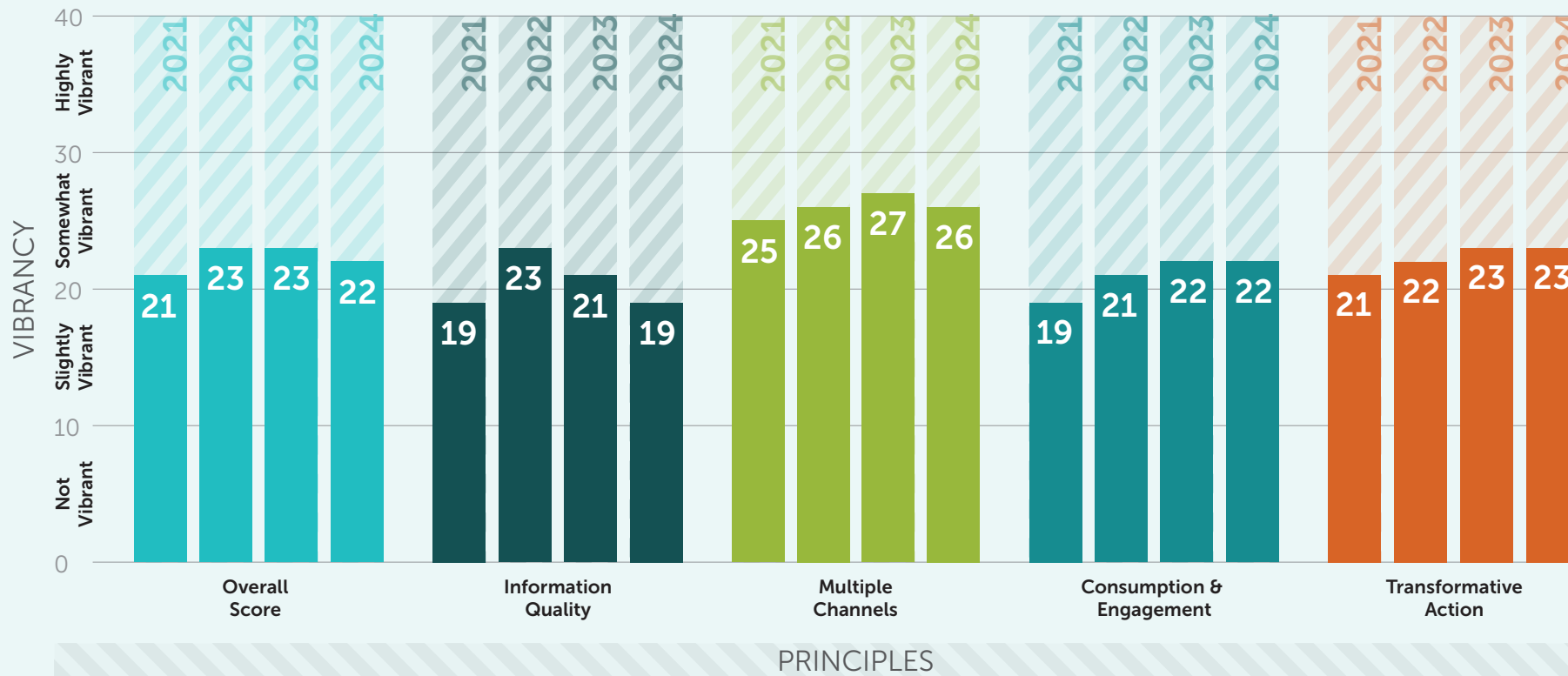


# NORTH MACEDONIA

## 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

22

After several years of anticipation, North Macedonia saw some progress in the long-awaited reforms of the media sector. In July 2023, the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (LAAMS) was amended to align it with the revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive of the European Union. There was understanding among all stakeholders that the subsequent steps should include a detailed review of the LAAMS and the Law on Media. However, a group of parliament members interrupted the process by unexpectedly submitting a bill that proposed reinstating state advertising laws. The media community strongly opposed this bill, which would essentially establish a system of indirect subsidies for the broadcasting sector. However, with parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled for 2024, continued work on the comprehensive reforms were tabled.

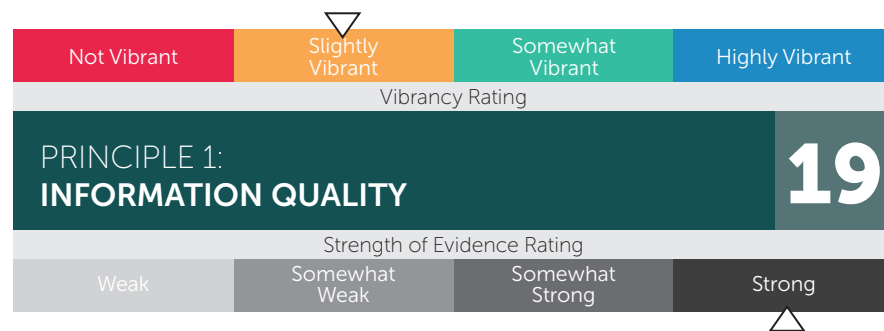
The overcrowded media market has a persistent, longtime problem of low to no sustainability. Although a number of local and regional broadcasters, including radio and TV stations, terminated their operations, the number of active outlets remains well beyond the capacity of the national economy to support. The media are also concerned with the fight against corruption; the deteriorating situation in the judiciary; relations with Bulgaria; and information manipulation campaigns, especially on the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Politically, 2023 continued the trajectory of 2022. North Macedonia still faces obstacles with its EU integration. The government has been unable to secure parliamentary consensus to incorporate the Bulgarian minority into

the constitution, which is a requirement for unblocking the EU accession process. Opposition party members continued to refuse to vote for the constitutional changes and insisted on early elections in 2024.

In 2023, rampant inflation dropped from 16.7 percent in February to 3.1 percent in November, only to increase slightly to 3.6 percent in December. Salaries continued to rise, but the increase was insufficient, and the population's purchasing power still declined in real terms. The government continued to implement crisis measures, such as controlling prices of essential goods, and imposing a solidarity tax on companies reporting earnings higher than their average annual earnings.

The overall VIBE country score of 22 is lower than the 23 recorded in 2023. Scores for Principle 1 (Information Quality) and 2 (Multiple Channels) decreased by two points and one point, respectively, while scores for Principles 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) and 4 (Transformative Action) did not change. The reasons behind the lower scores for Principles 1 and 2 are consistent with those listed in the 2023 VIBE report: low sustainability of the media market, in which media members struggle to secure the resources to pursue their activities freely; ongoing migration of audiences to online, which is characterized by lax ethical and editorial standards; and persistent polarization hindering meaningful discussion and communication. The panel also reiterated concerns about information quality and its limited effect on citizen choices and actions.



North Macedonia has quality, fact-based information available, but it is distributed unevenly across the different media platforms. Traditional mainstream media provide quality content, but nonprofessional creators on social networks produce mostly manipulative information and harmful content. The panelists agreed that the content generally is diverse and responds to the needs of all societal groups. Low sustainability, financial constraints, and a lack of proper resources explain the deteriorating quality of information and other media content. Indicator 4 (inclusive and diverse content) had the highest average score of this principle (25), while Indicator 5 (sufficient resources) received the lowest average score (13). Indicator 5's decrease from the 2023 VIBE study is attributed to ever-shrinking financial resources to invest in quality content production or acquisition.

