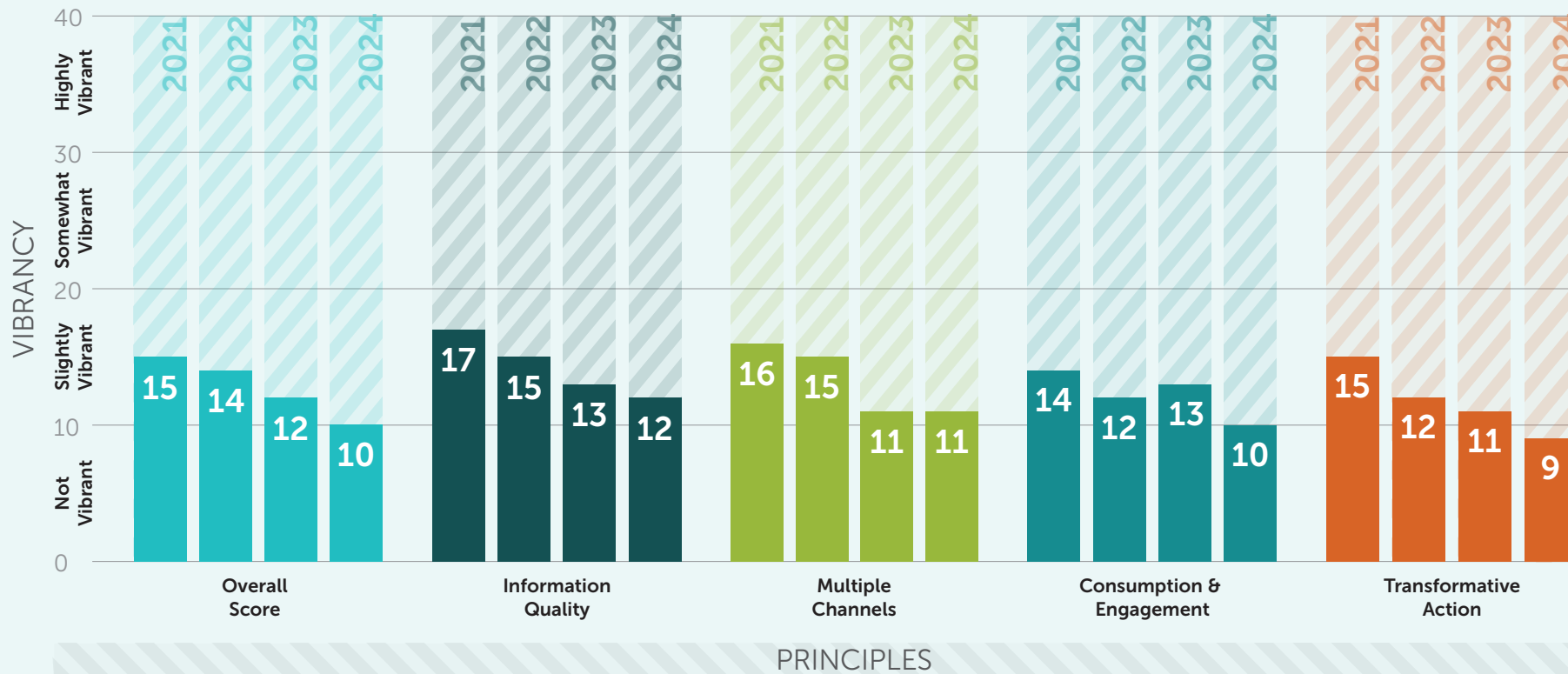


# RUSSIA

## 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

10

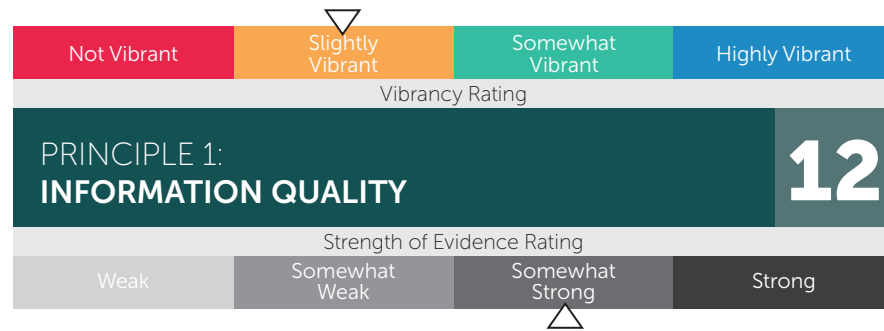
Russia continued its full-scale invasion in Ukraine, which started on February 24, 2022. While the West [stepped up military support](#) to Ukraine in 2023, at the end of the year neither country seemed poised to talk about peace. In June, Yevgeny Prigozhin’s Wagner Group—a private military company funded by the Russian state—launched an armed rebellion after accusing the Russian brass of betraying Wagner forces. Wagner units left Ukraine and subsequently seized the city of Rostov-on-Don in southern Russia. After a hastily brokered deal ended the rebellion, Russian law-enforcement agencies dropped all charges against the Wagner Group; however, two months later, a Wagner Group business plane mysteriously crashed near Moscow, killing everyone on board, including Prigozhin. As a result, his once powerful pro-government propaganda “Patriot Media Group” folded along with its flagship outlet, the RIA FAN, and the notorious troll-factory in Saint Petersburg. In 2023, the Prigozhin media were first put under EU sanctions and then blocked by Roskomnadzor, the Russian government agency responsible for media monitoring and censorship.

Russian authorities have battered the last traces of freedom of political opinion in Russia—forcibly shutting any remaining windows of pluralism in the country. The Russian government’s media policy is part and parcel of its overall approach to controlling the Russian people. Privately-owned media that dare to contradict the official line either turned away from politics, fled abroad, or folded. In addition to the state-run media’s near-unchallenged monopoly, the authorities have introduced severe restrictions on information sources from abroad and increasingly labeled media and civil society organizations (CSOs) as “foreign agent media” and/or “undesirable.” The Kremlin’s shutdown on social media, which appears to be permanent since 2022,

was found [the most expensive](#) globally in 2023, costing over \$4 billion and affecting 113 million users.

