

MONTENEGRO

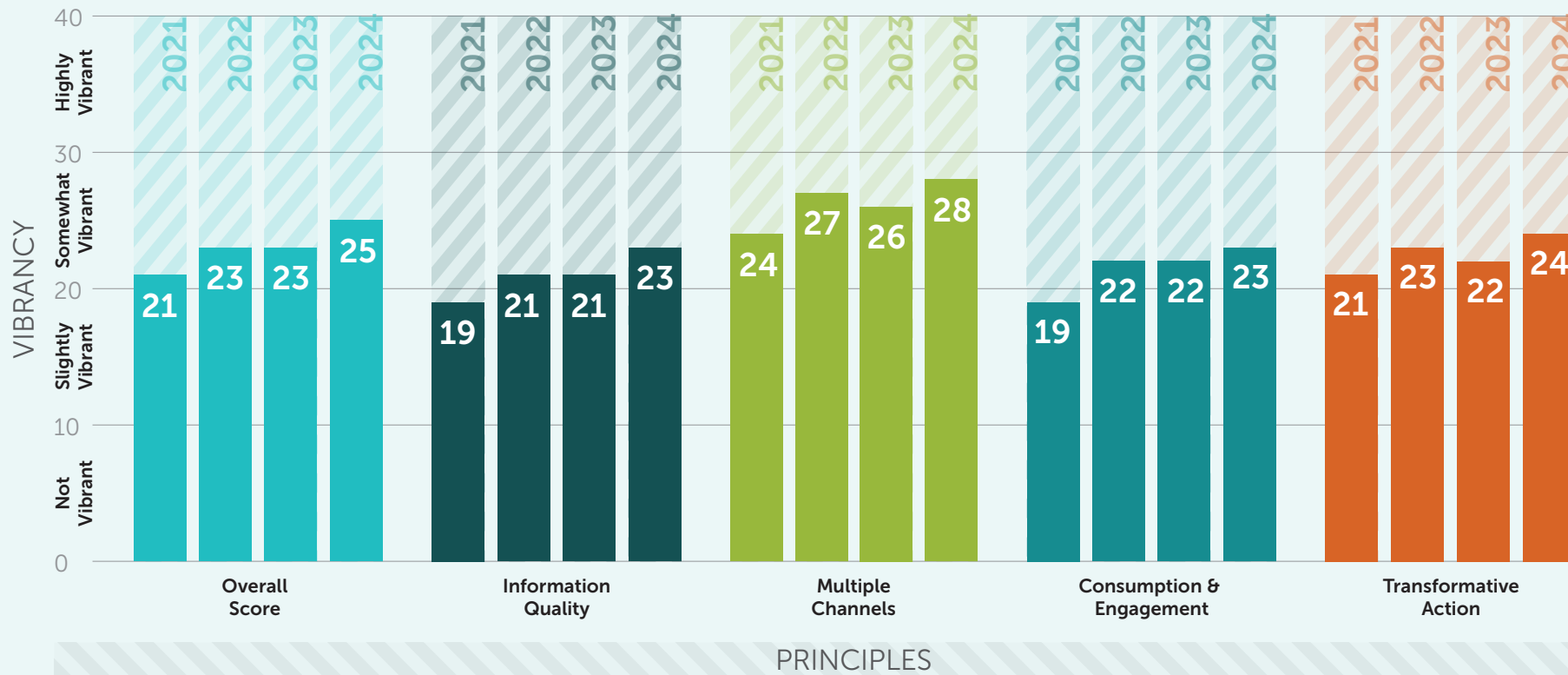
Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 4



Photo by: Boris Pejovic/VIJESTI





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

25

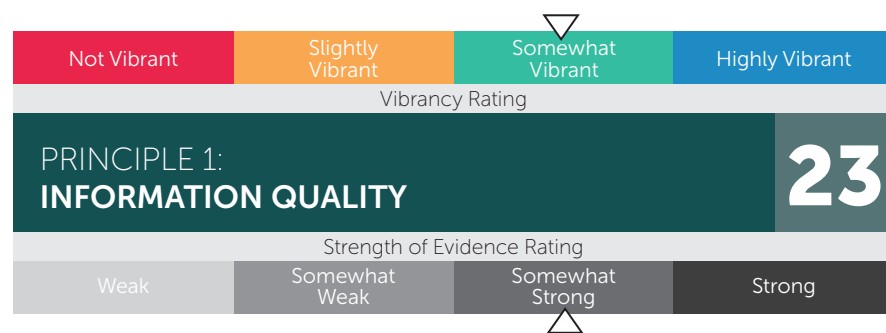
In 2023, Montenegro held a presidential election and a special parliamentary election, which resulted in political instability. During the presidential election in March, the parliamentary majority candidate, Jakov Milatovic, defeated former President Milo Djukanovic. In the parliamentary election in June, no political party won an absolute majority, and after a long period of negotiations, a new coalition government formed in October. Prime Minister Milojko Spajic, member of the Europe Now! (PES) party and a former finance minister, leads the government, formed by pro-Europe populist parties, including PES and the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), with the support of the Serbian nationalist parties, the New Serbian Democracy (NSD) and the Democratic People’s Party (DNP). The NSD and the DNP advocate for closer ties with neighboring Serbia and the Kremlin.