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

Panelists agreed that North Macedonia has sufficient infrastructure to produce quality news and information. However, the prolonged shortages for properly staffed newsrooms have stunted production and lowered the quality of entertainment, educational, and cultural content. Content quality is not comparable between traditional, mainstream media and the new online media outlets; the former provide much higher quality reporting.

Panelists noted the shortfalls in journalism educational content and little practical or hands-on training in the curricula. Another issue is

that media owners are not willing to invest in training or specialization for their employees. "Journalists often find it difficult to participate in training programs because of limited human resources of their newsrooms," commented Naser Selmani, editor of Shenya TV. Panelists also observed that young people have marginal interest in the journalistic profession, which results in dwindling numbers of newly enrolled journalism students.

There are obvious differences between mainstream media and online outlets and their adherence to professional standards and ethics. The panelists said they have seen scant evidence of professional consequences for unethical or irresponsible reporting. Several panelists noted that the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia (CMEM) offers a self-regulatory system, but it is not widely accepted. Many media staff, especially from online outlets, choose to stay out of CMEM, likely believing that it curbs more partisan approaches to reporting the news.

Across the media scene, content on a wide variety of topics and subjects is available. Specialized and niche reporting and topics have largely moved online, and increasingly depend on donor funding. Local reporting is also in jeopardy, with many local TV and radio stations facing closure due to sustainability issues. Foreign-affairs coverage almost entirely depends on wire services or the translation of foreign online news sources. A small group of foreign correspondents for the public service broadcaster Macedonian Radio Television (MRT) and the state news agency, Macedonian Information Agency (MIA), covers regional countries and important European capitals.

According to some panelists, the lower quality of information is reflected in journalists being unable to hold the government accountable. Other panelists said that the media have increased public scrutiny of the government due to their work. "We have seen in a number of cases that the public pressure is there and is more efficient than in previous years," said Petrit Saracini, president and editor-in-chief of the Institute for Media Analytics.

Panelists noted that for most media, providing proper context for news and information is increasingly an afterthought. This trend is the result



of newsroom downsizing, the 24-hour news cycle, and a focus on posting stories quickly. It is especially evident at online outlets, which often publish barebones information and news.

Some journalists have established online news media dedicated to news reporting, and they enjoy far greater editorial independence than their counterparts in traditional mainstream media. Journalists in the traditional media often must account for the interests of owners or major advertisers in their news coverage. Panelists also noted the practice of “native advertising” (sponsored content) not being adequately marked as such and presented as actual news reporting.

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

When discussing fact-based reporting and information manipulation, panelists noted a valid distinction between traditional, mainstream media and the online sector, with exceptions on both sides. The situation is particularly concerning on social networks, where conspiracy theories abound, and peddlers of manipulative information satisfy the demands of various “filter bubbles.” Some panelists highlighted that many online media outlets are specifically established to spread manipulative information.

Panelists emphasized the ongoing political polarization, in which media aligned with a political party often concentrate on promoting partisan viewpoints. Traditional, mainstream media often do not have proper in-house fact-checking practices and can unintentionally spread or amplify manipulative information. These outlets are also increasingly reporting statements and posting on social media without proper verification.

Panelists noted that the government rarely uses information manipulation. They pointed to political parties as the primary culprits, via their networks of news sites and social media profiles. Journalists are vigilant, however, in holding the government accountable if it does

engage in manipulation, as shown by a case involving a claim on the total length of new roads built during the current administration’s tenure in office.

Panelists from local media noted that manipulative information is less effective at their level. “Locally, everybody knows everybody else,” according to Stevo Bašurovski, editor at TV Tera. He said that local politicians are more traditional and more aware of opinions of their local communities, so they have to be more careful with their media presence.

The panelists observed that the government sometimes selectively releases information to the public. “They thus adhere to the principle of transparency, but not to the principle of accountability,” said Iskra Koroveshovska, editor at Alfa TV.

The panelists also highlighted a case where several media outlets [disseminated](#) a social media post with manipulative information about a gruesome homicide case. According to Anita Latifi, spokesperson of the Albanian Theatre in Skopje and member of the MRT Programming Council, “It provoked a lot of hate-speech against the Albanians, and divisions into ‘our folks’ and ‘their folks’ in the social networks, and no one was held responsible for that.”

**“ The prolonged shortages for properly staffed newsrooms have stunted production and lowered the quality of entertainment, educational, and cultural content.**

Media face few formal consequences for producing and disseminating manipulative information — non-professional content producers least of all. However, most panelists agreed that those engaging in such activities already have damaged reputations.

North Macedonia has several independent fact-checking organizations that work to debunk manipulative information from domestic and foreign sources, although the reach of these organizations might be limited. Some panelists commented that fact-checkers are far more likely to cover the media that hold critical stances on the government, showing a clear ideological and political bias. Panelists also mentioned that mainstream media are not doing nearly enough to fight information manipulation.

Another problematic area is the near absence of moderation in the comments sections on media websites, and especially on their social media pages, where manipulative information and hate speech are rampant. “It is simple, really. They have an ethical obligation to moderate the comments. If you cannot moderate, then turn off the comments altogether, or you are an accomplice,” said Suzana Miceva, editor at regional broadcaster TV VIS.

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

Professional content producers rarely disseminate manipulative information or hate speech. Still, factors such as shrinking newsrooms, the pressure to publish quickly, or the need to present all sides of a story can lead to unintentional dissemination of manipulative information, especially regarding the ongoing Kremlin full-scale war in Ukraine. Several panelists highlighted that citizens cannot avoid being targeted by Government of Russia propaganda, or by foreign government efforts to influence North Macedonia’s political process for their geopolitical goals. Nevertheless, panelists called out the media that blindly circulate such propaganda. “I may understand that they want to present the views of all sides of the conflict. But to spread Russian government propaganda without any critical approach is unacceptable,” said Selmani.

According to the panelists, the government is not seen as actively creating or distributing harmful speech. “The public reaction to any attempt by political parties to use disinformation or harmful speech is increasingly quick and fierce,” said Xhelal Neziri, president of the Balkan Institute for Media and Democracy, “Everybody knows who controls which portal.”

Unprofessional information creators, especially on social networks and online media, remain a main source of information manipulation, hate speech, or “lawful but awful” content — legal but offensive, insensitive, or provocative speech. Several panelists pointed out that certain websites, especially those with political alignments, might coordinate to publish identical material in quick succession to ensure greater coverage.

The panelists remain dissatisfied with the responses to the use of “lawful but awful” speech. They have seen limited professional or legal consequences beyond the perceived loss of credibility or popularity. Judicial authorities tend to refrain from prosecuting alleged hate speech incidents, due to their relation to freedom of expression, and overly broad legislation on the definition of hate speech.

The only consequence for journalists and professional content producers is their peers’ condemnation through CMEM. However, panelists also deem CMEM insufficient, as its sanctions are only moral, the system is voluntary, and it does not apply to a significant number of online media. Panelists said that in the highly polarized media landscape where confirmation biases and “bubbles” prevail, many players and non-professional content creators in particular are unconcerned with losing credibility or audiences.

