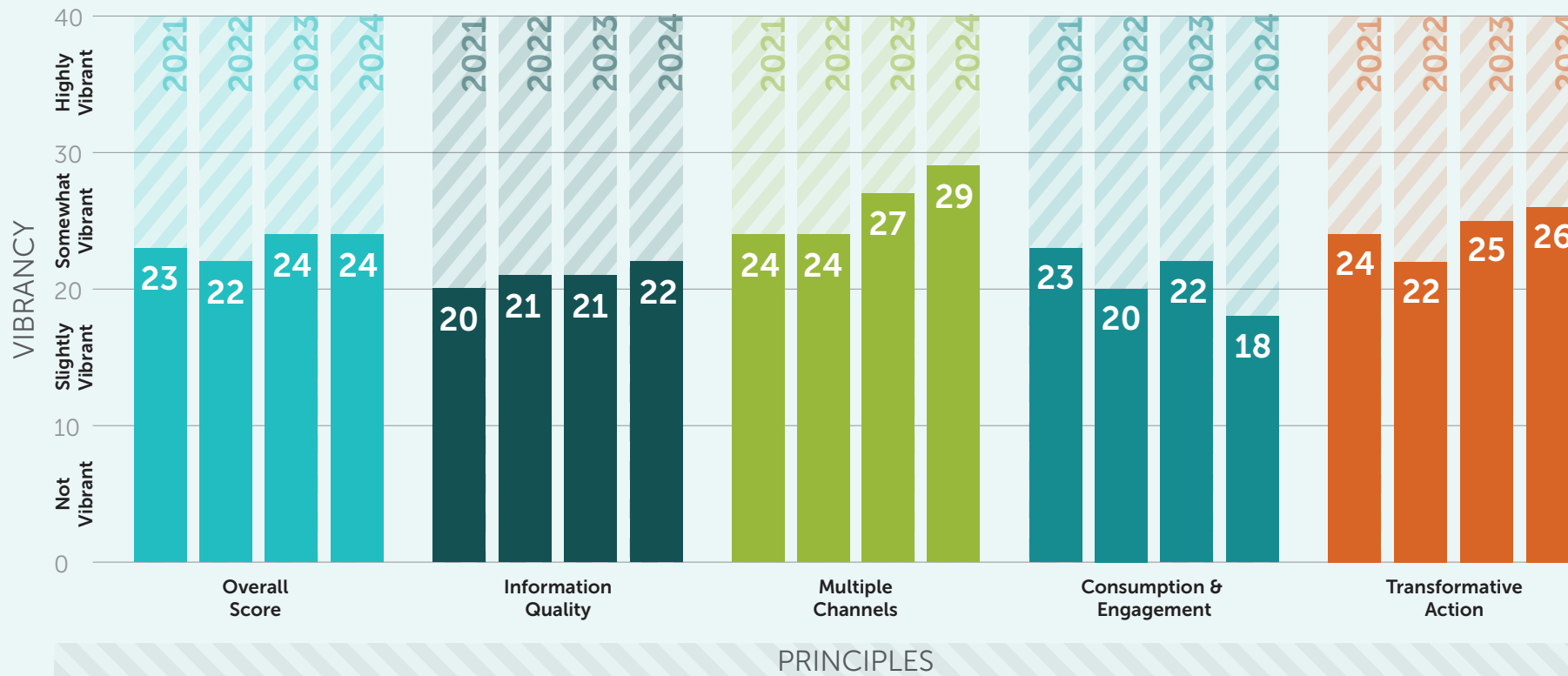


# MOLDOVA

## Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 4





**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

24

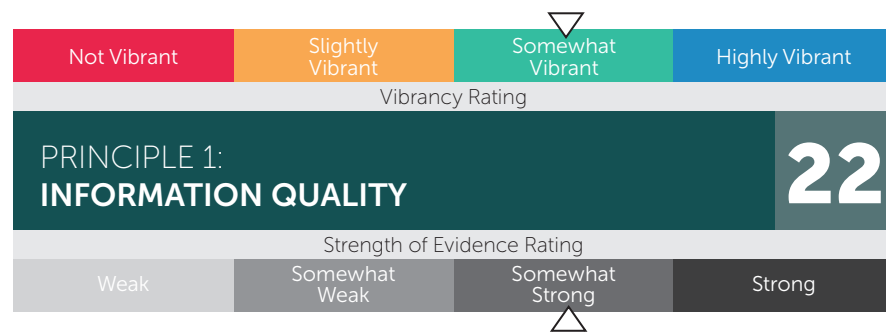
In December 2023, the European Council decided to initiate EU accession negotiations with Moldova, marking a significant development in the country's progress towards EU integration. Structures are now in place to carry out accession negotiations and align national legislation with EU law. Moldova also faced economic challenges resulting in increased inflation and prices during the year. In addition, the general local elections in November 2023 triggered internal strife within political parties. Opposition forces backed by the Russian government sought to destabilize the sociopolitical situation through protests and partisan media, exploiting grievances related to energy prices and the economic crisis.

During the state of emergency, implemented in February 2022 and lifted at the end of December 2023, Moldova's Commission for Exceptional Situations (CES) suspended the broadcast licenses of 12 TV stations—six in December 2022 and another six in November 2023—for allegedly spreading false information. Simultaneously, the Information and Security Service blocked over 100 web pages for publishing content deemed as manipulative. At that time, a group of civil society organizations expressed concerns about the practice of suspending the licenses of TV stations without extensive explanations regarding the factual and legal circumstances justifying the restrictive measure.

Moldova's overall country score of 24 remained consistent with the previous year's results. Although Principle 1 (Information Quality) increased by one point, its score remained relatively low due to rampant propaganda, combined with poor financial sustainability of independent media and reduced resilience of the population to manipulative information. Principle 2 (Multiple Channels) saw a two-point increase from last year's study, with satisfactory infrastructure and good laws guaranteeing free speech notable, but the improper implementation of access to information laws remains a major gap. Other problematic aspects include the lack of efficient mechanisms preventing media concentration and the overall weak independence of information channels.