The Office of the Prosecutor-General [continued](#) its “undesirable organization” designations in 2023, including Novaya Gazeta Europe, operating in exile; SIA TV Rain and TVR Studios VV, two subsidiaries of TV Rain registered in Latvia and the Netherlands; and the Conflict Intelligence Team (CIT), which investigates armed conflict through open data research. Accusations against these outlets ranged from discrediting the Russian army to serving the interests of foreign states. There are 32 journalists [currently in detention](#) in Russia, while many others escaped by going into exile abroad and were convicted in absentia.

Russia’s overall country score continues to slip year-to-year and stands at 10 points for VIBE 2024. The score for Principle 1 (Information Quality) dropped from last year’s study, mostly due to panelists’ concerns that the norm for information available in Russia is less and less based on facts. The scores for Principle 2 (Multiple Channels) remains at the low mark of 11 points, reflecting panelists’ rejection of the idea that the country’s media outlets have any independence and their doubts that Russians have rights to create, share, and consume information. The score for Principle 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) saw a further drop from the previous year, as any evidence that citizens have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate or opportunities to engage productively with the information made available to them is vanishing. The same is true for Principle 4 (Transformative Action), as the panelists do not believe that available information supports good governance and democratic rights in the country.



The relatively high score for this principle is the result of panelists underlining the technologically advanced state of the Russian media infrastructure and overall access to significant public money. Both are available for the mainstream media and online resources, but only in return for their loyalty and consent to spread propaganda, hate speech, and stigmatization. Some panelists, however, hold a high opinion of the quality of information provided by the independent online resources that operate in exile abroad.

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

Most panelists provided relatively high scores on the availability of quality information, while mentioning a significant difference between online and legacy media in Russia. “Traditional mass media (press, television, and radio) are strictly restricted in providing their audience with information,” said one panelist. “They are publishing a mix of manipulated information and propaganda. At the same time, online media (websites, mobile apps, YouTube, Telegram, Facebook groups) are still able to provide news from abroad (outside of Russia) and also—with limits, disclaimers, and risks—from Russia.”

Another panelist explained the logic behind his scores differently, highlighting that accessing quality content about Russia within the country is increasingly difficult since the government has blocked most global media platforms except for YouTube and Telegram. Additionally,

Putin’s government has created obstacles in creating news content within Russia, as journalists and media outlets are on official lists of “foreign agents” and “undesirable organizations.”

The overall body of content includes information covering local, national, regional, and international news. However, news contextualization is driven by the preferences of government authorities or the owners, who are often aligned with the same authorities. As a result, as one panelist observed, the production of unethical content often results in promotions and extra pay—quite different from the “professional ramifications” of creating or spreading information and opinions that contradict the official perspective of the government, another panelist added.

The panelists noted the country’s high technical and technological opportunities, especially in major cities of the European part of Russia. “There are a lot of great tools in the Russian media market, great infrastructure, but only for content producers that the government likes,” observed one panelist. Many others agreed, noting that it is ideological and legal obstacles which undermine the quality of the information.

Journalism schools are abundant in Russia. According to [one source](#), there are 290 universities and colleges that currently provide journalism education. Many of these schools, particularly in major cities, provide quality training in journalism, but only on apolitical topics. Topics that are taboo in media coverage—such as media freedom, journalists’ investigations into corruption, or unfair elections—are also taboo in the classroom, especially as Russian universities enjoy neither autonomy from the government nor academic freedom in relation to social sciences. Moreover, even once-respected journalism schools such as Moscow State University and the Higher School of Economics were purged of independent scholars, while the police and authorities harassed their dissident journalism students and campus media, such as Doxa.



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

The panelists confirmed that since February 2022, the Russian government has stepped up its manipulation of information through media outlets. “Facts regarding the Russian [government’s] invasion of Ukraine are being heavily distorted,” said one panelist. “Media outlets are forced to disseminate information only from one source—the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation. No other sources are considered legitimate.”

The panelists again highlighted the case of online media and cited examples of “alternative” independent outlets Pskovskaya Gubernia online (Pskov), Svobodnye (Saratov), and Vechernie Vedomosti (Yekaterinburg), as well as the Network of Urban Portals run by Shkulev media holding, noting that these local news outlets “do not publish deliberately false information, say, from the Ministry of Defense, without a second opinion of the events.” These media were also noted as brave enough to hold local authorities accountable by identifying manipulated information and false promises disseminated by officials. However, as one panelist observed, “The authorities in Russia are incapable of accepting criticism.”

One panelist lamented the government’s strict internet monitoring, noting that media sometimes publish on foreign platforms—some of which are still accessible within Russia—to avoid being blocked. However, in the view of another panelist, independent online media have low capacity “to balance the monopoly of the state propaganda and correct false information from the state resources.” As a result, the first panelist concluded, there are two different media realities for Russian audiences: one concerning those who follow the news through traditional media, and another for those who follow online news sources.

The panelists underscored the lack of professional standards in the mainstream media, evidenced even by broadcasters’ own policy documents. While broadcasters such as Channel 1, Rossiya-1, Rossiya-24, Rossiya K, 5th Channel, Match-TV, and TVC have not published their charters or editorial guidelines, [a report](#) by the European Audiovisual Observatory emphasizes that the state TV and radio broadcaster RTR highlights timeliness and “all-roundedness” but not truthfulness in its charter; the private television channel NTV only highlights timely event reporting; and the Defense Ministry’s radio and television outlet Zvezda does not include professional broadcasting or journalism standards but allows gambling. These broadcasters also have not granted right of reply or refutation except by court order. Regarding editorial mechanisms or processes to reduce manipulative information, as one panelist noted, “Most Russian publications do not have a transparent corrections policy and do not always say how exactly an article was changed [online] after publication.”