Similarly, elected or appointed ministers enjoy full protection from their respective political parties, and do not fear any public pressure demanding resignation. Government officials very rarely apologize for offensive statements or inappropriate language.

Mainstream media, news websites, and social media forums all have poor content moderation. They continue to have issues with investing in necessary content management personnel.

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

Audiences in North Macedonia have access to information in preferred languages and formats. Macedonians and Albanians, the two largest linguistic groups, have sufficient access. Most traditional media specifically produced in the languages of smaller communities have succumbed to the unsustainable market. These smaller communities can access numerous TV channels in their respective languages via cable and internet protocol television (IPTV) networks. Nearly all the news and information programs in their languages are produced by MRT, which remains unique in Europe for broadcasting in nine languages.

Media offer information that reflects the views of people from various ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds. However, panelists pointed out the lack of gender representation and said that media give unnecessary prominence to anti-gender movements and their spokespersons. The panelists emphasized the need for media to show greater sensitivity on gender issues, especially in language usage across news and information content.

Panelists also noted the scarcity of newsrooms that employ journalists of different ethnicities. “It results in exclusive ethnic perspectives, which is reflected in the content and information they offer,” said Saracini.

Vulnerable and marginalized groups, especially persons with disabilities, tend to garner media interest only on designated international days that mark their movement for equality. “They are there to discuss their specific problems and the issues they face. They are commonly presented as victims, as if they do not or should not have opinions on other political or social issues,” pointed out Zaklina Cvetkovska, journalist at Kumanovonews.com. Still, marginalized groups leverage opportunities via new technologies and the internet to secure spaces for presenting viewpoints and sharing news and information on their respective communities.

According to the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Services’ 2022 [annual report](#) on the labor force in the broadcasting sector, women still constitute the majority of journalistic staff in broadcast and print media. However, women remain significantly underrepresented in ownership, management, and senior editorial positions. “Among the national terrestrial TV broadcasters, only one woman holds the position of editor-in-chief (and general manager),” Koroveshovska noted. No data is available on gender balance in the online media labor force or among non-professional creators of information and other content, but similar trends could be anticipated.

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

In the North Macedonia unsustainable media landscape, the main challenge for new and traditional media outlets is securing sufficient resources for operations and producing quality content.

Advertising revenue remains the primary source of income for media organizations. Unofficial estimates from advertising industry insiders indicate that total advertisement spending is an estimated \$40 million, and approximately one-third goes to media buying abroad, mainly to promote North Macedonian products in those markets. In digital advertising, industry insiders estimate that 60 percent of advertising budgets goes to big tech companies. Approximately 40 TV stations, 60 radio stations (national, regional, local), four dailies, around a dozen other periodical publications, and hundreds of news sites compete for the remainder.

**“Unprofessional information creators, especially on social networks and online media, remain a main source of information manipulation, hate speech, or “lawful but awful” content — legal but offensive, insensitive, or provocative speech.**

Local media finances are especially precarious. Local advertising is limited and not nearly sufficient to sustain operations. Classified ads at the local level have long since moved online, and even small local businesses increasingly opt for cheaper and more effective digital advertising, commonly on social networks.

Panelists noted that advertisers often consider political factors when allocating their advertising budgets. “This is especially the case with companies that work closely with the government and receive most public tenders. They have to be careful where they advertise their products or services, for fear of losing the favorable position,” Neziri said.

Print media can receive direct state subsidies and some forms of indirect subsidies. Panelists noted that subsidies are distributed fairly, to benefit all remaining print media in the country. However, panelists expressed concern about the allocation of public subsidies for political advertising during election campaigns, since under country laws political parties

cannot use their own funds for this during elections. Political parties tend to funnel those subsidies to media they favor or control, leading to complaints by many media outlets, especially online, of not getting their “fair share” of political advertising revenue.

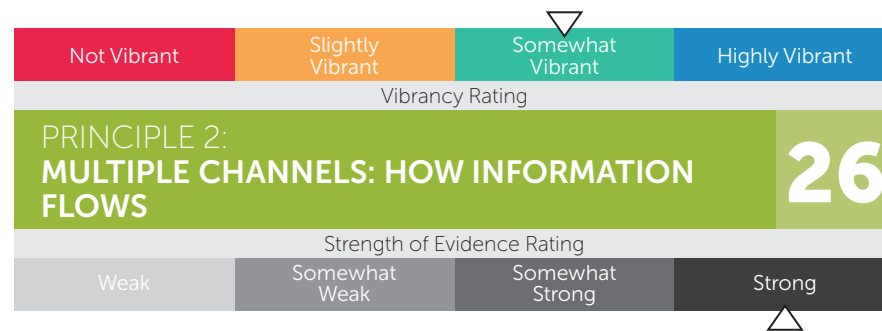
Although the law prohibits the government, state and public bodies, and enterprises from buying advertising space, investigations [revealed](#) various methods used to circumvent this ban, especially by local administrations, to fund local media. A recent legislative proposal, prepared by the five national terrestrial TV broadcasters, proposed to lift the ban on state advertising. Panelists perceived the bill, aiming to regulate the financing of public interest promotional campaigns, as an effort to introduce a system of indirect subsidies for broadcast media.

While panelists generally support some form of public funding, they insist that it should benefit producers, journalists, and media professionals, rather than enrich media owners. “The problem lies in the allocation decisions of those funds, made by a political body, which could allow political control. It would be more adequate if an expert body decided on the allocation,” Saracini argued.

To reduce reliance on advertising revenue, many journalists — investigative reporters in particular — have registered media outlets as non-governmental organizations. This format allows them eligibility for funding from international donors operating in North Macedonia.

While several attempts to implement paywalls in online media have failed, several online media actively seek contributions from their readers, the effect of which should be seen in the coming months.

A large majority of professional journalists earn salaries below the national average. Journalists at national TV broadcasters are in the best situation; staff at smaller, local, and especially online media earn considerably less. Many journalists in these media outlets are also tasked with seeking potential advertisers to supplement their income, earning a percentage of advertising revenue they generate.



Freedom of information is in good shape in North Macedonia, with citizens free to create, share, and consume information over a variety of available channels without fear or outright reprisals. Panelists deemed access to information rights satisfactory; however, the panel emphasized the need to enhance public awareness on the exercise of these rights. Journalists, in particular, should be able to leverage these rights more in their work, panelists held.

While media ownership is transparent, panelists highlighted the need to reset the overcrowded broadcasting market with new license allocation policies. The panelists agreed that the situation has improved at MRT, but they recommended augmenting its wide variety of content by ensuring access to the latest informational, entertainment, cultural, and educational productions.

As in last year’s VIBE study, Indicator 7, which examines access to information channels, scored the highest (32) among the Principle 2 indicators. The indicator assessing the independence of information channels received the lowest score (16) of the principle, marking a two-point decrease compared to last year’s study. The panel concluded that only a few media outlets in North Macedonia can be considered truly independent.