Principle 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) had a four-point decline, primarily due to a shift in panelists' perceptions of how community media are defined, as well as insufficient media literacy skills among the general population, contentious debates on social media platforms, and a lack of awareness and knowledge of digital security. Despite a one-point increase in the score for Principle 4 (Transformative Action), there remains a persistent scarcity of nonpartisan news and information sources, with manipulative information influencing public perspectives. Still, civil society groups continue to leverage quality information for the betterment of their communities.





Although this principle scored slightly higher in 2023, challenges persist with information warfare, marked by pro-Kremlin propaganda aiming to undermine Moldova’s pro-EU trajectory, and with biased content promoting or denigrating parties and candidates in the general local elections. Indicator 4, on inclusive and diverse news content, scored highest again, while Indicators 3 and 5, on hate speech and varied financial sources, scored the lowest.

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

While infrastructure for print, broadcast, and online media operation exists and the related technology is adequate, print media still face challenges. Victor Cobășneanu, editor-in-chief of *Observatorul de Nord* in Soroca, highlighted the unequal distribution of media production capabilities, while Anastasia Nani, vice-director of the Independent Journalism Center in Chișinău, noted unresolved issues in print media, such as poor service conditions and high newsprint costs. “Due to a more than 40 percent increase in rates for printing and distribution services, newspapers such as *Gazeta de Chișinău*, *Gazeta de Sud* (Cimișlia), and temporarily *SP* (Bălți) have suspended their print editions,” she added.

Both new and experienced media workers have access to various training opportunities provided by journalism departments at state and private universities, as well as by NGOs such as the Moldova School of Journalism. However, these trainings are limited outside the capital,

Chișinău, and in the Transnistrian region, a separatist area between the Dniester River and the Ukrainian border that broke away from Moldova in 1990, according to a panelist from the region who wished to remain anonymous.

Moldova’s media landscape is characterized by its division into pro-Russian and pro-Western camps, with strong influence from oligarchs and political leaders on their editorial stances. In the relatively small segment of truly independent outlets not serving a political agenda, content producers act in an ethical and accountable manner, respect facts, and strive to represent the truth. Nevertheless, unethical and irresponsible content, disseminated predominantly online by non-professional creators, continues to be a problem in Moldova. TV channels face legal repercussions for subpar content, while print and online media rely on editorial policies and the Journalist Code of Ethics, although with varying degrees of adherence. Marina Bzovaya, editor-in-chief of *Nokta* in Gagauzia, noted that Moldova’s generally loyal audiences help mitigate the risk of losing trust.

The state of emergency prompted by the Russian government’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and actions by Moldova’s authorities—including the Audiovisual Council, Commission for Emergency Situations and Intelligence and Security Service—have led to increased control over manipulative information and hate speech, impacting media outlets disseminating Kremlin propaganda. However, civil society organizations (CSOs) [demanded](#) proper evidence for the decisions to suspend broadcast licenses and block websites, highlighted Nicolai Paholnițchi, a journalist from *Newsmaker* in Chișinău.

The media’s overall body of content covers a variety of topics, with a greater emphasis on political and social issues but less on specialized and thematic reporting. According to Victor Goțișan, a media researcher in Chișinău, the lack of specialized reporting can be primarily attributed to the limited practice of thematic specialization among journalists, who often opt for “universal journalism,” covering a diverse range of topics, to save resources. Among Transnistria’s government-controlled media, human rights topics are superficially and infrequently addressed, lacking journalistic investigations and analytical materials.

Although independent journalists generally strive to hold the government accountable, newsrooms often concentrate on national authorities, allocating considerably less attention to events outside the capital. Regarding the range of topics and geographical coverage, Ion Bunduchi, executive director of the Association of Electronic Press in Chişinău, referred to a [monitoring report](#) conducted by the Association of Independent Press from July to November 2023 on how 13 media institutions address corruption. The findings revealed a preference for covering corruption cases in sectors like health or education, while often neglecting areas such as the agri-food sector or social assistance.

Viorica Zaharia, a member of the Press Council of Moldova in Chişinău, highlighted that contemporary information is frequently contextualized by independent media and explained to audiences through analytical pieces and talk shows. In Transnistria, predominant content revolves around local and Russian news. As the panelist from Transnistria noted, “Military events in Ukraine and Russia receive limited coverage, with occasional mentions of Ukrainian authorities allegedly attempting to recruit citizens from the region for military participation.”

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

Moldova continues to face significant challenges related to information warfare, marked by aggressive pro-Kremlin propaganda and manipulative information. These efforts aim to undermine Moldova’s pro-EU trajectory and destabilize the constitutional and public order. According to Gotişan, there the amount of propaganda is not expected to decline in the near future, especially with the commencement of Moldova’s EU accession negotiations, the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2024 and 2025, and broader regional issues, including the war in Ukraine.

“Moldova’s media landscape is characterized by its division into pro-Russian and pro-Western camps, with strong influence from oligarchs and political leaders on their editorial stances.”

Independent media, largely funded or supported by external development partners, predominantly engage in fact-based journalism. Broadcast and print media are less prone to spreading manipulative information compared to online platforms. However, Cristina Pohilenco, vice-director of Jurnal TV in Chişinău, observed a rise in non-professional content creators disseminating false information through various Telegram channels in the past year. The panelists questioned

the assertion that professional media disseminate false information due to low capacity, suggesting that intentional violations are more likely, although they acknowledged occasional instances due to oversight or human error.

The central government refrains from generating or spreading patently false information and has shown a decrease in manipulative narratives. However, authorities in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia—a region of Moldova populated by the Orthodox, Turkish-speaking Gagauz people—frequently [embrace and proliferate](#) propaganda-infused content aimed at obstructing Moldova’s path to the European Union and maintaining its alignment with Russia’s sphere of influence.

Moldovan authorities have taken steps to counter manipulated information, including blocking numerous websites promoting violence, hatred, and war. In addition, they suspended the broadcasting licenses of six TV channels linked to the Kremlin-backed Shor Party, forbidden by law in 2023. However, these measures proved ineffective as some restricted portals established mirror websites with different domains, and the suspended television channels migrated their content online, highlighted Nani. “Programs previously on the ‘Shor-owned’ television Primul În Moldova have shifted to Gagauz TV, while *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, Sputnik, and *Argumenty i Fakty* now operate on social networks and messaging platforms,” added Bzovaya.