Political instability throughout the year affected the economy: The public debt stood at \$4.42 billion, which is 71 percent of the nation’s gross domestic product (GDP) of about 3.4 percent, according to the Ministry of Finance. The Employment Bureau reported that the unemployment rate was around 16 percent; and inflation, measured by the consumer price index, was 8.6 percent, according to the Statistical Office of Montenegro (MONSTAT).

Overall, the media sector remained unchanged, except the emergence of more TV stations under the direct control of pro-Serbia, pro-Putin supporters. Most media are politicized and aligned either with the ruling parties or opposition. National and local public media services lean toward the ruling parties and remain closed to dialogue in terms of critical and independent public opinion.

Media quality falls short of the professional standards and norms that characterize free press in a liberal democracy. Citizens have unimpeded access to information through the internet and social media. Local media try to report news based on facts, but certain outlets are under the influence of countries with their own interests, such as Russia and Serbia, and as a result are used as propaganda and manipulation tools. Media regulation is adequate but needs improvement due to a lack of everyday democratic journalism practices. Authorities have improved the protection of journalists from violence or threats, but several unresolved cases of attacks on journalists over a period of 20 years remain.

Montenegro’s overall country score increased two points over last year’s VIBE study, with modest increases in all four principles. Online journalism continues to develop and expand rapidly, while print media is vulnerable. The advantage of internet news is that people can react in real-time, and it is predominant in other forms of media as well, including social networks and web portals. Hate speech is common on social networks and can be found in comments posted in online media portals. However, authorities attempt to control extreme hate speech. Traditional and established media, as well as the NGO sector, do report quality information. In contrast, media produced by political parties and some government agencies spread manipulative information and propaganda. Local media are more likely to report on issues important to their communities. However, political parties influence local public service media. As a result, local media tends to reflect their dominant political positions. This also occurs with the state-owned TV and radio, the National Public Service.



The panelists confirmed that the quality of information in Montenegro has remained the same for years. Although this principle score increased by two points compared with the 2023 VIBE study, there has been neither significant progress in terms of quality nor regression. There is media pluralism in the country, with more than 200 different types of electronic and print media, resulting in one media source for every 2,800 citizens. This wide range of media means Montenegro has an abundance of information content, with numerous local, national, and international news published daily. While traditional media present reliable information, nonprofessional content producers on social media sites do not.

However, media objectivity is weakened by political confrontations and external influences, and outlets spread political propaganda and manipulative information. The unstable political environment has caused an increase of manipulative information, including hate speech on ethnic nationalism or ideological and political opposition. The panelists agreed that government authorities try to combat hate speech, especially where it is present on social networks. But the leading digital and print media do strive to report fact-based information and to preserve professional standards.

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

State-owned media outlets, as well as traditional ones, are the only outlets with adequate infrastructure for creating quality media content. Smaller media, including local media, often do not have sufficient infrastructure, which affects the quality of their work. Dragan Markešić, CEO of Direct Media International, believes the political orientation of an outlet's editorial team is often very visible. "When it comes to information relevance and quality, there is a huge difference between professional and non-professional news sources," he said.

The country still has special education centers for journalists run by professional associations, such as the Montenegro Media Institute. NGOs continue to provide journalism training in reporting and ethics. Traditional, national, and local media journalists participate in trainings. Other media, particularly online platforms, are less likely to, which can lead to poor quality media content.

Despite an abundance and diversity of media on numerous topics, including political, economic, cultural, and social issues, outlets sometimes offer information that is of poor quality. When covering public officials, the media focus on accountability. Natasa Ruzic, a professor of political science at the University of Montenegro, noted that [data](#) from Montenegro's Media Trade Union, shows that more than 222 media outlets in the country employ 1,939 staff. However, despite the presence of registered media, she observed, "We do not have independent media in the country. More precisely, the media are working in the interest of their owners or political entities."

Olja Nikolić, acting director of the Montenegro Media Institute, pointed out that the country uses professional, mainstream media to discover and debunk manipulative information, which has been relatively successful. "But we do not have an adequate mechanism to counter unregistered online portals, such as the right-wing IN4S, which is the primary source of disinformation and hate speech in the country," she said.

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

According to the panelists, traditional media are trying to publish fact-based information. “Professional, mainstream media rarely report disinformation,” Jelena Martinovic, editor and journalist with news outlet Pobjeda, said. She noted that [Montenegro Media Institute](#) and [Montenegro Media Trade Union](#) surveys show that credible media do not spread manipulative information and do not breach professional ethics.

“It is very difficult to assess the intentions of media when disseminating disinformation, but mainstream media usually comply with professional standards,” Runic said. She pointed out that fact-checking organizations, such as the NGOs Digital Forensic Center and the Democratic Transition Center, use the [Raskrinkavanje.me](#) platform to check information and notify media when manipulative information is published.

Nonprofessional content producers typically do not engage in fact-checking and often produce dubious or outright false reports or politically motivated propaganda. Since the formation of the new government in 2023, relations between the government and the media have improved. The panelists agreed that the media try to fact check government information, or statements from public officials; and attempt to debunk certain statements identified as manipulative information, which is challenging.

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

Panelists noted that foreign governments, particularly Serbia and Russia, are spreading disinformation and hate speech through media outlets they control, which have editorial policies aimed at undermining

Montenegrin sovereignty and its pro-Europe foreign policy. “In Montenegro we are openly talking about China and Russia impacting media content,” journalist Predrag Zecevic commented, “China’s impact is not visible, but [Russian-influenced outlets are] very visible those media either haven’t registered in Montenegro or they have a non-transparent ownership structure.”