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

The constitution guarantees the freedom of expression in North Macedonia, with limitations allowed by relevant international conventions. There is adequate legislation in place that regulates limitations on such issues as hate speech, civil defamation, national security, and public health concerns. In line with global trends, North Macedonian society is growing its voice and demanding much broader definitions of what should be considered illegal speech. Citizens are constantly calling for prosecutors to take action against forms of “lawful but awful” speech. According to the panelists, the most common complaint is that existing laws, especially those regulating and prosecuting hate speech, are not fully or consistently enforced. Panelists also noted that authorities apply double standards, prioritizing cases of hateful or offensive speech against major political figures while neglecting to address similar expressions against journalists and other citizens.

The government has not been involved in open efforts to silence or censor the media. Panelists noted that such efforts are not deemed necessary because self-censorship is already prevalent among journalists, primarily driven by economics. The panel did have some dissenting voices on this topic. According to Koroveshovska, editor at Alfa TV, a national broadcaster critical of the government, “The treatment that Alfa TV gets from the government, following the public statement of the ruling party’s former president that their officials and representatives will never appear on our programs, is shameful and constitutes censorship.”

There are no recorded efforts of government pressuring or asking ICT providers to censor media.

Srebra Gjorgjijevska, editor and journalist at Umno.mk, described the environment within media houses that breeds self-censorship.

“Journalists are not protected by their media [organizations]. Most journalist self-censor, asking themselves – why they should expose their neck? Their salary is dismal, they are not protected. To be fully professional, adequate working conditions and protection are essential,” she said.

There were no recorded cases of the government pressuring information and communication technology (ICT) service providers to censor media or any type of content. After the full-scale invasion in Ukraine, North Macedonia joined the decision of the European Union to ban broadcast of Russian government-controlled media, such as Russia Today.

Physical attacks on journalists have been on the decline for several years, with the [registry](#) of the Association of Journalists of Macedonia listing five cases of physical and verbal assault in 2023. Still, verbal attacks on social media remain common, especially against female journalists.

Panelists argued that authorities do not do enough to find and sanction the perpetrators. To further discourage violence, changes to the Criminal Code in 2023 classified attacks on journalists as attacks on officials performing professional duties. Also, the Office of Public Prosecutor appointed a special prosecutor to handle all assaults on journalists.

Defamation was decriminalized in 2012, and over the past several years, the number of active defamation action cases against journalists has been low. However, panelists pointed out a concerning aspect of a Civil Court [ruling](#) in favor of a former government official and against the Investigative Journalism Lab, a media outlet registered as an NGO. “The Court ruled in favor of former Deputy Prime Minister Angjušev, and also imposed an injunction of further distribution of the story. Their justification, claiming that online portals are not media outlets, and their journalists are not real journalists, is totally unacceptable,” said Selmani.

The right to confidentiality and protection of sources is regulated by the Law on Media, and no journalists are facing court orders to reveal or

**“ Verbal attacks on social media remain common, especially against female journalists. Panelists argued that authorities do not do enough to find and sanction the perpetrators.**

name their sources. However, panelists noted anecdotal evidence that representatives of state institutions and political figures ask journalists to name their sources when reporting on controversial issues.

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

Panelists agreed that North Macedonia has a robust ICT infrastructure. As of [February 2023](#), internet penetration stood at 87.2 percent, a two percent increase from the previous year. With [1.92 million](#) active mobile phone subscriptions, representing 104.94 percent of the population, mobile phones serve as the main access point for internet and media.

The increase in online news consumption, compared to TV as primary source of news, has shown a slight slowdown. In 2023, 38 percent of the population listed the internet as main source of political news, as compared to the peak of 47 percent in March 2021. Television remained the primary source for 73 percent of the population, according to a 2023 [survey](#) by the International Republican Institute's (IRI) national office.

The rural/urban division in technology accessibility is diminishing. However, new issues could emerge, such as reduced distribution of print media outside major urban centers in tandem with declining circulation figures. Moreover, rural depopulation, driven by migration to cities or abroad in pursuit of higher living standards, may render these concerns moot.

The panelists highlighted consumers' financial constraints affecting access to media. "The purchasing power of the population differs greatly between different regions, so I think there are lots of places that remain untouched by social media, or even television broadcasts," said Gjorgjijevska.

Persons with disabilities often face problems with accessing news and information, especially online. Very few websites in North Macedonia have been adapted with assistive technology for persons with impaired vision. MRT leads the way with providing sign language interpretation for people with impaired hearing, but panelists noted that MRT has

room for improvement. No other broadcaster uses technical assistance instruments in programs outside newscasts. According to Latifi, "The First Programming Service in Macedonian offers much better sign language interpretation. The other language channels [of the public service broadcaster] do not provide this for their news programs."

Amendments to the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services aim to align with the European Union's new Audiovisual Media Services Directive and will introduce new accessibility obligations. However, leading broadcasters oppose the measures, due to limited capacities to invest in such technology.

Given the prevalence of mobile telephony, citizens are used to alternating between various channels of information. This availability mitigates concerns over service disruptions on any single platform.

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

North Macedonia has strong freedom-of-information (FOI) legislation, fully in line with international standards. However, panelists observed that citizens rarely exercise their FOI rights, typically doing so only when directly affected by a personal matter. Data is not available regarding citizen awareness of rights under the FOI legislation. On the other hand, consumers show no indications that they fear seeking information from the government or other information holders. According to the panelists, and the latest information available on the [website](#) of the Agency for Free Access to Information (from 2022), the most common complaint refers to the practice of information holders violating the legally prescribed 20-day deadline to provide the material sought.

Despite an initial period of showcasing robust transparency several years ago, the government seems to be increasingly closed. Panelists noted that online instruments established during the earlier transparent period are not regularly updated with new data and information.

NGOs continue to lead in terms of filed requests for access to information, especially those working on corruption-related issues,

such as monitoring public procurement procedures. Similarly, the government's Unique National Electronic Register of Regulations, an online instrument for gathering feedback on new legislation, is mostly used by civil society organizations (CSOs) and other stakeholders, with no official data or breakdown of users by category (citizens, CSOs, businesses, business associations, etc.).

Journalists, on the other hand, rarely exercise their FOI rights, with investigative journalists from a few active operations being the primary users. Journalists still prefer to seek information from institutions through spokespersons, a practice that does not qualify as a FOI request.

Panelists noted that spokespersons of various institutions are increasingly remaining behind the scenes. For instance, government ministers tend to answer all questions directly from journalists — a trend that journalists might actually prefer. Journalists tend to have trust and confidence in spokespersons, particularly considering that former journalists fill the majority of spokesperson positions, both in government and public institutions.

Some panelists expressed a more critical perspective. “The spokespersons have been transformed into MC’s and moderators for government press-conferences,” Neziri argued. In the highly polarized society, the perception of spokespersons, and the trust placed in their truthfulness, mostly depend on individual political affiliations. This is exemplified by the routine exchange of accusations of lying and misleading the public among spokespersons of the main political parties.

Panelists from local media reported a different experience. “Most local institutions do not even have a spokesperson, and we have to go to the civil servants working in those institutions,” said Cvetkovska, “Usually, they direct us straight to the mayor’s office, who seems the only person in the administration that speaks to the press.”