**Putin’s government has created obstacles in creating news content within Russia, as journalists and media outlets are on official lists of “foreign agents” and “undesirable organizations.”**

The fact-checking service most respected by the Russian panelists, Provereno.Media, was established in 2020 by journalist Ilya Ber using [Snopes](#) as a model. Ber immigrated to Estonia a few months before the service was blocked by Roskomnadzor on the eve of 2023. Provereno.Media remains active on social media and has

an ongoing project, “[Proverka slukha](#),” with Kommersant-FM radio in Moscow, though the project is void of any sensitive topics which would alarm the authorities. Like Snopes, Provereno.Media is a member of the International Fact-Checking [Network](#) and works in compliance with its [standards](#) to combat manipulative information online. In contrast, panelists described the pro-government fact-checking resources as “simulative in their nature.”

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

“From my perspective, hate speech and malinformation are at the core of the work of Russian pro-government media and bloggers, with no accountability for this, as long as hate speech aligns with the state’s line,” said one of the panelists. Hate speech also stems from a number of non-state actors such as [media and blogs](#) associated with Yevgeny Prigozhin and his Patriot media group, until Prigozhin’s death in mid-2023.

Another panelist agreed that hate speech and intolerance are inherent elements of official state propaganda and the professional news media agenda, but added that challenging governmental policies such as the invasion in Ukraine or the accuracy of official information may, in turn, be easily [prosecuted as extremist speech](#).

Harmful propaganda does not necessarily relate to the Russian government’s aggression in Ukraine. One panelist pointed to antisemitic claims on Russian-language social media which echoes rhetoric denying the very existence of the Ukrainian nation.

According to a [recent statement](#) from the US Department of State, “In an attempt to defend its unjustifiable neo-imperial war against Ukraine ... Russia often deploys antisemitism as its rhetoric of choice,” noting that Russia’s Federal Security Service (FSB) has provided funding and direct tasking to push content online that has often been featured alongside antisemitic content.

Even when Russian media outlets and platforms manufacture or disseminate harmful information by non-government actors, they are often discreetly guided by the authorities. As one panelist explained, some non-professional content creators spread hate, including so-called “war correspondents” through Telegram channels or other social media. Another panelist noted the instigative role of the Telegram channel “Utro Dagestana” in the case of antisemitic disturbances in Dagestan

in October 2023, which authorities immediately [blamed](#) on Ukrainian actors.

As for hate speech created and disseminated by professional content producers, one of the panelists highlighted Dmitry Kiselev, an anchor at Rossiya-1 state national television channel under European Union sanctions since 2014, as “the most significant example.” Media regulators of neighboring countries often refer to hate speech in Moscow television programs when imposing their sanctions on its distributors.

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

The Russian Federation in its internationally recognized borders has 26 national (ethnic) republics, districts, and regions. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, all regional state broadcasters, often having significant portions of programming in local languages, were incorporated into the state national television channel and “Russified,” with only short “ornamental” slots for autonomous local programming. The public

authorities of several ethnic regions then [established their own bilingual broadcasters](#), such as Novy Vek (TNV) in the Republic of Tatarstan, that were not directly subordinate to Moscow; their national-language programs still claim a large share of the local audience.

Several panelists said that information in national minority languages is inadequate. There is little media content that helps

ethnic groups other than Russians to self-identify; everyone must be, first and foremost, a Russian. In the view of one panelist, this is a remnant of colonial/postcolonial practices in Russia. Migrant workers from Central Asia are the most discriminated-against group in Russian society, according to one panelist. With a few exceptions—such as TAJINFO, a Russian news portal in Tajik—they have no access to information in their languages on events in Russia.

“With the full-scale invasion of Ukraine came a full-fledged increase in financial support from the national budget for state-sponsored propaganda, with resources tripling since the start of the war.”

Regarding information diversity and inclusiveness, the panelists made a crucial distinction between the traditional media controlled by the Kremlin and independent media, most of which have relocated abroad. Among the former, they singled out business media outlets *Kommersant*, RBK, *Vedomosti*, *Russian Forbes* and Business FM, where diversity is still maintained, but noted that within the overall media landscape they do not constitute a significant element.

As for gender diversity, “It may seem that women are historically more represented in Russian journalism, compared to some other countries, but that does not mean that their voices are equally heard in the newsroom and respected outside of it,” observed one panelist. “Since Russia has de facto criminalized the LGBTQ+ community [through the ‘anti-gay propaganda law’], this group does not have a voice within the country at all.” This discriminatory trend culminated in November 2023, when Russia’s Supreme Court [ruled](#) that the “international LGBT movement” is an “extremist organization,” thus criminalizing all forms of LGBTQ+ rights activism in the country. Another panelist noted that the LGBTQ+ community is largely excluded from the media, with the state claiming to be protecting “traditional values.”

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

With the full-scale invasion of Ukraine came a full-fledged increase in financial support from the national budget for state-sponsored propaganda, with resources [tripling](#) since the start of the war. In 2023, the amount of state subsidies to Kremlin media [reached](#) RUB 122.1 billion (\$1.3 billion). In 2024, these “investments” will be kept at about the same level, with some funding slashed for the public service broadcaster OTR, but almost doubled for the Defense Ministry’s Zvezda TV. The subsidies are distributed non-transparently, without any explanation to the public of particular needs. Moreover, even Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik, cut off in 2022 from most of their Western audiences, still enjoy full budgetary funding as if nothing happened. In return, observed one panelist, “The Russian government requires them to spread messages that are convenient to the government.”

In addition to taxpayer money, mainstream broadcasters tap the growing Russian advertising market, which expanded significantly in 2023 compared to previous years despite the departure of all major international brands in goods and services. Compared to 2021, advertising revenues [grew](#) by 40 percent for online media, 34 percent for radio, and two percent for television broadcasters in 2023. Only print advertising saw a drop (by 60 percent), probably because many Russian editions of international glossy magazines have since folded. Panelists noted that global brand commercials were simply replaced by Turkish and Chinese ones, as well as by local ads.