The fight against manipulative information is a daily challenge in Montenegro. Specialized

NGOs are the best sources to disprove fake news. For example, the Democratic Transition Center hosts [www.raskrinkavanje.me](#), which works with the International Fact-Checking Network, and the Digital Forensic Center try to detect and publicly debunk fake news and malicious information. “The public space is full of hate speech, and as

a rule of the thumb, it goes unsanctioned. Hate speech [occurs on] social networks but sometimes even mainstream print or digital media intentionally publish or broadcast hate speech”, explained panelist Samir Rastoder, editor with Radio Petnjica.

Panelists agreed that professional media content producers do not produce information to intentionally harm, but the same cannot be said for unprofessional content producers. The absence of a self-regulatory body of influential media is

a great handicap. Self-regulation is decentralized due to decades of disputes among major media companies. “People are concerned about the spreading of mal-information and hate speech in media, because it can result in creating a hostile environment and incitement of intolerance,” Nikola Markovic of Radio and Television of Niksic, pointed out, “Professional media has limited impact on the issue.” Nikolić noted that sometimes hate speech appears in the comments section, coming from the readers, in mainstream media. This doesn’t occur as frequently since the 2020 Law on Media started regulating web portals, which requires outlets to quickly delete disreputable content.

“State-owned media outlets, as well as traditional ones, are the only outlets with adequate infrastructure for creating quality media content. Smaller media, including local media, often do not have sufficient infrastructure, which affects the quality of their work.”

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

News sources are generally inclusive and diverse, according to the panelists. Media disseminate information in all languages spoken in Montenegro, and local media has the most diversity of languages. Different media provide information from a broad ideological and political spectrum, as well as from diverse experiences and opposing viewpoints. Varying platforms provide information for different ethnic and religious groups, but coverage can be sporadic. “In Montenegro, one can pick and choose information at will from a broad spectrum of media that are accessible to citizens,” Martinovic said, “However, it seems that marginalized groups do not get enough media coverage.”

Local private and public media in particular cover the activities of different ethnic and religious communities. Panelists agreed the Roma and Egyptian communities are underrepresented in media content. “Certain minority groups, such as Roma and Egyptian, are the least represented in Montenegrin media, because they don’t have representatives in Parliament, and the media spreads stereotypes, for example, focusing reporting on community members who beg or steal or are forced into marriages,” Natasa Ruzic said. Media also does not fully represent the LGBTQ+ population, except when reporting about Pride parades and activities, or same-sex marriage. Inclusiveness and access to different kinds of information are increasing, as media content reflects a range of languages and formats to meet the needs of different audiences. “Exposure to different ideologies, experiences, and points of view, including different gender, ethnic, racial, and religious perspectives, is a testimony to Montenegro’s pluralism and broad representation,” Markovic noted. Gender diversity is present in both professional and non-professional media contents.

Nonprofessional content producers typically do not engage in fact-checking and often produce dubious or outright false reports or politically motivated propaganda.

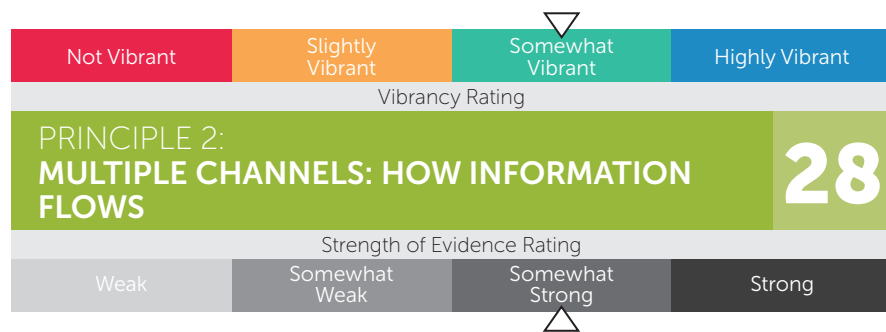
Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

As in previous years, the lack of funding is a constant issue for all media content producers. Ruzic pointed out that the country has [222 media outlets](#) competing for about €11 million (\$12 million) in advertising revenue, which makes it difficult to survive, particularly for non-professional media. The government amended the Law on Media, so it can fund media projects from the national budget through the Media Pluralism and Diversity Fund, which gets its money from a certain percentage of the national budget. The fund will have about €3 million (\$4 million) for 2024.

Montenegro media content does not have subscriptions, and public services are funded by the national or local budgets. For example, this year the national public service, Radio and TV Montenegro-RTCG, [received about €18 million](#) (\$19 million)

from the national budget. Private media rely on the advertising market, which, for years now, ranges between \$10.7 million to \$12.9 million annually.

The government pays for media advertisements, raising objections over transparency and politicization of those ads. The exact amount of the government’s advertising budget is unknown. Journalists continue to struggle with pay with the average journalist’s salary at about €645 to €700 (\$700 to \$755), monthly, while the average salary in Montenegro is €860 (\$929). Low salaries are an important reason that journalists leave the profession, and also prevents qualified new staff from joining the media. “In Montenegro we are constantly facing the issue of media funding,” said Zecevic. “The establishment of the Media Pluralism and Diversity Fund marks a major step forward.”



Principle 2’s score increased by two points from last year’s VIBE study. Media regulations largely follow international journalistic and regulatory standards, as well as the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms. They have all been adopted relatively recently, between 2010 and 2020. In August 2020, the government revised the Law on Media and the Law on National Public Service. In 2023, public debates concerning changing the media laws took place, but as of 2024, nothing has changed.