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

People are free to establish media without any licensing requirements, except in broadcasting. The Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services has clear rules on media ownership concentration. However, many media experts and practitioners deem these rules too strict. According to the panelists, they are obstacles to the further development and much-needed consolidation of the broadcasting market, and they discourage market entry or any significant interest from major international media companies. Past enforcement of these restrictions has been deemed fair and impartial.

“Although requirements for ownership transparency are in place, broadcasters easily circumvent them by using “proxy” owners — a loophole that remains open for online media.

Although requirements for ownership transparency are in place, broadcasters easily circumvent them by using “proxy” owners — a loophole that remains open for online media. In fact, the poor transparency of online media ownership is a primary driver behind growing requests for regulation. Media stakeholders call

for standards at least to be those applicable to print media, which are obligated to disclose their ownership structures under the media law.

Panelists pointed out issues with distribution of the broadcasting spectrum and permits to broadcast programs. Recently, the regulatory body for permit allocation lost a case filed by an applicant for a national terrestrial license, on charges of irregular practices.

Panelists agreed that the whole system of broadcasting licenses needs a detailed review and that authorities should introduce more restrictive policies and practices.

“The very fact that we have so many media in such a small market points out that [previous] decisions on allocation of licenses were politically motivated. Give [one person] a license, and when [they are] disobedient, give more licenses to loyal people. Then, it turned out that all tycoons have to have a TV station. If those decisions were made solely on basis [market capacity], we would have a completely different scene today,” commented Naser Selmani.

In line with its remit to inform, educate, and entertain, MRT provides a wide variety of content in nine languages. Panelists noted significant improvements in MRT's operations since the removal of the previous authoritarian government that used it as a mouthpiece. In its news and information programs, MRT makes an extra effort to adhere to its legal obligation to be neutral and non-partisan, according to the panelists. Still, accusations of bias often emerge from both the government and the opposition.

Cable and IPTV distribution sectors are dominated by three major telecommunication companies, with a number of smaller players also active in the market. Print media distribution is increasingly an afterthought, with shrinking circulation figures leading to their sale through a few independent newsstands.

Internet service providers operate fully in line with the principles of "net neutrality."

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

Panelists questioned the existence of truly independent media in North Macedonia and noted that editorial decisions in the newsrooms are heavily influenced by ownership<sup>1</sup> and major advertisers. Panelists agreed that all newsrooms think at least twice about reporting on major advertisers, such as big telecommunications companies. As consistently highlighted in previous VIBE studies, and predecessor Media Sustainability Index reports, owners do not establish media organizations to inform the public or generate revenue. They use them as bargaining chips when negotiating lucrative public contracts or as tools in their fight with competitors. "Owners today do not love their media outlets the way some owners did in the past. They just need them as money laundering vehicles," Koroveshovska commented.

To avoid influence from ownership structures or advertisers, a number of journalists have opted to establish NGOs as investigative journalism operations. These journalists perceive their NGOs as an approximation

<sup>1</sup> Most commercial media in the country are privately owned, usually as family businesses, with a single national broadcaster registered as a shareholder company.

of full independence, but some panelists noted that they have led to a different type of dependence and influence. "Those media are now under the influence of the donors. They accept their language, their preferred subjects, and even their [positions on certain issues], [distancing themselves] from the actual needs and issues faced by the population," observed Bojan Šaševski, editor of Radio MOF, an online community media outlet dedicated to youth culture and youth.

The shrinking newsrooms and the proliferation of small online media outlets have contributed to blurred lines between management and editorial staff. Journalists with online media and small local broadcasters are also tasked with administrative duties, soliciting advertisers, cleaning, and any other tasks deemed necessary. Even at the biggest national broadcasters, sometimes the same person holds the position of general manager and editor-in-chief. Panelists recounted a case when the general manager of a national terrestrial broadcaster overstepped by interrupting a live political talk show to criticize a guest's comments about the TV station.

MRT has made strides in reducing political interference in its editorial policies. However, appointing a new Programming Council, the MRT steering body, has been stalled in parliament since 2019 due to political disagreement.

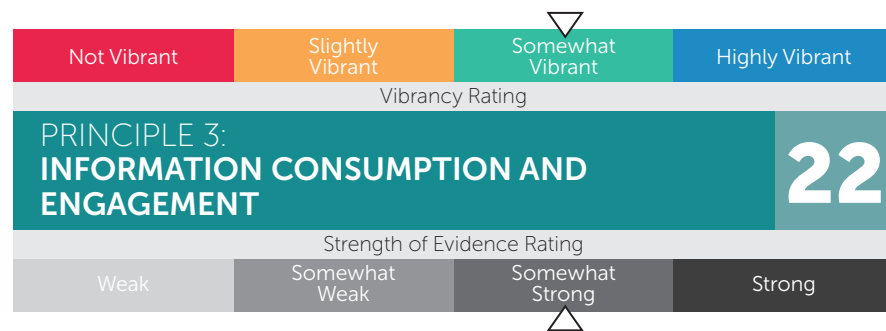
MRT continues to suffer from underfinancing, as the government has yet to allocate the full amount from the state budget as prescribed by law. On the other hand, MRT secured grants from the government and foreign donors to overhaul and modernize its studios and technical equipment. "MRT has many problems, and the quality of content it offers is less than satisfactory. But in fairness, I refuse to criticize their failing until they receive proper funding," commented Selmani.

Aside from financial pressures, media face no barriers on importing necessary equipment or procuring services from news agencies, domestic or international. The panelists agreed that public media are not given favorable treatment regarding access to statistics or to government sources.

The broadcast regulatory body faces problems similar to the MRT



Programming Council around appointing new members, with constant accusations that its actions are politically motivated and reflect council members’ political preferences.



Digital and media literacy levels remain low among the North Macedonia population. However, efforts supported by foreign donors are underway to address this issue by integrating media literacy into official curricula at all levels of education. The panel acknowledged the persistent poor quality of public debate in the country, with institutions failing to effectively combat information manipulation or hate speech on all platforms. The panelists also highlighted that media have made inadequate efforts to identify and meet the needs of their audiences. Panel members also noted the pressing need to restore mutual trust between media outlets and their audiences. Community media remain largely unknown and misunderstood, and panelists emphasized the necessity of sufficient state support to ensure their survival.

Indicators 11 (privacy protections and digital security tools) and 15 (community media) received the highest average score (24), while Indicator 14 (media’s engagement with their audience’s needs) scored the lowest with an average of 18, within this principle.

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

North Macedonia has harmonized its legislation on data protection and digital safety with the EU’s General Data Protection Regulation, and

authorities adequately apply the legislation. However, panelists reported instances where government officials and political figures attempted to avoid media scrutiny by invoking their privacy rights. In 2023, no cases were recorded of legal protections for privacy used to impinge on personal freedoms.

Some entities, such as the Personal Data Protection Agency, and CSOs working in this field, organize training sessions on digital security. Over the past several years, The Association of Journalists of Macedonia has offered training sessions on internet safety for journalists.

Due to financial constraints, only a few media outlets can afford in-house IT departments and online security specialists or adopt serious security measures. Some panelists criticized the generally lax approach to digital safety in the media. “We in the media like to lecture the people and ‘share our wisdom,’ including on this matter. But in reality, we ourselves rarely implement what we preach,” commented Šaševski.