Overall, journalists hold the government accountable by identifying manipulative information when it is disseminated. Fact-checking

platforms like StopFals and Mediacritica routinely scrutinize statements from public figures and the media, revealing common instances of false claims and manipulation. Nevertheless, content moderation remains a serious issue. Professional journalists have verification mechanisms but face challenges due to limited resources, leading to mistakes, according to Ana Gherciu, editor-in-chief of Moldova.org in Chişinău. Social media platforms are vulnerable to falsehoods; Ilan Shor, a fugitive oligarch, managed to post “political advertising” on Facebook even after being [sanctioned by the United States](#), with Meta [earning](#) over \$200,000 from his campaign promoting pro-Kremlin views. Shor used fake Facebook pages to post political ads with over 155 million views, including many [deepfake videos](#) featuring Maia Sandu, Moldova’s president.

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

Panelists unanimously agreed that the Russian government and its proxies actively spread manipulative information and hate speech. Falsehoods and direct threats, often emanating from high-ranking Russian officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the State Duma, are widely disseminated. The Russkiy Mir (Russian World) Foundation, labeled a command center for a global network of affiliated organizations, [operates](#) through Russian scientific and cultural centers in Chişinău, Comrat, Tiraspol, and Bălţi. These centers, alleged to use science and culture as a facade, engage in propagandistic activities that promote Kremlin rhetoric.

There was a consensus among the panelists that the government does not create or spread harmful content, such as hate speech, although some politicians do so without facing consequences, noted Paholniţchi. There is no evidence showing that hate speech is a coordinated effort by non-governmental entities. However, several panelists mentioned that participants at the 2023 protests organized by Moscow-backed opposition forces and political bloggers of the Shor party spread hate speech.

While professional content producers usually do not create or disseminate manipulative information or hate-inciting content,

politically controlled media institutions employ these malicious techniques and tactics. Non-professional 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 perpetrators usually elude punishment due to the difficulties in investigating cybercrime. During the 2023 campaign season for Moldovan local elections, political parties, anonymous portals, and occasionally mainstream media affiliated with political parties disseminated content intended to undermine the election process, candidates, or even state institutions. “Among bloggers, the situation is significantly worse, with numerous TikTok videos aimed at spreading hatred, and the creators face no consequences,” said Paholniţchi.

Media outlets and their social media platforms typically employ mechanisms to moderate content and minimize the spread of manipulative information and hate speech. However, tracking the vast amount of malicious content in comment sections remains challenging.

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

Moldovans have access to content in the languages they speak or prefer, predominantly Romanian and Russian. There are several publications specifically tailored for linguistic minorities, including the Roma and Gagauz communities. While Ukrainian is the primary language of Moldova’s largest ethnic minority, its limited presence reflects low audience demand as minority Ukrainian speakers in Moldova more frequently consume content in Russian than in their native language, as does the Gagauz community. Zaharia mentioned gaps in sign language translation. In the Transnistrian breakaway region, information is predominantly available in Russian, with minimal representation of “Moldovan” (Romanian) and Ukrainian, recognized as official languages by the separatist authorities.

Although the information landscape appears to encompass a diverse array of opinions and ideological perspectives, Gherciu maintained that it lacks sufficient inclusivity, with content rarely adapted for persons with disabilities. A 2023 [report](#) conducted by the NGO Association

of Independent Press, “Media Evaluation in Terms of Diversity and Social Inclusion,” shows that marginalized groups—including people who have been in detention, Roma, and the LGBTQ+ community—are not sufficiently represented in the mainstream media, and content dedicated to minorities is scarce. However, marginalized groups which are not well represented in the media find alternative methods and platforms to express their views, including human rights organizations or social network groups and pages.

The traditional mainstream media has demonstrated progress in effectively representing perspectives from all genders, with a notable emphasis on featuring women in press materials. Nevertheless, Nani identified instances where media coverage of women’s issues perpetuates stereotypes and reinforces misconceptions, indicating areas for improvement. There are no communities whose experiences or viewpoints are excluded by the professional media sector. Paholnițchi raised an event that sparked controversy—the [denial](#) of a mayoral candidate’s opportunity to speak in Russian during debates by the public broadcaster. Despite public [criticism](#) from both the opposition and President Maia Sandu, the Audiovisual Council found no breach of the law.

Gotișan highlighted a substantial gender imbalance between the mostly male ownership and leadership roles, in contrast to the predominantly female editorial staff and journalists in the field. On the other hand, Bunduchi suggested evaluating gender balance and diversity beyond numbers, emphasizing the absence of restrictions for individuals aspiring to be media owners or content producers as long as they adhere to Moldovan law, which presently has no such limitations.

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

Panelists expressed a pessimistic view on media financing, assigning Indicator 5 the lowest score within Principle 1. They unanimously

agreed that limited financial independence remains a significant factor hindering the advancement of media independence in the country. As Bunduchi highlighted, “Only a limited number of professional content producers, including *Ziarul de Gardă*, Rlive TV, Agora, and the national public broadcaster, manage to secure adequate financial resources for their activities.” While the public broadcaster relies mostly on state funding, the others mentioned have found success through ad revenue, grants, and subscriptions.

Media outlets face challenges in producing quality content without international funding. An [analysis](#) by the Audiovisual Council revealed that grants constitute 85 percent of the annual budget for two media organizations among the 13 analyzed. A significant hurdle to ensuring the financial sustainability of media is the limited advertising market, particularly in regions outside the capital. This challenge is compounded by the preference of small producers for “word of mouth” advertising, while other companies find it more advantageous to advertise on social media, highlighted Bzovaya.