“Journalists practice self-censorship, which the panelists thought is more pronounced in public service media than private media.”

Montenegro’s Law on Free Access to Information stipulates that every local and foreign natural person has the right to access government information without having to state the reasons for the request. The rule of thumb is that the public has the right to know information available to authorities. Government agencies are required to evaluate the information request and respond to the applicant within 15 days from the date of submission. A [survey produced by the Center for Civic Education](#) in 2022 noted that NGOs submitted over 9,000 requests for information, and filed more than 5,000 appeals against government decisions on releasing information.

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

Montenegro’s media regulations provide legal protection for free speech and freedom of the press. Laws are enforced in principle, but issues

remain as to how they are implemented. “In theory, the laws are good, but in practice they often do not live up to the real-time situations that journalists encounter,” Martinovic said. She pointed out that major issues surround journalists’ self-censorship such as the attitude of some institutions towards journalists. “For example, all cases of threats against journalists usually end up at the Basic State Prosecutor’s Office,” she said, “After several months of investigations, which usually end up inconclusive, the prosecutor’s office usually assesses that no criminal offense occurred.”

Government agencies do not censor the media. However, journalists practice self-censorship, which the panelists thought is more pronounced in public service media than private media. Marko Vesovic, editor-in-chief of Portal Radio and Television of Montenegro, said, “The government is not trying to violate media freedom or freedom of speech. In rare cases, government officials verbally attack journalists, which was more common during the previous government.” Journalists are legally protected, he continued, and self-censorship is fading. He noted, however, that many journalists avoid topics related to organized crime and corruption, due to fears they may be targeted. Moreover, he observed that the government does not encourage investigative journalism.

No journalists were imprisoned because of their reporting in 2023. Libel was decriminalized years ago and is no longer a felony. Now libel claims end up in litigation before the courts as a civil matter. Physical violence and verbal attacks against journalists were minimal, but many disputable, unresolved, and controversial cases of attacks or pressures on journalists remain from previous years.

The laws protect information sources, although a controversial provision in the Law on Media specifies that journalists are obliged to reveal a source when necessary to protect national security, the territorial integrity of the country, and public health. Mihailo Jovovic, editor-in-chief of news outlet Vijesti, pointed out, “Even though authorities can

detect culprits more quickly now, the biggest problem is still unresolved, old cases of attacks against journalists, and an increased number of threats on social networks.” Natasa Ruzic said that the [Western Balkan Journalist Safety Index](#) shows authorities respect the confidentiality of information sources and laws are enforced objectively to enable journalists to do their job freely. In 2022, the Index shows 15 cases of mostly online harassment of journalists occurred. “In Montenegro we have a good regulatory framework, guaranteeing freedom of media and freedom of speech, but journalists are still facing variety of pressures in their work,” Nikolić commented, Relevant [surveys](#), conducted by the Media Trade Union of Montenegro, point to a decrease in the number of attacks on journalists, but an increase in the number of online threats.

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

Citizens enjoy adequate access to information channels, and to a range of communication devices. The information and communications technology infrastructure generally meets consumers’ needs and almost the entire nation has broad access to cable providers, internet, and mobile telephone services. According to the Statistical Office of Montenegro, or MONSTAT, report “[Usage of ITC by households and by individuals](#),” 81 percent of citizens have internet access at their homes. Internet penetration is lowest in the north of the country at 75 percent, and highest in the south at 93 percent and in central Montenegro at 83 percent.

Cable TV and internet connections are generally affordable, giving citizens easy access to many information channels. Even socially vulnerable groups, and ethnic and religious minorities have access. “Information infrastructure meets the needs of the vast majority of citizens, offering affordable access to different information channels, including radio, TV, newspapers, magazines, and digital media,” Markovic said, “It is also important to note that telecommunication and internet infrastructure is easily available even in rural areas.”

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

For almost two decades, Montenegro has had regulations allowing unimpeded access to government information. The country’s Freedom of Information Act, adopted in 2012 and

amended in 2017, provides access to information held by public authorities. The Act is based on principles of free access to information, transparency of government bodies, the right of the public to know, and equality.

The government enforces the laws in line with standards from ratified international treaties on human rights and generally accepted rules of international law. “We continually see frequent cases where government agencies provide incomplete information and take too much time to respond to applicants’ requests for information, which usually goes unpunished,” Milan Jovanovic, senior analyst of [Debunk.org](#), pointed out. The Agency for Protection of Personal Data and Free Access to Information (AZLP) has recorded a [steady increase](#) in the number of applicants obtaining information. Ten years ago, the registry recorded some 400 applicants, and in 2022 this number went up to 9,441. A majority of applications are filed by NGOs, at almost 65 percent, followed by individual citizens, and companies.”

Article 31 of the Law on Free Access to Information stipulates that a government body rule on requests to access information and respond within 15 days from the date of submission. Article 32 states that a government body is obliged to execute a decision granting the applicant the right to access information within three working days as of the day when the decision on granting that right is relayed to the applicant. NGOs and, to a lesser degree, media outlets primarily use the right to access government information. “These rules to accessing information are a relatively good regulatory framework to access information, and reflect confidence in government spokespersons,” Markovic said, “It is also positive that we have laws granting the right to access information.” Panelists agreed that these laws align with international standards and

norms, and they are being enforced in a timely and comprehensive manner.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

The 2010 Law on Electronic Media section on pluralism protection and broadcast media diversity regulates ownership transparency and media concentration into monopolies. Registered media ownership is transparent. The [Agency for Electronic Media website](#) gives data on radio and TV station ownership. Serbian media conglomerate, United Media, owns two TV stations, TV Vijesti and TV Nova M. Three out of four national television outlets are owned by Serbian media enterprises, which impacts the pluralism of opinions.