Media organizations usually depend on available online antivirus and anti-malware tools, as well as external services for their protection. “The common practice is to delegate all such matters to the hosting company to take action when their websites are under threat”, Gjorgjijevska noted.

Similarly, citizens mostly rely on the default protection installed by the device vendor upon purchase. Panelists agree that citizens generally do not seem to be too concerned about such issues until they face actual problems with computer viruses or malware. The panel also highlighted a ransomware attack on the national Health Insurance Fund in February 2023, in which hackers compromised the personal data of all citizens with health insurance and demanded payment.

According to the “State of Play: Digitalization and Digital Skills of Citizens and Businesses” [report](#) by the Macedonia2025 think tank, citizens have relatively low digital skills, below the EU average. Panelists noted a significant gap between older and younger generations, with the latter developing much more skill having grown up in the digital age.

No evidence is available to assess the population’s knowledge of

social media algorithms and targeted advertising. However, some panelists pointed to the high number of Facebook users<sup>2</sup> and said that this indicates at least a basic understanding. “It is impossible not to notice that if you google the Maldives, for example, you will suddenly receive heaps of ads offering you vacation packages for the Maldives,” Bašurovski commented.

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

State education authorities have focused on media literacy for several years. Thanks to a major project funded by USAID and implemented by a consortium of CSOs led by IREX, media literacy integration to curricula at all levels of education is rather advanced.

The process of training teachers on how to implement the media literacy curricula is also underway. Some panelists suggested offering media literacy as a discrete subject in the curricula, rather than integrating it with tangential subjects such as civic education or language and literature.

**Due to financial constraints, only a few media outlets can afford in-house IT departments and online security specialists or adopt serious security measures.**

Additionally, a number of CSOs provide media literacy training, focusing mostly on elementary and high-school students. Some organizations hold training programs specifically designed for the older population, perceived as most vulnerable in this regard, although these programs are less common.

North Macedonia has several fact-checking organizations, although some panelists said that their reach seems limited, used primarily by journalists and academic researchers. One panelist provided specifics on the Institute for Media Analytics, a fact-checking and debunking organization. Editor-in-chief Saracini noted that its weekly debunking program, produced in cooperation with a national broadcaster, attracts significant numbers of viewers. “On average, we get between 60,000 and 70,000 viewers per episode, which is not insignificant in a country

with such a small population,” he said. He expressed the belief that mainstream media should increase fact-checking efforts, in terms of pre-publication verification as well as debunking false stories and countering information manipulation.

No data is available to provide a clear picture of citizen discernment of high- and low-quality news and information. However, panelists voiced concerns about this issue, highlighting the growing number of people prone to believing various conspiracy theories, as well as the general decline of trust in the media, according to IRI’s national poll.

For consecutive years, the European survey conducted by the Bulgarian Open Society Institute consistently ranked North Macedonia last in Europe for its population’s media literacy levels. Some panelists,

however, offered dissenting opinions. They cited similar national surveys conducted by the broadcast regulator, and those results show much higher levels of media literacy. “We are not as media illiterate as generally believed, but we can act illiterate if it suits us,” commented Bašurovski, with others agreeing.

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

After a decade of serious pressure on freedom of speech, North Macedonia has experienced significant improvement since the removal of the authoritarian government led by the conservative VMRO-DPMNE party. Panelists agreed that journalists, civil society activists, and citizens in general now enjoy the freedom to exercise their constitutional rights to freedom of speech and access to information. However, North Macedonia has not been immune to global trends of attempts to limit or attack freedom of speech on ideological or political grounds. Political party members frequently make accusations of information manipulation or hate speech against their opponents. Similarly, the concept of political correctness has led civil activists to accusations of hate speech even if the questionable statements constitute legal speech.

<sup>2</sup> North Macedonia has [1.4 million Facebook users](#) and a population of 1.837 million.

Panelists agreed that critical public statements can carry consequences. “For citizens, they will have [difficulties in obtaining services from institutions]; for companies, there will be inspections and sanctions [imposed by] authorities; and for the media, it [could result in] isolation from the sources of advertising income,” Neziri warned.

According to various opinion polls, most people engage with objective information on a daily basis, often provided by traditional media. “They may read something on the internet, but they wait for the TV news to check it out,” said Koroveshovska. Panelists emphasized the importance for many consumers to consult multiple news sources across political divides to get an objective picture of daily events and form their own conclusions.

While media offer many platforms for public debate, multiple panelists highlighted their poor quality. Municipal administrations organize occasional town hall meetings, and all major TV stations have call-in programs. However, these programs face criticism due to the level of vitriol and outright hatred expressed by callers, venting their frustrations. Hosts seem to be vigilant to caution callers against hate speech. On the other hand, some political talk shows seem to encourage conflicts between guest pundits or endeavor to present all sides of an issue.

The panelists said discourse is especially dire on social networks, where much of the public debate has moved in recent years. Panelists have observed that in any public debate forum, most people prefer to present their viewpoint only, without considering opposing arguments. Online debates, particularly on social networks, are often littered with manipulative information, insults, and inflammatory speech, often verging on hate speech.

Panelists expressed dissatisfaction with authorities’ infrequent action against “lawful but awful” speech. While some commended the Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination for

reporting and sanctioning discriminatory and offensive speech, they criticized the failures of prosecution authorities.

According to the panelists, citizens are inclined to exhibit their best behavior in formal, organized debates. However, people tend to label statements with which one disagrees as hate speech or manipulative information, and such instances are common in all public debate forums.

**After a decade of serious pressure on freedom of speech, North Macedonia has experienced significant improvement since the removal of the authoritarian government led by the conservative VMRO-DPMNE party.**

No data is available to indicate the extent to which citizens report manipulative information, hate speech, etc. to competent authorities and institutions. The general impression, including among the panelists, is that CSOs and activists working to protect vulnerable communities do report such instances, although in many cases such reports refer to expressions that may be offensive or provocative but remain

below the threshold of criminal hate speech. CSOs also organize topical public debates and panel discussions, which tend to be more civilized.

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

Only the biggest and wealthiest traditional media outlets conduct audience surveys to gather data on audience interests and needs. Smaller media, especially internet-native news sites, try to communicate with their audiences directly for the same purpose, usually through their social media profiles and pages. Panelists were unable to assess the structure and organization of these communications, or to what extent they influence the outlets’ practices.

Television broadcasters have access to audience measurement data. However, the Joint Industry Committee, composed of representatives from broadcasters, advertisers, and advertising agencies, only measures TV ratings for MRT and the five national commercial terrestrial broadcasters. The measurement is conducted by Nielsen using people-meters, but the covered broadcasters often contest the ratings produced.

According to the panelists, especially those working in broadcasting, the current system needs an overhaul.

Print media closely guard their circulation figures, although they are legally obligated to publish them. Online media rely primarily on Google Analytics, but media outlets have repeatedly attempted to create a separate system of audience measurement. Whether the ratings, circulation, and online user data have any impact on editorial decisions remains to be seen. “We do look at our Google Analytics figures, but, as mission-oriented community media, we do not really care what they say,” Šaševski said, “We would rather continue doing what we do for ten readers than do something to reach larger audiences.”