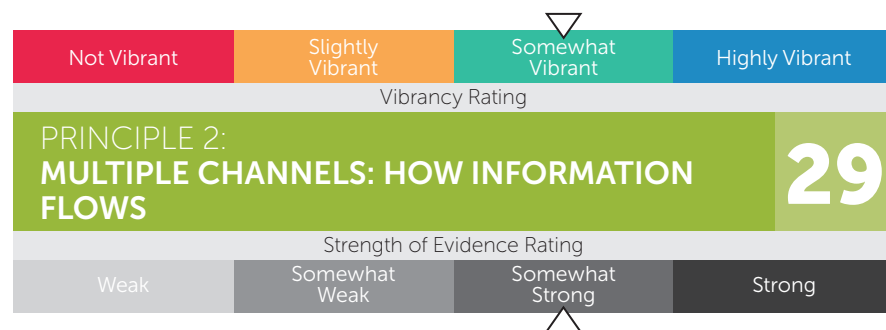
“The advertising market in Moldova is very small and following the closure of 12 TV channels in a year and a half, it has further decreased and become less dynamic,” Paholnițchi noted. Zaharia emphasized the severe shortage of qualified professionals in journalism due to inadequate salaries, with many journalists migrating to communication fields where wages are comparatively higher.

Apolitical private funding sources are scarce, if they exist at all. Huge portions of local advertising budgets continue to go to international companies such as Meta (for Facebook and Instagram) and Google. Some media outlets are exploring alternative financing avenues but face obstacles. Crowdfunding may provide partial backing for small online platforms, but it falls short, while subscription-based revenue models and the practice of paying for content are still in their infancy in Moldova.

““ **The traditional mainstream media has demonstrated progress in effectively representing perspectives from all genders, with a notable emphasis on featuring women in press materials.**



Government subsidies are exclusively directed to public media service providers, who participate in the advertising market on an equal footing with private media. Advertising placement in Moldova faces challenges, as the small market remains quite politicized, lacking clarity and regulation. Pohilenco noted that advertising placement is influenced by sales houses and agencies. “It is also impacted by businesses’ loyalty to specific media outlets, with some advertisers avoiding those associated with a pro-European stance,” Bzovaya added.



Moldova saw a two-point increase in this principle in this year’s study as compared with the 2023 VIBE publication. The country boasts a robust legal framework promoting freedom of the press and expression. Despite right to information laws aligning with global standards, challenges arise in their implementation. Panelists awarded the highest scores to Indicator 7, on adequate access to information channels, while the lowest marks were assigned to Indicator 10, indicating concerns about the independence of information channels.

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

Moldova has an advanced legal framework regulating freedom of the press and expression. Overall, the laws align with international standards, with the exception of 2021 amendments to audiovisual legislation bringing the public broadcaster under parliamentary control and removing the immutability of Broadcasting Council members. The application of laws is generally consistent, except in the Transnistrian

region. Zaharia also noted minor lapses in practical implementation, particularly in handling access to information requests, hindering journalists’ right to freedom of expression.

The central government does not actively attempt to erode freedom of speech and freedom of the press through legal or extralegal means. However, several panelists noted that during 2023, some concerns arose, particularly regarding the suspension of six TV channels’ licenses [without transparency](#) and clear evidence of deviations. Bzovaya argued that blocking Kremlin-backed websites which spread toxic information for violating Moldovan law is not considered censorship or persecution, while Bunduchi stressed the importance of justifying actions against manipulative information with sufficient and plausible arguments.

Some politicians and local representatives attempted to erode freedom of press and journalists in 2023. Mihail Sirkeli—director and host of the independent portal Nokta, which focuses on coverage of Gagauzia—faces frequent [pressure](#) and intimidation from local administration representatives, explained Bzovaya. Gherciu highlighted persecution from authorities in Tiraspol, the largest city in Transnistria, citing a [case](#) of a journalist declared “undesirable” by the separatist regime.

The panelists generally agreed that the government does not pressure information and communications technology providers to censor media. The majority of panelists asserted that self-censorship, common in politically controlled media, is driven by financial dependence, political bias, or low standards rather than fear of retribution. Dumitru Țîra, executive director of Realitatea TV, expressed a different perspective, highlighting the tangible effects of government pressure, stigmatization, and self-censorship on journalists.

Moldovan journalists were not arrested, imprisoned, fined, or killed for doing their jobs in 2023. However, incidents of assault and intimidation persist, including physical attacks on reporters during spring anti-government protests organized by the Shor Party, verbal attacks against and denigration of a Nokta journalist by a deputy of the Gagauzia People’s Assembly (the representative and legislative body of the autonomous region) and two civic activists, insults against



a *Ziarul de Gardă* reporter by former Prime Minister Ion Chicu, and the Kremlin banning several Moldovan journalists from entering the Russian Federation.

Laws protecting the confidentiality of sources are adequate and applied fairly. While Moldova has defamation laws that categorize it as a misdemeanor, potentially impacting journalists' freedom of speech, no such cases were reported in 2023. The panelist from Transnistria shared how a regional colleague faced intelligence service pressure, investigation, and the threat of imprisonment for providing Moldovan media with economic analysis from open sources. Despite avoiding imprisonment, the colleague remains intimidated and hesitant to publicize the information, expressing doubt about finding adequate protection. Top of Form

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

Access to information in Moldova is considered adequate, with well-established information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure that enables reliable internet access, [reaching](#) a penetration rate of 71.5 percent—an increase of 4.5 percent from the previous year. In the third quarter of 2023, the penetration rate of mobile internet access services has reached 120.6 percent. Although Moldova [stands out globally](#) as the third-cheapest country in terms of average broadband monthly cost, this may not necessarily indicate overall affordability.

The ICT infrastructure extends throughout the entire country, but Zaharia mentioned a unique case in the Ungheni district (Veverița), where internet access is unavailable due to providers declining to install the required infrastructure, citing the small number of residents (approximately 30 houses). Nani highlighted the problem in the regions bordering the Dniester River, where people can access Russian, Ukrainian, or Transnistrian stations, but not programs broadcast from the capital.