The main problem in terms of the transparency of media outlets in Montenegro is the amount of anonymous web portals, because the Law on Media does not regulate the operations of these unregistered outlets. Media distribution channels are not monopolized, and the process for establishing a media outlet is free, depending on financial, technical, and human resources. Public service media provide news and educational programs, although consumers continue to debate the quality and scope of information offered. Internet providers do not discriminate based on consumers, content, or destination addresses.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Panelists concurred that news outlets are essentially not editorially independent due to the influence from either politicians or media owners themselves. According to the Media Trade Union report "[Socio-Economic Status of Media Professionals](#)," half of the journalists surveyed believe that owners have a certain degree of influence on their reporting, and 36 percent of said owners have no influence over them. In addition, 43 percent of the journalists surveyed said that at some point in their

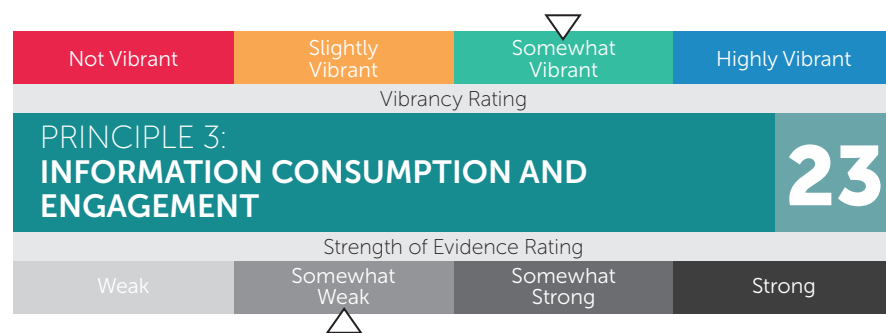
professional careers they were forced to censor reporting. The national public service broadcaster, Radio and Television of Montenegro (RTCG), is not independent, which is clearly stated in its editorial policy. The government provides financial support for it with 0.3 percent of the budget, which does affect its pro-government reporting.

Most panelists agreed that political parties and government officials exert pressure on public news services, and do so less on private media. However, Vesovic disagreed: "For now, it seems that National Public Service is able to operate without the interference of political parties and its editorial policy does not depend on advertising revenues," he said, adding that the situation is different with private media. Montenegro has 17 public service broadcasters, one national and 16 local, Nikolić, observed, which are funded either from the national budget or the local and municipal budgets. The fact that the new government wants to change the Law on National Public Service to discontinue funding in fixed amounts is problematic. It now sets funds outlets based on a percentage of the GDP. "This poses a threat for financial stability and the editorial independence of the national public service broadcasters,"

Nikolić said, "These changes were introduced without public consultations or analysis. Local public services don't have a fixed amount of funding they can count on, which impacts how politics influence their reporting."

Panelists believed that government agencies are selective when it comes to paying for advertising services and tend to avoid advertising on critical and opposition media outlets. Government regulatory bodies try to maintain professional independence, but they are criticized because of their political bias, their unwillingness to protect professional and media standards, and a failure to prevent foreign media activities that violate fundamental journalism principles. Public service media does not have privileged access to equipment, internet, or tax relief when compared to private media.

Panelists believed that government agencies are selective when it comes to paying for advertising services and tend to avoid advertising on critical and opposition media outlets.



Principle 3's score saw a one-point increase from last year. Laws protecting privacy and digital security in Montenegro include the 2008 Law on Protection of Personal Data, amended in 2017; and the 2010 Law on Information Security, amended in 2021. These laws ensure the protection of personal data, and they are in accordance with the standards from ratified international treaties on human rights and the generally accepted rules of international law.

A major problem in Montenegro is poor media literacy, though certain improvements have occurred; as a result, panelists gave the media literacy indicator their lowest scores in this principle. In 2023, media literacy was introduced as an elective course in elementary schools for 7th, 8th, and 9th graders. However, the course is only available in 96 out of 163 elementary schools in the country and was introduced as an elective in only a third of secondary schools, which shows how limited formal media literacy education remains in the country. Panelists agree that citizens are vulnerable to manipulation and manipulative information, especially when it comes to the less educated segment of the population.

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

The panelists claimed that, in recent years, new laws are strengthening the protection of information privacy and digital communications, which has in turn improved online media. Media outlets show an increased commitment to digital security and protection from cyber-

attacks. "This year [2023] Montenegro is supposed to establish a Cyber Security Agency, and competent bodies have finished drafting the new Information Security Act," Ruzic noted. Montenegro has also adopted the Cyber Security Strategy 2022-2026, a five-year document that aims to improve the country's capacity to respond to cybersecurity threats. "We can say that Montenegro has an excellent legislative framework [for protection online], but our citizens are still media illiterate," she said, implying that citizens do not realize they are violating their own rights to privacy by posting personal data on social networks.