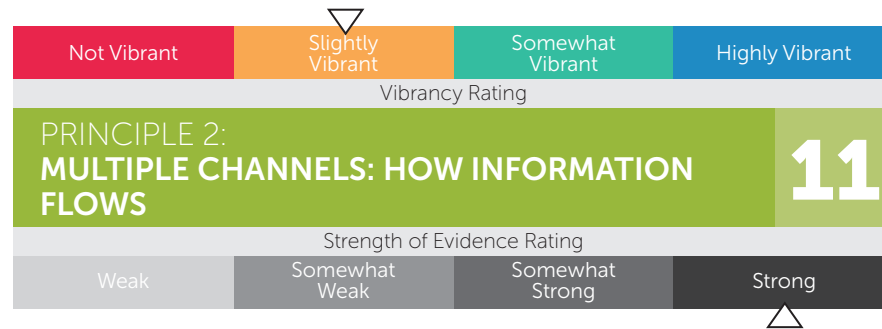
In the shadow of the state-run ecosystem, private media outlets try to scratch out an existence by looking into niche topics, possible staff and budget cuts, and alternative revenues. Local outlets are in particularly dire straits, one panelist pointed out, as they face a shortage of financial and other resources. Among exiled media outlets, one panelist noted that only a handful, such as Meduza, enjoy relative stability, with the majority unsure that they can survive long term.

Salaries are often inadequate for quality journalists. “When I think of professional content producers, I predominantly think of [bona fide] journalists, not propagandists,” said one panelist who works as a journalist. “Professional journalists are certainly not sufficiently compensated, especially if they report on public affairs, and not on entertainment.”

Indeed, rank-and-file journalists depend on outside funding to secure a livable wage. As of January 2024, the [average gross annual salary](#) of a journalist in Russia was a mere RUB 510,000 (\$5,600), while key propagandists make much more. Pre-war, in 2020, [annual wages](#) paid by the state-controlled media to the top dozen media actors ranged from RUB 4.6 to 100 million (\$60,000 to \$1.3 million) each, figures which have [increased](#) significantly since the start of the full-scale war in Ukraine.

Furthermore, advertisement placement is politicized, as the state controls that market as well. One panelist who earlier worked for *The New Times*—a once-popular, independent news weekly in Moscow—recalled that most businesses were afraid to provide advertising for fear

of retribution from the state. Today, the process is being formalized, as Russian media that are increasingly [blacklisted](#) as “foreign agents” or “undesirable organizations” by the state cannot even dream of revenue from advertising, donations, or subscriptions from within the country. In the words of one panelist, “It is unsafe for their Russian subscribers and advertisers to provide funds to them, given the implications of their ‘foreign agent’ status.”



The panelists generally agreed that there are no legal guarantees for freedom of expression and information and that media in Russia are not independent. Access to information channels scored the highest thanks to the media’s technological progress and methods, such as using a virtual private network (VPN), to access alternative sources of information, especially professional Russian-language media operating from abroad.

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

The current media statute of the Russian Federation, adopted in 1991, prohibited censorship, ensured essential rights for the journalists and editors, and promoted the fulfilment of everyone’s right to establish media independent from the state. Over time, however, due to amendments and additions made to the law, it has been turned into an instrument to suppress free speech. The best illustration of this transformation is one of its key provisions, Article 4, detailing instances when a news outlet “abuses” freedom of the media, including

infractions such as hate speech and incitement to terrorism. In such cases, the outlet will first receive a “warning” from the state watchdog Roskomnadzor, then eventually be shut down, according to other provisions in the statute. From 1991 to 1995, this article was 62 words long; by the beginning of 2024, it had increased tenfold, expanding to 627 words.

Over time, the state has become the sole arbiter of how national and world historical events are to be interpreted, specifically those that serve as a source for the mandate and legitimacy of the current nationalist and populist elite. The recent overbroad legal prohibitions on “discrediting” the military (and its commander-in-chief, Putin) and the public authorities, even in value judgments, and on information found “unreliable” and “dangerous to the public” erected barriers to independent political information<sup>1</sup> and led to the arrest of [some 7,000 people](#) for alleged “discreditation” of the military through August 2023. In 2022, the government adopted an amendment allowing the closure of a media outlet in such cases without a court decision. “Since February 2022, the Russian government has adopted laws that practically kill the freedom of speech and expression,” commented one panelist.

A reliable indicator of the public’s deprivation of the rights to freely create, share, and consume information is perhaps the exodus (since the start of the full-scale war) of some 1,500-1,800 journalists and media outlets from Russia and its jurisdiction abroad, mostly to Berlin, Tbilisi, Riga, and Amsterdam according to [recent report](#) from the JX Fund. Russian media in self-exile **include at least 93 projects, ranging from early-stage startups and media focused on ethnic minorities to large publishers serving a general online public, and these media reach a total readership of six to nine percent of the adult population in Russia.** Nevertheless, the financial situation of most media is precarious and dependent on donor financing. Moreover, media continue to struggle with a myriad of operational issues that have a significant [impact](#) on the accessibility of their audiences—from securing

1 Andrei Richter, “The Legal Death of Media Freedom in Russia,” in *Global Perspectives on Press Regulation*, vol. 1 eds. Paul Wragg and András Koltay (Europe: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023), 181.



a permanent home for the media company and its employees to dealing with the effects of blocking by Roskomnadzor.

Those who refused or failed to leave face purges within Russia. “Journalists are persecuted, intimidated, threatened, and imprisoned, with sentences as severe as the 22-year term given to journalist Ivan Safronov,” observed one panelist. Safronov is just one of the [29 journalists and other media actors](#) who are behind bars in today’s Russia. The world was also shocked by the violent [physical attack](#) against journalist Yelena Milashina in July 2023.

“At this point,” concluded a panelist, “I am under the impression that many aspects of press freedom mentioned in this survey appear to exist only in theory, on paper, or in the form of entities pretending to be something they are not.”

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

Russia has reached an advanced [level of internet penetration](#) and access to other modern technologies. Telecommunications and internet infrastructure extends to all geographic areas, both urban and rural. Still, authorities have increasingly restricted the flow of information since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. “[Sovereign internet laws](#) allow the state to block access to alternative, foreign-based sources of information—a ban that extends to global social networks and messengers such as Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and LinkedIn. In 2023 alone, according to [official government information](#), Roskomnadzor blocked or removed online access to 670,000 websites, webpages, and information materials, including 73,000 stories deemed to be “discrediting” the Russian military and 19,300 cases related to “LGBTQ+ propaganda.” Today, extra-judicial blocking is routine in relation to online political information.