👂👂 **Self-censorship, common in politically controlled media, is driven by financial dependence, political bias, or low standards rather than fear of retribution.**

There are no legal or social norms preventing groups from accessing the internet. However, some panelists highlighted that specific populations, such as marginalized groups and financially vulnerable individuals, still face barriers. Smartphones and newspaper subscriptions may not be affordable for groups like the elderly, while there is a need to address access challenges for specific vulnerable groups, including people with disabilities, illiterate individuals, and speakers of non-dominant languages. Many websites are not adapted to the needs of people with visual impairments and most television channels do not offer sign language interpretation. “Some social groups, like the Roma, have the financial means to access various information channels but prefer digital media,” said Cobăsneanu, “This particular stratum has refrained from subscribing to newspapers and magazines, citing high illiteracy rates.”

Even in the most remote villages, citizens have the necessary technical means and opportunities to stay well-informed. The panelists said that in the event of a disruption to a telecommunications

infrastructure, people have access to other information systems or devices.

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

Moldova's right to information laws align with the basic standards outlined in the Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents, according to Freedom House's 2023 [report](#), “Freedom of Information Index (FII): Measuring Transparency of Public Institutions in Moldova.” However, consistent with previous years, the panelists emphasized the insufficient implementation of the legislation. While Moldova's legislation achieved a score of 32 out of 40 in the FII report, the categories of “proactive transparency” and “access upon request” received only 14 and 11 points out of 30, respectively. Although information is supposed to be provided within 15 working days after filing a request or 20 working days if additional work is required to

obtain the information, the panelists agreed that requests often do not follow this timeline.

The public has access to government policy and decision-making information through online platforms, including relevant statistics and details about public consultations. Nevertheless, Paholnițchi emphasized the lack of awareness among the general public regarding available channels for requesting information from government authorities. On the other hand, journalists and researchers frequently utilize

“**Politization and the influence of owners on media institutions, especially in terms of editorial aspects, remain among the most significant challenges facing the media sector.**”

information access tools. The right to file information requests is extended to everyone, including non-citizens and legal entities. There is no apparent widespread reluctance among the public to seek government information, and no particular groups are consistently excluded from exercising their right to information. Nevertheless, Zaharia explained that “despite the overall inclusivity, hearing-impaired individuals constitute one of the groups excluded from the information circuit, as translation into sign language of messages from authorities is rarely ensured,” noting that there was not adequate translation for President Maia Sandu’s end-of-year speech.

Government entities in Moldova typically have designated spokespeople or information offices that serve as points of contact for the press, but their effectiveness varies around availability, transparency, and accuracy. According to Gotișan, there has been an improvement in the communication landscape, especially at the national level, with increased political will for information exchange under the governance of the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS).

On the other hand, Bzovaya noted that while all ministries and agencies have press services, their quality is sometimes lacking. Zaharia highlighted cases where authorities refuse to provide relevant information, particularly about public procurement contests, opting instead for formal responses devoid of substantive details. “The regions

face a more critical situation due to a limited number of public relations specialists in regional and municipal councils,” said Cobășneanu, “In Soroca, for example, only a couple of press conferences are organized in a year, and there are challenges in establishing effective communication channels between state institutions and the media.” Bunduchi underscored that Moldova has enacted a new law on access to information of public interest, ratified in June 2023 and operational since January 2024, which he believes has successfully addressed significant procedural shortcomings that were present in the previous law.

In Transnistria, information requests should be processed within seven days according to local regulation, but journalists have complained that responses are often uninformative or rejected, explained the panelist from this region.

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

Individuals have the freedom to establish media in Moldova. Licensing procedures and other regulations are in place and applied fairly and transparently. The allocation of broadcasting frequencies undergoes a fair and transparent process. Internet service providers treat all communications equally, without discrimination based on user, content, or source of destination addresses.

Overall, the national public service provider supplies sufficiently objective and impartial news, but lacks enough truly educational, new, or unique content. Nani referenced a 2023 monitoring [report](#) by the Independent Journalism Center (IJC) of Moldova, stating that the Moldova 1 public TV delivered neutral news coverage but noted a slight bias favoring representatives of the governing PAS party.

Moldovan laws make no distinction between domestic and foreign ownership in the media. Instead, the focus is on an individual’s or legal entity’s right to be the sole owner or to hold specific shares, voting rights, or social capital within broadcast media service providers. For

instance, audiovisual legislation outlines limitations such as limiting individual ownership to a maximum of two television services and two radio broadcasting services. Moreover, an individual, their spouse, or a legal entity with significant ownership in a broadcast media service entity cannot exceed a 20 percent ownership stake in another similar entity under the jurisdiction of Moldova.

While broadcast media must adhere to legal requirements for ownership transparency, online portals are not bound by this obligation. At times, it becomes impossible to ascertain information about the ownership of these online platforms. Regarding media ownership concentration and regulations, Gotișan highlighted adjustments in media laws and more efficient application in recent years. “Political influence on the media sector has diminished with the decline of some media conglomerates, yet concerns arise over the sector’s dependency on central authorities, particularly evidenced in public media favoring central authorities in news editions,” he added.

Bunduchi highlighted the monopoly of the state-owned Poșta Moldovei, the national postal operator, in the distribution of printed press, emphasizing a [significant increase](#) in distribution fees that poses a risk to the existence of print media. Meanwhile, Gotișan observed a diminishing political influence on the media sector, with the dismantling of some media conglomerates, although the demise of one conglomerate (Plahotniuc) resulted in the strengthening of another (Șor). Nevertheless, he observed that politicization of the media sector has generally improved.

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, the second-largest company in the region, said the panelist from Transnistria.

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

As in previous years, the VIBE indicator measuring independence of information channels scored the lowest in this principle. While the influence of politics and economic factors on the media has slightly

decreased recently, according to Gotișan, politicization and the influence of owners on media institutions, especially in terms of editorial aspects, remain among the most significant challenges facing the media sector. “Despite some degree of de-politicization in the Moldovan press, local authorities in various regions, such as Soroca, financially support certain self-proclaimed ‘independent’ media outlets through ‘public procurements,’ conducted without legal tenders, thus impacting their independence,” Cobășneanu highlighted.