Most citizens do not have basic knowledge or skills to protect their electronic data due to various reasons including lack of money and a weak culture of digital security. Even the government lacks adequate protection of its servers. "Although tools are available to combat DDOS [distributed denial-of-service] attacks and viruses, people don't know how to use them or don't realize they need to," Markešić noted. Montenegro does not have qualified IT technicians, and government agencies are not sufficiently trained to protect the IT infrastructure from hacker attacks. A massive cyber-attack on the government's information systems took place on August 22, 2022, with serious consequences that led to the system's collapse. The government recovered from the attack only after Western ally countries lent IT support. Since then, the government's information structure has been better protected, but there are questions surrounding its future vulnerability.

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

Panelists unanimously agreed that media literacy is crucial to protecting the public from false and misleading news and increasingly manipulative political propaganda, although progress is slow. "The issue of media literacy is huge," Neven Stanicic, journalist of Radio Tivat, said, "The general public often accepts unverified information that is fake news." Although the government does not focus on boosting media literacy, it has made advances by introducing media literacy as an elective course in schools. Panelists said, however, the nation still does not have a multi-sector approach to media literacy, and the government does not

pay enough attention to the issue. “Promotion of the elective course in schools is not enough — it is only offered in grammar schools, and in just 30 percent of high schools,” Nikolić said, “In the 2022 to 2023 school year, only 78 high school students opted to take it.” Thanks to the promotion of the course, in the 2023 to 2024 school year, the Agency for Control and Quality Assurance of Higher Education, the Media Institute, and the Electronic Media Agency promoted the media literacy course. As a result of this joint effort, about 3,300 high school students opted for it, 60 percent of elementary schools offered it. “The course is still not mandatory, and in the absence of concrete measures and policies, it risks being marginalized,” Nikolić explained.

Panelists agreed that the problem of misinformation in Montenegro means that media literacy should be a mandatory subject, starting from elementary school. “The capacity of the general public, to critically review media contents, is very low; because this skill is pushed aside within our educational system,” Jovovic said, “Instead, students are taught to listen to, respect, and believe authorities and to not think critically about them.” In addition, he argued that surveys show that many people do not question what their media outlet of choice presents to them, and many like to read and believe media reporting that aligns with their personal views, he added.

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

The panelists were divided regarding citizens’ commitment to exercising freedom of speech and using available information. More than 200 different media outlets operate in Montenegro, but many internet platforms operate with no legal restrictions and are sources of manipulative information and political and ideological propaganda. The country offers a variety of different platforms where people can freely express their opinion and engage in debate with others, and news media have a variety of debate shows, Martinovic noted. “However,

hate speech dominates Montenegro’s media environment when people disagree with each other,” she added, “Hate speech is a major problem, and perpetrators are rarely punished. The authorities’ slow reaction to finding and holding practitioners accountable is creating a sort of apathy among citizens when it comes to reporting hate speech incidents.”

The unfettered internet community provides a broad platform for online debates, comments, and individual views, but panelists claimed that the level of media culture and productive online debate is inadequate, and it is still dominated by partisan rhetoric and fake news instead of democratic principles.

The media have a positive and productive relationship with CSOs. However, most citizens are unaware of what a media ombudsperson is or what they do. On the positive side, some of the more established media outlets—including RTCG, Vijesti, and Pobjeda--do have in-house ombudspersons on staff, offering more objectivity and

professional credibility when presenting information. According to Ruzic, Montenegrin citizens are quite passive and do not know how to have constructive dialogues, especially on social networks. Civil society groups point to abuses in different sectors of society. The government’s Media Self-Regulatory Council and the Ombudsperson Office work transparently to resolve the complaints of citizens, which appear on the media council’s web site.

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

Lack of resources prevents Montenegro’s media from improving their ability to conduct public opinion surveys, and from positioning themselves to target their audience. Limited budgets lead media outlets to search for alternatives. Panelists agreed that outlets have a tendency to use surveys by local or international NGOs including [CEDEM](#), [CGO](#), and [CDT](#). Montenegrin media has traditionally had close relationships the NGO sector, which makes it easier for media to access quantitative

“Most citizens do not have basic knowledge or skills to protect their electronic data due to various reasons including lack of money and a weak culture of digital security.”

survey projects aimed at examining public opinion or media markets. According to Markovic, “Cooperation between media, content producers, civil society organizations, and government institutions is positive, and all of the aforesaid parties then review audience feedback together.”

Only a few media outlets independently research audiences’ needs, while most rely on publicly available research, or data published by domestic or foreign NGOs. The panelists believed that Montenegro’s citizens are convinced that the majority of media outlets care mostly about the interests of political parties and political power players, as well as the interests of companies and of Montenegrins with economic power, and not so much about the interests of citizens. There is strong competition among so many media outlets and a struggle over low salaries for journalists, and it leaves content producers mainly concerned about winning over commercial advertisers, which affects outlets’ critical editorial policy and neglects the interests of the public.

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

Although a comparatively minor segment of Montenegro’s media ecosystem, community media outlets offer information on a wide range of political and social topics, and they are primarily reliant on donor and volunteer support. Community media meets the informational, cultural, and entertainment needs of the local population to a greater extent than the national media does, including organizing inclusive debates. These outlets function as small local radio or television stations or internet portals, which are also present on social networks. Unlike numerous commercial local broadcasters or local public services, which depend on private capital, advertising revenue, or municipal budget revenue, community media outlets in Montenegro are recognized for their enthusiasm and activity which is on the limit of material survival. They

“ The unfettered internet community provides a broad platform for online debates, comments, and individual views, but panelists claimed that the level of media culture and productive online debate is inadequate.

are funded by private donations and partially from commercials.