“**Russians predominantly gain access to independent information through Telegram and YouTube. One reason for leniency on these platforms is that the Russian propaganda machine uses them in parallel to spread manipulative information.**”

Another problem, panelists noted, is the departure of global content services such as Netflix, Spotify, and Zoom from the Russian market and the inability to pay for services from within the country, further limiting access to information. The panelists agreed that the Russian public increasingly uses VPN services; however, these services are also being blocked. Russians predominantly gain access to independent information through Telegram and YouTube. One reason for leniency

on these platforms is that the Russian propaganda machine uses them in parallel to spread manipulative information.

Access to Russian-language media that relocated to Europe has become technically challenging. Furthermore, it may be unsafe as even sharing links to news articles may pose a personal risk. It is much easier to turn on television than to surf the internet using a VPN. In the words of one panelist, this creates a situation

of “digital degradation and inequalities” for those who cannot or do not use a VPN or pay for foreign services. Another panelist added that these “information-poor” communities include residents of Chechnya, hospitals for people with mental health challenges, and retirement homes.

Panelists mostly agreed that Russians do not have adequate access to channels of information.

While there are rare opportunities for access to professional Russian-language media operating in exile, internet governance and regulation of the digital space does not provide open and equal access to users and content producers in Russia.

International institutions, including [the UN Special Rapporteur](#) on human rights in Russia and hundreds of media organizations throughout the world, view this process with concern. The overall [verdict](#) is that the “Russian people are being denied access to the truth.”

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

Formally speaking, the panelists agreed that all governmental structures have press offices or at least public relations representatives responsible for the distribution of official news. The main problem, they said, concerns the quality of this information, which is very often biased, untrustworthy, and incomplete.

As to the proactive individual right to request and obtain information, it has not become a norm or a standard, despite the 2009 law on access to information. “FOIA is not a thing here,” said one panelist. A sharp increase in the secrecy of once-public data accompanied the start of the government’s full-scale invasion Ukraine. Some databases that previously served as helpful tools to investigative journalists have become unavailable. [According to The Bell](#), an independent online media outlet in Russia, the country has entered a “data blackout,” including restrictions on access to official economic statistics which limit understanding of the Russian economy.

These measures, taken together with restrictions on independent channels of information, seal the state’s monopoly on information. As [inter-governmental monitors](#) of freedom of expression and freedom of the media noted, this has happened “in blatant violation of Russia’s international obligations.”

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

State-run and state-controlled companies are the strongest national and regional broadcasters, social networks, news aggregators, information portals, telecoms, search engines, and press publishers in the country. The president single-handedly picks “must-carry” channels for Russians on all platforms. He or the prime minister appoints and dismisses CEOs of the national broadcasters. In addition, as one panelist explained, the government fully controls spectrum allocation and only grants

frequencies to private broadcasters who are loyal to the state. “These processes take place in a non-transparent way, without any explanation to the public or even the parliament.”

The same panelist noted that media ownership is not transparent, with other panelists agreeing that no laws regulate domestic ownership concentration in media and media-related industries. Since 2016, foreign media have been barred from establishing an outlet in Russia, act in an editorial capacity, or engage in broadcasting. They may not own shares or stock in media entities that exceed 20 percent of the charter capital, control or direct media outlets and broadcasters, nor determine their policies and decisions. These restrictions extend to all media based in Russia, including online outlets. According to one panelist, when adopted, these rules helped to redistribute media property in favor of owners from Putin’s inner circle of friends.

“State-run media fully coordinate their editorial policy with public officials, who may interfere at any stage to push information useful for the state.”

Panelists’ opinions on the existence of a public broadcaster were split. Some panelists, including a media researcher on this issue, affirmed that the public service media (PSM) concept is not applicable to Russia. As one of them explained, “Whatever calls itself a Russian PSM has no specific regulation with safeguards for financial and editorial independence, nor any specific requirements and obligations setting out accountability to the public.”

Others, including a former journalist with the company Public Television of Russia (OTR), acknowledged its mere “nominal” existence and noted that OTR provides some educational content. Nevertheless, they also highlighted the failure of the company to comply with the general standards of a PSM in regard to its public remit, governance, and method of financing. On paper, the [Charter of OTR](#) even mentions the promotion of freedom of the media, as well as truthfulness, timeliness, and “all-roundedness” as aims of its editorial policy of informing Russian audiences on events in the country and abroad. However, according to the panelists, in practice these aims remain distant.

In Russia, a media outlet needs a special registration at Roskomnadzor to launch. This process has never been easy (leading to complaints [adjudicated](#) in the European Court of Human Rights), but it has recently become politicized for those the authorities deem disloyal. In this regard, one panelist referred to the [case](#) of Pskovskaya Gubernia Online, which failed to obtain registration.

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

“Media ownership greatly influences editorial independence in Russia... Often, private media ownership is used to conceal affiliations with the government,” observed one panelist. State-run media fully coordinate their editorial policy with public officials, who may interfere at any stage to push information useful for the state. Their reporters have better access to government sources of information, but as another panelist noted, this largely serves state interests and does not result in reliable information.

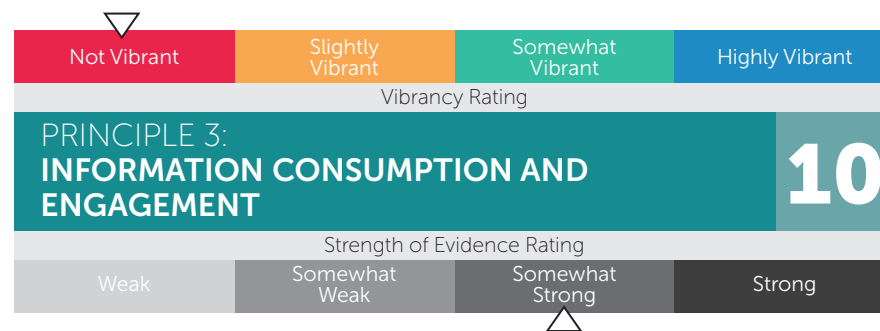
Another panelist described the situation in the Urals, his native region. In the last few years, once-independent, unbiased media have closed down or became part of state-owned monopolies. He cited examples of Channel 4, the first non-state media outlet in the region’s capital, Yekaterinburg, and the television company ATN; the authorities have transformed both into partisan outlets, along with the Urals’ edition of *Novaya Gazeta*, which has folded.