Although media outlets claim to make every effort to increase confidence among their audiences, trust in the media remains the lowest in years. IRI’s national [survey](#) from May 2023 shows that 48 percent of respondents do not trust the media, while 51 percent do. One percent is either unsure or declining to answer. Smaller online media outlets, especially those operating as NGOs, or as part of NGOs with specific objectives, offer additional activities to increase mutual trust with their audiences. These events include conferences, debates, and festivals.

Except for unmoderated discussions on their social network pages and profiles, media outlets rarely have processes to collect feedback from their audiences, such as letters to the editor. Citizens occasionally use call-in programs to praise or complain about the content of broadcast media.

“The [decline in] confidence and trust results from the general situation: financial constraints faced by the media, the mutually dependent interactions between the management and editorial staff with politics, etc. The general public recognizes that situation, which [explains] why trust is so low,” Saracini noted.

Media outlets, CSOs, and government institutions primarily view each other as competitors or adversaries. While cooperation is possible, especially when mutually beneficial, panelists expressed skepticism and suspicion about the intention of involved parties.

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

A number of de facto community media outlets operate in North Macedonia, although only four non-profit radios hold this particular legal status. They include three student radio stations (in Skopje, Štip, and Bitola) and a Catholic radio station in Strumica.

The online sector fares better with regard to this indicator. Numerous websites operate under the auspices of larger NGOs and associations, essentially serving as community media for their constituencies. Topical websites include environmental, LGBTQ+ rights, youth organizations, and associations of persons with impaired vision. Still, these outlets largely remain unrecognized as community media. Šaševski, editor at Radio MOF, the youth-oriented station voted the best community outlet, even said he is uncertain about this indicator.

As described earlier, North Macedonia has several journalist-led news media registered as NGOs, which operate on non-profit principles if not completely as community media. Additionally, local journalists, CSOs, and experts often perceive local commercial outlets as community media. That viewpoint is due to these outlets serving the smaller population groups often neglected by major national media outlets, which have long terminated their networks of local correspondents in smaller communities.

New community media focused on local reporting are emerging. They include LokalAktiv, a website that covers the eastern region of the country for now. A version for the central region is also under preparation.

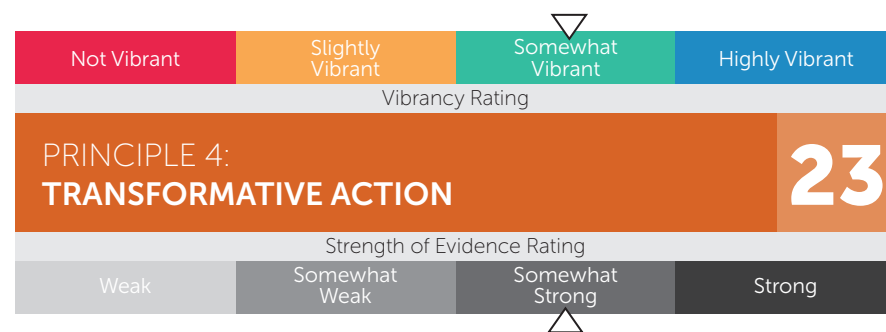
Community media fill an important gap in providing media services and addressing the needs of marginalized communities ignored by mainstream traditional media. As such, community media enjoy higher degrees of mutual trust with their communities and audiences. Radio MOF, for instance, benefits from the willingness of young people to volunteer their time and effort to support its operations.



Community media, whether or not they are formally recognized as such, are prominent for their commitment to avoiding information manipulation and harmful speech. These practices are largely attributed to the affiliations with larger organizations dedicated to protecting the rights of vulnerable groups.

Panelists noted that community media rely exclusively on international donor organizations, lacking an internal support system. This dependence makes them susceptible to donors' frequent changes of focus and interests. "Why is it that only foreigners support such projects? It is really a shame that the state [is not doing anything] to help community media," said Koroveshovska.

A [policy paper](#) prepared by the RESIS Institute makes a special note of the need to integrate online community media with the national legislative and policy network. The paper calls for diversified funding and support sources for community media, particularly in the areas of broadcasting and online platforms.



Information producers and distribution channels enable information sharing across ideological lines in North Macedonia, but representatives of different sides often squander this opportunity. They merely use it to present their viewpoints, refusing to accept or even listen to opposing perspectives. While quality information has little effect on the actions of individuals, the panelists noted that it plays a pivotal role in shaping the actions of CSOs to improve their communities and constituencies. The panel agreed that the government predominantly operates on political motives rather than relying on quality information as the foundation for

its decisions and actions. Panelists also acknowledged the importance of information in upholding good governance and democratic rights. They emphasized, however, that the government's response to violations of these rights should extend beyond mere verbal assurances and mandate addressing them with concrete actions.

Indicator 18, which assesses civil society's use of quality information, received the highest score (27) within Principle 4, a two-point decrease compared to 2023. Indicator 20, on good governance and democratic rights, received the lowest average score (19) of this principle, which marks a four-point decrease from the 2023 study.

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

North Macedonia has non-partisan sources of news and information. However, the high polarization levels of society along political lines reinforce the effects of various confirmation biases and filter bubbles. Given this civic environment, the panelists questioned the reach and influence of non-partisan news and information. Political parties have long recognized this situation as advantageous and have created networks of news sites that act as parallel information ecosystems.

Panelists reiterated the opinion that, for many citizens, consuming news and information from multiple media outlets across the ideological spectrum is the best way to assess situations and form judgments. This approach involves consuming reporting from left-leaning, centrist, and right-leaning sources.

Overall, citizens seem to be eager to engage in information and opinion exchanges across ideological lines. However, the panelists noted that the pervasive polarization turns discussions confrontational, with a preference for presenting one's own perspective rather than genuinely listening to opposing arguments. This is particularly evident on social networks, where often "bots" engage in prolonged conflicts, representing different sides of the political divide. "The polarization of society prevents any constructive debate based on facts and arguments.

People rarely give up their versions of the ‘truth,’ even when presented with facts that indicate a different ‘truth,’” Neziri observed.

Leading newspapers have also tended to consolidate their opinion pages toward a preferred political position.

The situation is similar in broadcast media, especially in political talk shows, which serve as the main platform for exchanges across ideological lines. Panelists complained that all broadcasters tend to feature a similar roster of a dozen or so pundits discussing current issues. As Gjorgjijevska noted, the repetition leads to audience fatigue.

Panelists emphasized the role of editors in improving their selection of guests provided with a public platform. “It is our responsibility as editors and journalists to select and invite people who [have genuine expertise], who are eloquent, and do not necessarily come from the shelters of political parties,” said Koroveshovska.

Panelists were unsure how extensively participants in public debates rely on facts or quality information. As they noted, people form opinions and viewpoints based on various factors beyond a rational approach. According to Saracini, “The views and perspectives of the public are mainly influenced by political, ideological, ethnic, and religious beliefs and convictions, not by fact-based information.”

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

Panelists said that quality information does not often shape the public’s views or opinions on social or political issues. However, panelists remained uncertain about the role of information manipulation in forming viewpoints. No data is available to support assertions that citizens base their interactions with elected officials on quality information or information manipulation.