Community media in Montenegro reflect the political, cultural, educational, and health issues of the citizens, that occur in their local communities. Outlets focused on the Albanian community include TV Boin in Tuzi or TV Teuta in Ulcinj, which are dedicated to broader local topics, and provide more comprehensive information to the Albanian

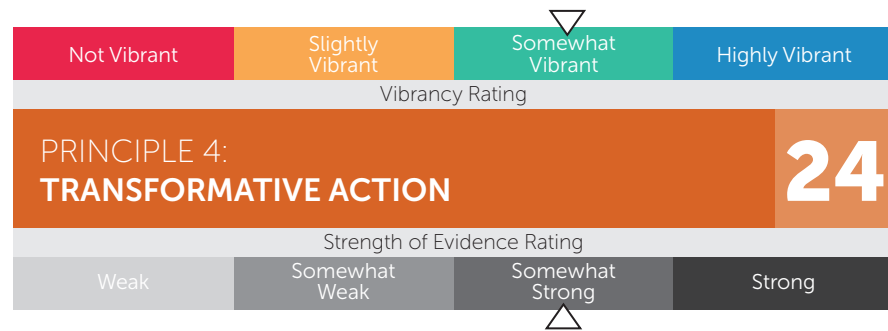
ethnic community. Another example is the only radio station in a small, northern municipality, Petnjica, which has a similar role as the Albanian outlets. Petnjica’s radio station focuses on local political and economic issues related to U.S. and Western European immigrants who live in this region. Because of its foreign population, the station survives on funding from western sources. According to Samir Rastoder, Radio Petnjica’s editor, “Montenegro’s community media are,

in a broad sense, a very neglected link on a media scene. But these outlets offer consumers real journalism. Their dedication to important local issues means they lack funding, but they fulfill their mission professionally and objectively.” Another example of community media is Radio Dux in Kotor, which focuses on the political and cultural needs of the Croatian ethnic community in the region, and mainly operates through volunteer support and donations.

Town portals also serve the same purpose as community media outlets, except they focus on broader issues surrounding municipalities’ political, cultural and sports events. Portals including [Volim Podgoricu](#), [Fokalizator](#) in Podgorica, and [PV Informer](#) in Pljevlja are supported by donations or local advertising. The nonprofit [PCNEN](#) portal includes broader national topics alongside local news and operates as a socially engaged outlet known for encouraging debates and presenting analytical blogs and issues related to media freedom. Despite its popularity, community media is limited and insufficient financial resources prevent them from spreading further in the country. The community outlets are important elements of democracy in Montenegro and, according to Marković, “give

a voice to marginalized populations and promote inclusive debates and conversations. Overall, the community media outlets in Montenegro, however limited, play a significant role in informing local populations.”

opinions based on fact-based information, those who primarily get their news and information from social networks or propagandistic media are significantly swayed by manipulated information.



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

Formally, the media sector has nonpartisan media, but media outlets are ideologically colored and politicized. This is apparent when media outlets give different interpretations of the same events. According to Markešić, “Non-partisan data sources exist, but the boundary between them and the parties is increasingly blurred, a consequence of a rise in conspiracy theories, misinformation, and unconventional interpretations of daily news events. We see this more on social networks, unregistered web portals, and in anonymous comments.”

With a two-point increase in this principle compared with the 2023 VIBE study, panelists agreed that media outlets are ideologically influenced and politicized, with some favoring the ruling parties and others the opposition parties. Outlets present opposing views but very few take a neutral or objective professional stance in news reports. Mainstream media--whether broadcast, printed or digital--claim to be independent, but their editorial policies clearly show political biases. Professional news producers along with the entire media sector are in the grip of hard political and ideological positions, which stifles the exchange of information across media channels.

The panelists agreed that the general public’s media choices are typically based on their political leanings. Montenegro is still in the grip of strong ideological and political extremes, which means open public debate

“Montenegro is still in the grip of strong ideological and political extremes, which means open public debate between conflicting points of view on TV and social networks is almost non-existent.”

However, social networks do offer a significant number of citizens a platform for debates on social and political issues, although these debates can be much more confrontational than constructive. Montenegro’s media sector is strongly influenced by foreign media, primarily from Serbia (TV Adria, TV Prva, and Portal Borba) or propaganda portals that reflect Kremlin narratives (Portal IN4S). Although it maintains an appearance of balance in reporting, even RTCG slightly favors the ruling parties. While citizens who follow mainstream or public service media tend to have

between conflicting points of view on TV and social networks is almost non-existent. “On social networks, citizens disseminate hate speech, because they do not know how to have objective debates according to democratic norms,” Ruzic noted, “Because of different political views, citizens often insult each other without basing their arguments on facts. The media is politically biased, and their reporting on political and

social events reflects that bias. When reporting, they mainly select the information they want the public to focus on and consequently invite interlocutors who agree with their editorial policy.”

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

Panelists agreed that citizens do not make good use of quality information, and many give in to manipulative information and fake news, predominantly disseminated by non-traditional media on websites, social media, or through influencers. The content on social networks often links to fake web portals, which are anonymous and not legally held accountable. In short, social media spreads more manipulative information compared to traditional media such as TV, radio, and newspapers, whose audiences are shrinking.