The government agency Roskomnadzor is officially responsible for monitoring media and internet communication and for overseeing the licensing process, but in practice is also charged with censorship, explained one panelist. Since its establishment in 2008, the powers, staff, and influence of Roskomnadzor (the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media), have increased manifold. It has become an ultra-watchdog in the field, although formally still operating under the authority of the Ministry of Digital Development, Communications, and Mass Media. The Federal Competition Commission (FKK)—the affiliated licensing board also under the Ministry’s authority—consists of nine members, all of whom, including the chair, are appointed by order of the minister. While in

its early years the FKK’s composition pointed to at least some level of independence, with the inclusion of several known media critics and arts figures among its members (though always a minority), today all nine represent government offices and pro-government parties, unions, and institutions.

The panelists mostly responded that commercial advertisers generally refrain from influencing editorial policy, although they also avoid contracts with politically “controversial” media outlets. One offered a different view, noting, “When I worked in Russia for companies that were much more independent than others, I still observed a few cases when owners and advertising departments intervened themselves in the editorial decision-making process.”

In conclusion, as exiled columnist Maksim Trudolyubov [writes](#), “The state has become the all-powerful chief editor of public speech.”



The panelists doubted the overall level of media literacy in Russia and possibilities for the public to proactively engage with available information, giving low scores to these indicators. They also questioned whether the concept of community media is applicable to Russia, although many shared respect for local independent outlets, which may or may not be called community media. The panelists did recognize the existence of professional digital security and media market research, although only to a degree.

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

Media watchdog Roskomnadzor oversees compliance with the federal law on personal data (2006) and protection of private data, including on the internet. It has established a web portal on the subject with a hotline mechanism and a register of all entities that are compliant with the Code of Practice on personal data protection (the register reportedly was last updated in 2021). The portal claims there are almost one million entities dealing with personal data in Russia.

The problem of personal data leaks is becoming particularly acute, as the number of leaks has [significantly increased](#). In response to major legal changes on personal data protection, in 2023, the parliament introduced strict cross-border data transfer rules, as well as requirements for compliance with procedures in the case of data breach.

The Kremlin is particularly concerned that these leaks may lead to intensive investigations of corruption in Russia by international investigation consortia such as the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project.

According to the panelists, personal data is never protected from the state agencies, especially law enforcement (including the FSB), which have unlimited access to telephone calls, messengers and emails, financial, medical, and other information. The FSB reportedly abuses this access to suppress political activists and independent media with the tacit support of platforms controlled by Russia, such as email on Yandex or messaging on VKontakte.

Information on how to protect oneself, through practical tools and trainings, is accessible within Russia. Still, as one panelist explained, “It is not widely promoted, and many users simply do not consider it necessary to take precautions.” This is a dilemma described by digital hygiene experts when users choose simplicity and convenience over

security. They would rather avoid leaving a doubtful digital trace on websites such as those linked to the political opposition or “foreign agents” than use complicated or alternative software to protect themselves from government eyes. A key CSO that actively promotes digital security is Roskomsvoboda, which the authorities have designated as a “foreign agent.”

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

According to [data](#) from the Russian independent sociological research organization Levada Center, the Russian public’s trust in media and broadcasting is the highest it has been in over two decades, reaching 43 percent in 2023. However, panelists expressed their opinions that trust is in fact low, which can be explained by further tightening of access to

alternative online sources (such as media in exile), the state-imposed monopoly on information through traditional media, and the decline of media literacy levels, all taking place in the context of a demand for news in these critical times for Russia.

While fact-checking services for Russian news in Russian are limited for content providers inside the country, the latter are still allowed to use foreign services

whenever they need evidence-based and contextualized information from abroad on controversial issues. Unfortunately, foreign language knowledge in Russia is not as widespread as in other European countries.

“As for independent [Russian] media organizations now predominantly operating from Europe, they generally seem to be doing a decent job,” said one panelist. “Their news coverage is typically factual. Occasionally, they debunk manipulated information and war propaganda as well, but those activities are not consistent.” According to an [expert discussion](#) held by the Eastern European Network for Citizenship Education (EENCE), there are also some media literacy trainings organized abroad for Russian participants.

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However, opportunities for media literacy training within Russia are limited. “The state does not see media literacy or digital literacy as a priority,” explained a panelist with experience organizing media literacy programs in Russia. “Wherever such classes exist, they are elective. Such courses for the general public are in decline.”

There is a lack of evidence that most of the population can discern professional news from propaganda and manipulated information. Although there are some modules supported by government programs, they mostly focus on technical skills and overlook critical thinking and media literacy.

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

The Russian Constitution, adopted in 1993, states that everyone has “human rights and freedoms” and explicitly protects “freedom of expression” and “media freedom.” The remnants of these freedoms disappeared with the start of the full-scale invasion in Ukraine, which led to the arrest and prosecution of numerous journalists for making anti-war statements and posts on social media.

Although lawyers defending them continue to operate in the country, representing their interests in appeals of inclusion on the list of “foreign agents” or challenging accusations of high treason has become an impossible task. “The legal and state system itself offers absolutely no protection for journalism,” said one panelist, a media lawyer.

Another panelist noted the bias of the judiciary towards the government, as it was under the Soviet Union. In 2023, Russian human rights defenders made 23 futile [attempts to persuade](#) the Constitutional Court to end the government’s attacks against dissent and free expression. In a stunning denial of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the court held that anti-war expressions “could undermine the determination and effectiveness” of the Russian armed forces

and “provide assistance” to opposing forces, “thereby obstructing the maintenance of international peace and security.”