The same dearth of proof applies to elections. When someone dislikes the outcome of an election, the tendency is to conclude that voters did not make rational decisions based on established facts but were influenced by information manipulation. However, no empirical

data supports this belief. Apart from members of political parties and their staunch supporters, voters tend to cast their ballots as a form of “punishment” or as a vote “against” rather than a vote “for” a political party or candidate. This system leaves the government especially sensitive to media coverage of its policies and actions and makes all participants in the political process very sensitive. These politicians are prone to hastily labeling unfavorable publicity as information manipulation or “fake news.”

In recent years, North Macedonia has witnessed the resurgence of several contagious diseases previously considered eradicated, with small-scale epidemics of measles, whooping cough, and other diseases. The country’s vaccination rates lag behind European averages, which, according to panelists, shows that much of the population is susceptible to the anti-vaccine movement’s propaganda, and ignores expert advice and opinions of medical professionals.

Furthermore, panelists highlighted a reported increase in consumption of various alternative over-the-counter treatments primarily sold online. Often, such online sales of alternative treatments feature false endorsements by prominent doctors and other medical professionals.

The panelists did not identify cases in which citizens acted against the public good due to information manipulation. However, they did suggest that foreign propaganda against the country’s European integration efforts could be influencing a growing sense of Euroskepticism among the population.

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

The general perception of CSOs in North Macedonia is that they rely on quality information to present their mission and goals, and they share quality information with the public through their watchdog and monitoring reports, policy analyses or documents, and public appearances or discussions. However, one of the panelists expressed concern that some CSOs prioritize information or findings from their monitoring activities that align with their positions, missions,

and goals. “I have had certain experiences with CSOs, specifically environmentalists. When it [serves] their interest to [present] some information, whether about illegal landfills or planned new mining operations they oppose, they are not always objective in the information they share, and the facts they use to [support] their case. We need to be careful and know which information requires additional checks,” Miceva argued.

Other panelists offered examples of CSOs that do not conform to the generally positive view. According to Saracini, “There are CSOs and informal initiatives that use [manipulated information] and propaganda to achieve their goals. For example, the anti-gender movements were visibly more active in 2023.”

A small group of NGOs is very active in the fight against information manipulation, mainly through offering fact-checking or debunking services for the general population, as well as through training initiatives. Furthermore, the media often engage with civil society when covering specific topics, or marking specific dates dedicated to specific issues, such as Human Rights Day. CSOs tend to conduct their own research and investigations when calling for policy changes, although they also rely on quality media reporting, such as investigative reports, if the situation warrants.

The government and state institutions involve civil society in decision-making processes when designing and adopting new policies or legislation. However, panelists noted that this engagement is often merely formal to meet legal requirements, and actual solutions and key proposals presented by civil society are usually ignored and neglected. That situation has led to a [blockade](#) of the Council for Cooperation with the Civil Society, an advisory body to the government. This tension arose after a series of disagreements regarding the operation of the council, and the disregard for its recommendations, as well as the decision to transfer the responsibility for allocating state funding for NGO activities from the General Secretariat to the Ministry for the Political System.

Also, throughout 2023 the government faced consistent accusations by the opposition, CSOs, and analysts of abusing of the so-called “European Flag”<sup>3</sup> in order to circumvent the mandatory process of public consultations and discussion that is a part of the regular legislative process.

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

The government and public institutions possess various instruments to engage and inform civil society and the media. However, media frequently raise complaints regarding certain practices, such as the de facto newsrooms and production departments established by administrations at national and local levels. These departments produce comprehensive coverage — including video, photos, and text — of administration events, and then they distribute the content to the media.

“It happens quite often that we, journalists from the media, are pushed aside so their cameras and their people can take the best shots, and have the best access to the events,” commented Cvetkovska.

In 2023, there were cases when the government was caught presenting false data. For instance, the government’s claim that it had built 1,300 kilometers of new roads was quickly debunked by the media and fact-checking CSOs. These reporters proved that the actual figure was not even one-tenth of that, and the government had included resurfaced roads, repaired roads, and even urban streets in its calculation.

The panelists held that the government does not intentionally disseminate manipulative information, but Neziri underscored that “political parties, whether in government or in opposition, are a completely different matter, and the political discourse is saturated with party propaganda.”

**“ The high polarization levels of society along political lines reinforce the effects of various confirmation biases and filter bubbles.**

<sup>3</sup> Legislation necessary to align national laws with EU legislation is marked with a European flag, enabling adoption through a shortened procedure without proper public consultation.

The government occasionally refers to information from civil society organizations when explaining its decisions, particularly on environmental or social welfare issues, as noted by the panelists. They did not think, however, that media reports are mentioned to the same extent in that context.

Due to the polarization of society along political, ideological, ethnic, religious, and other lines, the political discourse is characterized by frequent accusations from all sides claiming that “the other side” is using information manipulation. Panelists pointed out that manipulative information from political parties and their networks of online media, as well as from foreign actors, have a hugely negative influence on such trends in public debate.

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

Fighting corruption is widely seen the highest priority in North Macedonia, especially in light of the country’s Euro-Atlantic integration processes. Concern for this issue continues even following a number of interventions from international actors, including the US Department of State [blacklisting](#) several high-ranking political and business figures from North Macedonia.

Panelists noted that government institutions at all levels are quick to issue verbal reactions and pledges to do everything in their power to sanction and prosecute those implicated in corruption. However, some panelists commented that in many instances, government officials attempt to downplay the importance, outright deny, or discuss accusations of corruption in relativist terms. They also observed a selective approach in the fight against corruption, resulting in what resembles a policy of impunity, where officials accused of corruption have little reason to fear any prosecution or sanctions. In fact, in September 2023 parliament adopted changes to the criminal code through a secretive and expedited “European flag” procedure. The

amendments introduced milder sanctions for abuses of office and authority and for criminal association. Parliament was met with public uproar over the code changes, as they cast doubt over the government’s dedication to the fight against corruption.

“If it is the state and its institutions that are the true sources of corruption, what reaction do you expect? Yes, there were a couple of cases of high-ranking government officials prosecuted on corruption

charges, but [our discussions are futile if we recognize] that it is the government [itself] that is the source of the corruption,” said Pero Momirovski from the Independent Trade Union of Journalists and Media Professionals.

Similarly, when media report violations of citizens’ rights, all relevant institutions are quick to pledge action to address the

identified issues. However, real actions are often slow and, as panelists agreed, incomplete. The actual result is mutual accusations between different branches of government — executive, judicial, legislative — regarding inaction, and a lack of will to resolve or remedy the reported violations.

Panelists found scant evidence that quality information prevents violations of human rights and civil liberties. The panelists agreed that quality information contributes little to the quality of elections, whether at the national or local level. “It is not [accurate] information, but the power of political propaganda, that decides the elections,” commented Selmani. Panelists reiterated the position that most people hold strong views and positions based on ideological, ethnic, or religious backgrounds, and the quality of information does not influence their choices and actions on election day.

**“When media report violations of citizens’ rights, all relevant institutions are quick to pledge action to address the identified issues. However, real actions are often slow and incomplete.”**



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