Many Montenegrins are unable to distinguish between accurate and false news reports, which influences overall political and social relations within society. “It is very difficult to prove what factors influence people’s behavior in terms of political attitudes and health issues,” Ruzic noted. Surveys conducted during the pandemic showed that less educated people had a tendency to believe conspiracy theories regarding healthcare issues. The NGO CEDEM’s survey “[Political Participation of Montenegrin Citizens](#),” conducted in the period from August 25 to September 15, 2023, showed that the majority of citizens are not interested in politics: Out of 1,000 respondents, 38 percent said they are not very interested, and 26 percent are not interested in politics at all.

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

NGOs and trade unions tend to use quality news and information when presenting their missions, surveys, or positions on public policies. NGOs are also actively engaged in countering manipulative information. CSOs attempt to communicate quality information to the public and base their analyses, public policy studies, and opinion polls on credible media and

factual sources. “CSOs play a big role in Montenegrin society, but so far, the media has invested only limited efforts in catching up with CSOs in raising important societal issues,” Vesovic said. Panelists concurred that civic participation is quite limited, especially regarding engagement in public consultation sessions on important draft laws. Although CSOs play a role in disseminating information, there is room for improvement

“**The current government has poor communication with the media, the public, and the NGO sector. Government agencies do not hold partner meetings with NGOs, and they have increasingly superficial contact with the media.**”

to further strengthen their role in reducing the spread of manipulative information and to boost more active civic involvement by citizens.

Communication between the media and the NGO sector is constructive and high quality. Media outlets regularly publish NGOs’ reports. As in previous years, panelists agreed that the Serbian Orthodox Church is a main source of nationalistic and political intolerance, as well as anti-Western narratives. The church is a political tool of the regime in Belgrade and a major supporter of Putin’s policies in Montenegro. The European Parliament [noted](#) this phenomenon and described the activities of the Serbian Orthodox Church as “destructive” and working in the Kremlin’s interest. “The Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro often does not refer to science and factual reports, which is especially apparent regarding public health,” Nikolić noted, “It advocates a dogmatic, unscientific approach, which can have a negative impact on people’s healthcare, which was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Church also advocates for bans on abortion, emphasizing women’s traditional reproductive roles in society, and it displays homophobic attitudes about the LGBTQ+ community.”

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

The current government has poor communication with the media, the public, and the NGO sector. Government agencies do not hold partner meetings with NGOs, and they have increasingly superficial contact

with the media. They rarely organize press conferences, thematic roundtables, or any other form of press contact. “Government actors mostly spread accusations and hate speech, and try to discredit political opponents,” Ruzic said, “On very rare occasions, politicians refer to facts from media outlets and NGOs. We’ve also witnessed frequent misogynistic attacks on women members of parliament, from various political parties, including attacks on politicians Aleksandra Vukovic Kuc and Draginja Vuksanovic Stankovic.”

The current government prefers to communicate with the public through social networks. Officials usually do not refer to quality information from civil society sources; instead, they try to adapt available information to their daily political interests. “Regardless of whether the government tells the public facts or partial truths, officials have the power to give another meaning or context to the statement and spin it,” according to Martinovic. The media have a duty to publish accurate information, and politicians usually use it to fit their parties’ needs. Often, even denials presented by some politicians are formulated in such a way that they do not deny published news stories, but instead deal with a particular media outlet’s editorial policy.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

In cases when the media or NGOs disclose or expose corruption or criminal offenses, the government tends to claim it supports the prosecution of such cases. However, if the crimes are related to the government, or might discredit it, then officials will try to obfuscate the cases and then hand them over to prosecutors. The panelists believed that quality information is used neither for the purpose of holding the government accountable nor to contribute to developing democratic norms. Political confrontations and the need to discredit political opponents in public are often more important than taking suitable anti-corruption measures and actions. “Investigative journalism does not result in societal changes unless politicians, within their political agendas, do not integrate the fight against corruption and prevent violations of civil liberties,” Ruzic noted.

Panelists pointed out that some NGOs, like MANS, constantly fight corruption, highlighting the issue within Montenegrin society. Montenegro formed a National Council for Fighting Corruption, but it has not been in place long enough to see results.

NGOs—including the Center for Democratic Transition (CDT), MANS, and the Center for Monitoring and Research (CEMI), attempt to provide quality information to prevent violations of civil liberties and to ensure free and fair elections, which is a major contribution since voters often face threats by political parties. The biggest threat to electoral processes comes from political parties, foreign political influences, and criminal groups.

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

Milan Jovanovic, senior analyst, [Debunk.org](https://debunk.org), Podgorica

Mihailo Jovovic, editor-in-chief, Vijesti, Podgorica

Dragan Markešić, CEO, Direct Media International, Podgorica

Nikola Markovic, editor-in-chief, Radio and Television of Niksic, Niksic

Jelena Martinović, journalist and editor; Pobjeda, Podgorica

Olja Nikolić, acting director, Montenegro Media Institute, Podgorica

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

Natasa Ruzic, political science professor, University of Montenegro

Neven Stanicic, journalist, Radio Tivat, Tivat

Marko Vesovic, editor-in-chief, Portal Radio and Television of Montenegro, Podgorica

Predrag Zecevic, journalist and editor, Business CGL, Podgorica

Copyright © 2024 by IREX

Notice of Rights: Permission is granted to display, copy, and distribute VIBE in whole or in part, provided that: (a) the materials are used with the acknowledgment “The Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) is a product of IREX with funding from USAID.”; (b) VIBE is used solely for personal, noncommercial, or informational use; and (c) no modifications of VIBE are made.

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