Individuals are generally unaware of the possibility to report the manipulation of information or hate speech to media self-regulation bodies. Moreover, mainstream media [habitually refuse to engage](#) in mechanisms for filing external complaints or self-regulation. Although the national body, the Public Collegium for Press Complaints, addresses complaints in a fair and balanced way, the total [number of cases](#) it reviewed fell from 14 in 2021 to just one in 2023, while its activity has been totally deprived of any financial support from within and outside the country. The panelists therefore agreed that professional ramifications for producing content that does not meet criteria of accountability are minimal.

This bleak picture was confirmed in 2023 by the Alliance of Independent Press Councils of Europe, which [said](#), “*The media landscape in Russian is not compatible with press freedom and a system of independent self-regulation cannot operate under the current circumstances.*” The Alliance of Independent Press Councils of Europe *then expelled Russia’s Public Collegium for Press Complaints from its ranks.*

Statistics on how often citizens report independent media to the state agencies and call for their prosecution are not unavailable. Still, in this regard, a panelist observed, “Complaints are often fabricated and utilized as a tool to report opposition or disloyalty.”

While panelists agreed that there is currently no general practice or platforms for independent public debate such as town halls, academic discussions on government or policies, or call-in shows, there are some local exceptions such

as an offline mini-festival, “Press-Sledovanie,” held in December 2023 in Yekaterinburg. It included public [debates on media freedom and fundraising](#) for the local news outlet Vecherniye Vedomosti to pay fines under the law on discrediting the army.

**Media and information producers may cater to their audiences’ entertainment needs but cannot engage on politically sensitive content.**

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

Overall, the panelists agreed that market research has become scarce and less efficient since February 2022. For example, research on Russians’ use of social networks has become problematic as, due to their blocking by Roskomnadzor, Russian audiences of Facebook and Instagram do not exist among official statistics. Using forbidden social networks through a VPN is not counted and distorts the statistics.

For Kremlin-run media, audience research is, in the words of one panelist, a “second tier” priority, as the revenues from advertising trail behind financing from public sources. These media depend on how well they follow political instructions and not so much on commercial interests. Also, the independence and accuracy of audience measurement organizations, recently purged of foreign participation, are questionable.

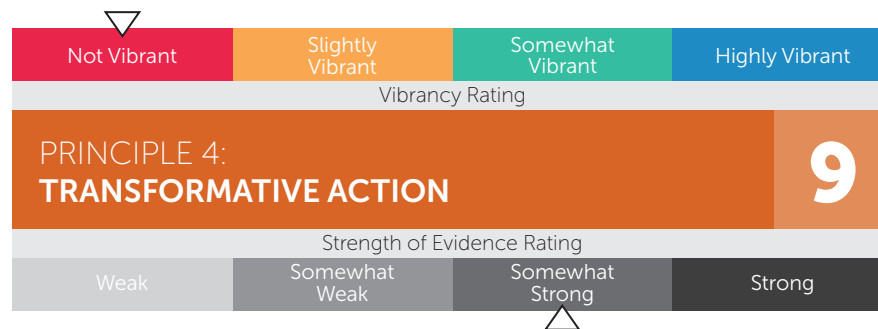
The panelists confirmed that media actors take audience preferences into account if they produce entertainment content. The existing feedback methods and mechanisms are pre-moderated with restrictions on comments that are critical of the government. In the opinion of one of the panelists, “Media and information producers may cater to their audiences’ entertainment needs but cannot engage on politically sensitive content.”

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

Almost half of the panelists said that community media as traditionally defined do not exist in Russia. Others approached the indicator in a broader sense, stating that they view various local online resources and even newspapers as community media, even though they do not follow the conventional community media model as outlined by VIBE. Those media, in their view, typically do not register with Roskomnadzor and are therefore less controlled by the state. “Community online media are more free than regional or federal ones and publish less political information and propaganda,” said one panelist. “In general, the former

are much more relevant to public needs and interests.”

Another panelist highlighted the example of Bumaga, an independent outlet covering news in Saint Petersburg, as community media in this sense. Indeed, this online media, although blocked in Russia since the spring of 2022, developed a number of ways to engage with and even shape the local community as its loyal audience.



Principle 4 scored the lowest among all the principles. Still, the indicators on information sharing across ideological lines and civil society using quality information to improve communities scored relatively high, mostly thanks to discussion of the few remaining bona fide CSOs and independent media outlets. However, given the scores of the previous principles, it is not surprising that panelists rejected the idea that the possibility to use information available in Russia for good governance or the protection of democratic rights exists.

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

Despite the overall dominance of state-run propaganda and purges of independent media actors in the past two years, it is still possible to find balanced non-governmental media content and media resources, which one panelist defined as “not oppositional, often metaphorical on political issues, but still trying to observe the principles of neutrality in coverage, context and fact basis.” Apparently, this is true for some

businesses and regional media, as well as in niche publications (such as for theatergoers and legal experts). However, even sharing information on topics such as ecology, for example, may become ideologically controversial and politically dangerous for content disseminators.

Not only news on the ongoing war and protests in Russia but also coverage of international issues—especially the relationship between Russia and the US and European countries—seems to be strictly partisan, leaving no chance for information consumers to understand the nuances of many events. “The public is being permanently misled by fake connotations,” commented one panelist.

Crossing the line makes the situation “dangerous for the honest speaker,” said a panelist, as critical opinions are silenced and almost no independent experts are allowed to speak in the legacy media. Sharing controversial political opinions or questioning Kremlin policies, for example on social networks, often leads to criminal prosecution and arrests. According to one panelist who is a media researcher, the state has a virtual monopoly on public debate.

Typical fare on popular Russian television talk shows, shared a panelist, is a debate “not on whether Russia should stop the aggression [in Ukraine], but on how to conduct it in a more effective way; not if it should fight with the West, but on whether Russian missiles should target London or Washington.” Infotainment often takes the place of pressing issues in the media, concluded another panelist, often diminishing their significance.