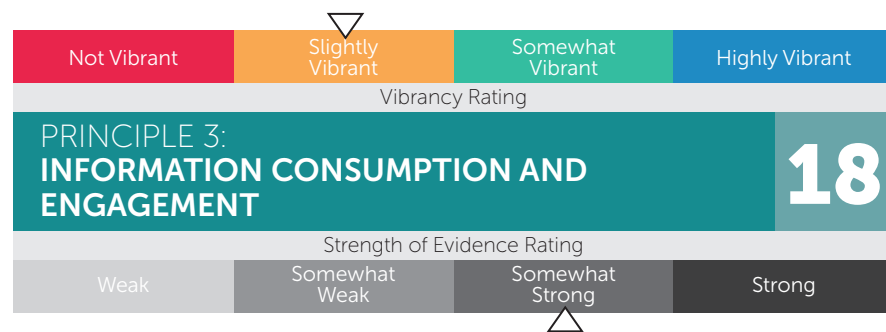
Gotișan noted that in many if not most media organizations, editorial and commercial departments are not clearly separated, posing a continued risk of interference in editorial procedures. Gherciu added that in the case of many independent editorial teams, owners usually serve either as editors-in-chief or as managers, and they are involved in editorial policy. “This involvement is not necessarily negative as long as the ethical code is respected,” she noted.

The national public service media are apolitically funded according to a precise formula provided by broadcast legislation. Bunduchi highlighted a distinction in the case of the regional public media (GRT) where funding, dictated by a 2016 Gagauz law, is subject to the discretion of the local parliament, the People’s Assembly. This leads to significant political influence on both the funding and editorial policy of GRT.

Political interference in the management and editorial content of the national public service media (TRM) seems to be minimal. Țîra emphasized the commitment of TRM to fairness, balance, pluralism, and accurate information, especially during the 2023 electoral campaign. When considering access to equipment, both state media and other media outlets are treated equally. State subsidies, which are exclusively available to public media, represent an exception.

The national regulatory authority, the Audiovisual Council, has significantly improved in terms of neutrality, professionalism, independence, and impartiality, particularly in the allocation of frequencies and licenses, noted Gotișan. “Despite politicians’ interference into the selection process of the council’s members, it now operates in a non-political manner, an improvement compared to

previous years,” Pohilenco added. State media do not have sole access to certain information, such as statistical policy data or government sources.



Media literacy remains a significant challenge in Moldova, with no state-level strategy currently in place. While some media outlets demonstrate awareness of digital safety, poor digital hygiene practices persist. Media struggle to understand audience needs through qualitative methods. The panelists agreed that Moldova lacks community media in a classical sense and this indicator received the lowest score. Indicator 13, on productive engagement with information, received the highest score for this principle.

“ At the state level, there is no strategy for promoting media and information literacy, and the level of media literacy among the general population is low.

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

While some media and journalists demonstrate a strong awareness of digital safety, panelists expressed concern about their poor digital hygiene practices. Many outlets, including SP, TV Studio-L, and TV8, [reported](#) that DDoS attacks on their websites caused disruptions in 2023. The Russian hacker group “Narodnaia CyberArmia” also [claimed responsibility](#) for cyberattacks targeting the websites of *Ziarul de Gardă*, Nokta, and Newsmaker. Although digital security training resources exist, outlets with limited budgets may face challenges accessing them, while trainings through donor-supported projects are scarce and are primarily

accessed by journalists and representatives from niche media and NGOs.

Legal protections for data privacy and digital security exist and panelists agreed that Moldova’s legislation ensures adequate personal data protection. While some panelists noted a decrease in recent years of instances where authorities deny requests for access to information, typically citing personal data protection, others expressed the opposite. This year, the government approved the [Digital Transformation Strategy](#) of the Republic of Moldova for 2023-2030, including a digital security component, along with a new national [cybersecurity law](#) set to enter into force in 2025, which will mandate that critical institutions and service providers maintain minimum cybersecurity requirements and report threat incidents.

There is minimal evidence that citizens possess knowledge of information security, making them vulnerable to internet and bank fraudsters. A limited segment of the population, primarily those with advanced digital literacy, is aware of the algorithms underpinning social media, the intricacies of targeted advertising, and the utilization of personal information to target digital users. Gherciu emphasized a deficiency in digital education, particularly among the elderly population and some public officials who continue to rely on the mail.ru platform for work-related communication.

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

At the state level, there is no strategy for promoting media and information literacy, and the level of media literacy among the general population is low. The NGO Independent Journalism Center (IJC) partners with Moldova’s Ministry of Education to implement a media literacy program in schools, although these classes are not mandatory, and has successfully trained almost 700 teachers, highlighted Nani. Authorities in the Gagauzia and Transnistrian regions do not promote media literacy.



According to a 2023 [study](#) by Internews Moldova, more than half of the respondents were uncertain about their ability to distinguish independent sources of information, and 44 percent found it difficult to identify information manipulation. Gotișan highlighted a discrepancy in media literacy initiatives, noting a stronger focus on youth compared to those aged 50 and above. Panelists agreed that tools and websites for fact-checking or exposing manipulative information, such as StopFals and Mediaticrita, are available, but they were unsure whether people use them.

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

Moldovan journalists and civil society activists generally exercise their right to freedom of expression and access to information without fear of retaliation. However, in the Transnistrian region, the possibility of reprisal for covering sensitive topics under the separatist authorities hinders freedom of speech. Overall, the general population tends to use these rights less frequently than media and civil society. “There is still a learning process regarding these rights, considering the historical context of a closed society where freedom of expression and the right to information were practically nonexistent,” Gotișan explained. According to the 2023 [Public Opinion Barometer](#) (POB) by the Institute for Public Policy, more than 44 percent of the population feel to a great or very great extent free to express their opinions about the country’s leadership, while almost 17 percent do not feel free at all.

The POB also indicates that Moldovans engage with at least some objective, fact-based information on a weekly basis. The report identifies internet (53.6 percent) and TV (30.1 percent) as the most crucial sources of information, with independent online media such as jurnal.md and protv.md and TV channels like Moldova 1, Jurnal TV, and Pro TV among the top sources.

**“ In the Transnistrian region, the possibility of reprisal for covering sensitive topics under the separatist authorities hinders freedom of speech.**

Mechanisms fostering public debate and discussion are in place, both in person and virtually. However, Bzovaya noted instances where decisions are made without sufficient discussion or consultation, as highlighted in a Promo-Lex [report](#) on the parliament’s activities. Nani cited a [recent vote](#) on the mechanism for suspending television licenses, highlighting that it did not undergo public consultation.

According to the POB, Moldovans’ primary choices for information sources on social media include Facebook (59 percent), Instagram (31 percent), and TikTok (27 percent). Panelists noted that digital communication platforms often feature personal attacks, insults, hate speech, and the spread of false or manipulative information. “With a few exceptions, public debate platforms led by the media predominantly concentrate on political subjects, overlooking other important topics for citizens,” said Bunduchi. In contrast, Cobășneanu highlighted that public debate platforms are varied and independent, and opinions expressed on these platforms reflect, to some extent, the societal mood.

The 2023 Internews Moldova [study](#) found that only one-third of respondents know they can file an official complaint if they encounter manipulative information.

Gherciu highlighted that people might not report manipulative information or hate speech due to awareness gaps, fear of repercussions, or the perception that reporting will not bring significant changes. “Reporting often occurs on social networks, where the process is more straightforward,” she said. Regular citizens rarely turn to the Press Council, Audiovisual Council, the Council for Prevention and Elimination of Discrimination and Ensuring Equality, or ombudsmen when they come across information manipulation or hate speech.

### **Indicator 14: Media and information producers engage with their audience’s needs (27)**

The panelists generally agreed that media and content producers do not use qualitative tools to understand audience needs and interests.

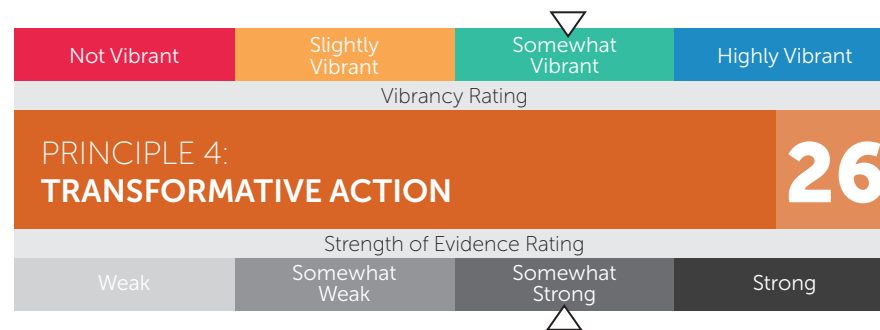
While some media outlets refer to results from sociological surveys such as the POB, this does not necessarily lead to adjustments in editorial policies based on public needs. Paholnițchi noted existing mechanisms for audience research, with online media using global tools like Google Analytics and regional tools like Gemius. Gotișan highlighted the presence of “yellow” or clickbait media outlets on the Moldovan market, suggesting that efforts to understand audience needs are lacking.

Almost all news portals have open processes for audiences to provide feedback through online comments sections on their social media pages. Nevertheless, challenges such as poor-quality comments remain, explained Bzovaya. “Not all media organize meetings with their audience, citing financial reasons and the preference of some audiences, like Nokta’s, to remain anonymous, or being located outside the region,” she added.

The majority of news portals, regardless of their nature, do not disclose the authors of published content, raising transparency concerns. Țîra noted that collaboration between media, content producers, civil society organizations, and government institutions is rare due to differing goals.

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

Panelists agreed that Moldova lacks community media in a classical sense, notably radio stations with official community radio status. While community-oriented media outlets occasionally emerge, they often fade away due to inconsistent community involvement. Despite constituting only a small portion of the overall media landscape, local independent commercial newspapers and radio stations effectively fulfill the functions of community media outlets, according to some panelists. Bunduchi noted the example of Vocea Noastră, a magazine serving the Jewish community in Moldova since 1990, distributed both electronically and in print on both sides of the Dniester River. Additionally, various forms of digital platforms like Instagram groups, Telegram channels, and WhatsApp groups serve as community spaces where locals discuss issues and share news.



While Moldova does have nonpartisan news and information sources, the panelists noted that manipulative information, rather than quality information, shapes people’s views and informs their actions. This was reflected in the low scores for Indicator 17, on whether individuals use quality information to inform their actions. In contrast, civil society groups predominantly use quality information to improve their communities, so Indicator 18 received a high score 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 have comparatively large audiences in some cases, depending on the topic. Similar to Moldovan society in general, the media landscape grapples with high polarization—a fact underscored by the [Press Freedom Index](#) published by Reporters Without Borders—which is essentially a consequence of the low levels of media literacy and critical thinking among the population, explained Nani.

Based on the September 2023 [POB](#) data, internet and TV are the primary and trusted sources of information for most citizens. Approximately 20 percent of respondents said they typically rely on broadcast programs and Russian newspapers and magazines for information. Notably, there appears to be a potential correlation between this 20 percent and the 17 percent of respondents who believe in a Kremlin “operation to liberate Ukraine.” As Bunduchi explained, these findings highlight a substantial

segment of the population which forms opinions and views without a solid foundation in facts.

Moldovans demonstrate a tendency to gravitate towards information sources that align with their existing beliefs and often choose to remain within their information bubbles, whether on social media or other platforms. “By the end of 2023, following the suspension of six TV channels licenses due to alleged threats to national security, there was a shift in people’s viewing habits towards similar foreign TV content rather than transitioning to independent local channels,” noted Paholnițchi.

People share information through discussions on TV, radio, social media platforms, and the comment sections of online media. Țîra emphasized that constructive and well-documented discussions are often missing, especially online, and open dialogues between individuals with differing opinions are infrequent. Zaharia added that civilized discussions are rare but do occur in situations where online trolls are absent.

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

The panelists unanimously agreed that a combination of reliable and manipulative information shapes the social and political perspectives of individuals. They acknowledged the decisive role of information manipulation in the elections of the Gagauz *Bashkan*, the local governor, and its notable influence on the broader local elections in 2023. Additionally, panelists referenced the [pro-EU rally](#) gathering tens of thousands as a positive example of people’s opinions being based on quality information. However, the success of pro-Russian political forces in the elections underscores the continuing effectiveness of aggressive propaganda and information manipulation strategies in Moldova, as acknowledged by the [OSCE](#), which also identified foreign interference.

**“ Moldovans demonstrate a tendency to gravitate towards information sources that align with their existing beliefs and often choose to remain within their information bubbles, whether on social media or other platforms.”**

Instances of citizens utilizing quality information to interact with their elected officials on matters of concern are relatively rare. “The main political parties enjoy strong support from loyal constituencies, who are likely to vote for their party regardless of media coverage, often disregarding negative media reports about their preferred side as misinformation,” explained Nani.

Many individuals struggle to differentiate between propaganda and legitimate news. The 2023 Internews Moldova [study](#) found that over half of respondents were uncertain about identifying independent information sources, and 44 percent faced challenges in discerning information manipulation. In some cases, manipulative information has incited individuals to take actions detrimental to the public good, with several panelists citing [the protests](#) orchestrated by the Pro-Russian Shor party,

which resulted in [42 police reports](#) being issued for violations of public order and security.

The challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic have revealed a concerning inclination among Moldovans to jeopardize their health and that of others due to exposure to manipulative information in the public sphere. Despite this, as noted by Cobășneanu, there are positive developments in public health, with citizens showing increasing trust in advice from specialists.

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

The panelists agreed that CSOs often rely on quality news and information to articulate their mission and objectives and present themselves as credible sources. According to Bunduchi, Moldova still harbors a few “pocket NGOs”—essentially controlled or heavily influenced by government authorities or specific political entities—which have misleading agendas and opportunistically surface in public

discourse to align with specific interest groups. “The positive aspect is that such NGOs are relatively scarce,” he added.

Regarding combatting information manipulation, the panelist from Transnistria observed a spectrum of engagement among NGOs, with some actively working to curb the spread of false information. Zaharia underscored the critical role of CSOs in explaining manipulative information concepts and narratives to the public. Nonetheless, concerns arise about individuals within CSOs spreading manipulative information, raising questions about their funding sources. Bzovaya added another layer, pointing out the potential infiltration of political movements under the guise of NGOs, leading to the propagation of false narratives and a deviation from addressing local community issues.

While CSOs actively engage with media outlets to provide statements and expert commentary, some disparities exist. The dynamics between CSOs and media producers can be intricate and not all content creators consistently collaborate on socially significant topics. Gherciu noted an uneven relationship where NGOs seek media visibility but may not reciprocate in enhancing media outlets’ visibility.

Although key decisions such as policy formation and legislative changes involve civic participation, it could be improved. Paholnițchi highlighted instances of NGOs providing consultation for initiatives such as the Strategic Communications Center, while Gherciu cited farmer organizations, classified as NGOs, influencing governmental decisions. “During the finalization of the regulation on the coverage of elections by mass media, CSOs submitted 41 suggestions for improvement, with over half being incorporated into the final version,” Bunduchi added.

Nevertheless, civic participation faces constraints which can partly attributed to the parliament’s lack of transparent decision-making. Promo-Lex’s [annual report](#) on the 11th Legislature of the Parliament from August 2022 to July 2023, based on the monitoring of 43 plenary sessions and the analysis of 596 legislative acts, suggests limitations in

transparent decision-making, highlighting sporadic cooperation with civil society, limited public consultations, and a relatively low percentage of recommendations which are implemented. Furthermore, Gotișan noted a perceived leniency among CSOs toward authorities since mid-2021, potentially eroding their watchdog role.

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

Moldova has mechanisms facilitating government engagement with civil society and the media, including press conferences. However, challenges persist at the local level, particularly with public authorities, where information accessibility and accountability can be more challenging.

Political discourse or debates sporadically include evidence and facts, with infrequent press conferences allowing the press to pose direct questions. Deliberately false information can significantly impact the narrative, especially during election

campaigns. Although information manipulation is not pervasive, it is still seen in cases such as an [announcement](#) by two politicians that gas would be supplied to the people of Gagauzia for MDL 10 (\$0.55) per cubic meter. This claim was dismissed as false and politically motivated by the Minister of Energy.

Government actors minimally reference quality media or civil society information when explaining decisions. Despite the existence of press conferences and other engagement mechanisms, explanations for certain decisions like the suspension of TV licenses can be unclear, explained Paholnițchi. “On the other hand, in other government sectors such as energy, authorities have become more transparent and provided a large amount of information based on data and facts,” he added.

**“The panelists unanimously agreed that a combination of reliable and manipulative information shapes the social and political perspectives of individuals.”**



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

The government's response to revelations of corruption varies. While press investigations trigger some internal investigations, the effectiveness of sanctions remains questionable, fostering an atmosphere of impunity.

A 2023 [report](#) by the Association of Independent Press suggests that journalistic exposure of integrity and corruption issues does not consistently prompt institutional or criminal investigations, reflecting a general tolerance for lack of integrity in public and private sectors. In the majority of cases examined in the report, government institutions responded with control measures, investigations, or internal inquiries, but subsequent law enforcement investigations were generally ineffective. The study highlights that these inadequate practices send a message of tolerance for corrupt behavior.

There is insufficient evidence to indicate that the presence of high-quality information effectively prevents or reduces corruption within national or local governments. “Typically, cases uncovered by journalistic investigations exposing high-level corruption in Moldova receive inadequate or delayed responses, causing public interest to diminish over time,” Bunduchi noted. Still, Paholnițchi referenced [a case](#) where timely public pressure led to the release of an unlawfully detained man in the Transnistrian region.

As previously mentioned, Moldova has no reliable research on whether information quality contributes to free and fair elections. Still, some panelists believe that the availability of quality information does not guarantee the preservation of democratic values, as seen in the [Gagauz governor elections](#) and the [local elections](#) in 2023.

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