One panelist noted, with others mostly agreeing, that there is a demand for independent, large-scale public discussions despite the lack of any within Russia, although there are some online debates with Russian participants abroad. As an example, she referred to the debates “What is to be done?” on the independent TV Rain channel (now in exile in Amsterdam) on the 2024 presidential elections, which garnered nearly [1.8 million views](#) and 14,000 comments on its YouTube channel alone.

Panelists also confirmed that Russia-based platforms for public debate are neither diverse, nor inclusive.

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

“Overall, it is not always that easy to draw a line between people whose opinions are shaped by facts and those whose opinions are shaped by rumors, disinformation, misinformation, or propaganda,” admitted a panelist. Still, [data](#) from the Public Opinion Foundation

(FOM) reveals that in 2023, as many as 55 percent of Russians still relied on news and information from television, 42 percent from online news websites, 28 percent from social media, messengers, blogs and news forums, eight percent from radio, and only seven percent from print sources. Concerning the quality of information

on Russian television, individuals do not generally seem to use quality information on political or social issues, while their views, including on the war against Ukraine, are shaped primarily by manipulated information.

According to one panelist, manipulated information is also what individuals face when they seek information on social issues, environmental problems, and other topics. “Health issues are covered poorly and in a biased way, as the government is suppressing information about certain diseases,” he said, citing the example of HIV patients as one of the most *marginalized and vulnerable groups in Russia*.

*This is part of a more general approach of simply forbidding certain key topics for the media in Russia.* According to one panelist, these topics include criticism of Putin, the ruling party, and military aggression, while another added to the list criticism of the state’s COVID-19 response, the Russian armed forces, and commentary on LGBTQ+-related topics.

As to whether quality information influences election outcomes, the situation is even more grim. “When the playing field is so uneven that

**Panelists agreed that government spokespeople are responsible for propaganda, hide information from the public, and repeat “lies on the record.”**

independent candidates do not have a chance to enter it, we are far beyond the point when we can discuss if information is the factor to influence the outcomes,” explained one panelist.

A related issue is that following the full-scale invasion in Ukraine, most global and international news media, even though they are in foreign languages, have been blocked for the Russian audiences by Roskomnadzor. In addition, fearing oppression from the Kremlin such as the arrest of [Evan Gershkovich](#), a reporter for *The Wall Street Journal* detained since March 2023, most of the bureaus of foreign correspondents have folded or moved to the neighboring countries.

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

The civil society situation in Russia has significantly deteriorated from the vibrancy the sector enjoyed in the 1990s. Today, the panelists distinguish between the marginalized group of NGOs and government-organized NGOs (GONGOs, or pseudo-NGOs supported by the governmental authorities). The former often play a critically important role in providing people with relevant and objective information but are limited in number and fully excluded by state officials from participating in decision-making. Only a minority of civil society organizations, such as genuine human rights defenders, use quality information to improve their communities, according to one panelist. These remaining organizations face pressure from the authorities and are ignored by the mainstream media, labeled as “foreign agents,” and forced out of the country by the authorities, explained another panelist, citing a recent [report](#) and [article](#) from *The Moscow Times* (also in exile) as evidence.

Two panelists pointed to the Russian Union of Journalists (RUJ), a professional organization for media workers, as an example of a GONGO, which neither rely on nor share quality information with the

public. On its [webpage](#) and in publications, RUJ parrots information from Roskomnadzor, threatens independent journalists, and funnels jingoistic materials. RUJ branches in the editorial offices do the same, with one panelist from the Urals noting that they protect the rights of the administration rather than journalists. The few attempts to go against the grain, in [St. Petersburg](#) and in [Karelia](#), were fiercely opposed by Moscow, which labeled two leaders of the Karelian branch as “foreign agents.” One of the panelists raised a legitimate hypothesis that GONGOs are as guilty of disseminating manipulated information to the public as pro-Kremlin media.

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

Panelists agreed that government spokespeople are responsible for propaganda, hide information from the public, and repeat “lies on the record,” naming Maria Zakharova of the Foreign Ministry and Igor Konashenkov of the Defense Ministry as brazen examples. The press accreditation system allows government offices to pick correspondents that only they—and not the media pools or clubs—find appropriate. As a result, many panelists reported, press conferences are staged and no longer even imply the presence of independent journalists with serious questions.

Another panelist observed that the Russian government established the current pattern of information abuse, using “misinformation almost constantly, following the example of President Putin who lies every time he speaks in press conferences.” In this regard, another panelist pointed to the Telegram channel of Dmitry Medvedev, deputy chair of the Security Council of Russia, as a blatant example of governmental incitement to hatred.

Manipulated information dominates political discourse and debate. “The government is presumed to inform people correctly, and if media

“Evidence of corruption can only be found in informal internet sources, as the mainstream publications or broadcasters avoid discussing these issues if their sources come from “unauthorized” CSOs.”



professionals and media outlets and general audiences disseminate alternative information, they may easily be persecuted,” said one panelist. The panelists seemed to agree that most media outlets stick to this rule and offer only one point of view, although this goes against journalistic standards.

Another panelist observed that decision-making is hidden from the public. The panelists seemed to agree that public actors never refer to information from civil society when explaining their decisions, although they like to pretend that they rely on public demand, despite weak evidence to indicate such demand exists. “The quality of rationalization of governmental decisions is very weak,” admitted one panelist.

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

This indicator scored the lowest in the study, as the panelists found almost no mechanisms to hold government and public officials accountable. One panelist explained that overall, information in Russia is politically and economically biased and of low quality. Evidence of corruption can only be found in informal internet sources, as the mainstream publications or broadcasters avoid discussing these issues if their sources come from “unauthorized” CSOs.

According to the panelists, the government itself is one of the critical violators of the human rights of Russians, especially civil and political rights and freedoms. There are minor exceptions such as journalist [Eva Merkacheva](#), a member of Russia’s Presidential Council for Human Rights who actively monitors the rights of detainees; one panelist argued that she indeed exposes certain rights violations which could lead to minor rectifications of the detention conditions in the country.

Even the existence of quality information on corruption cannot prevent or lower its incidence or severity in the country. “Corruption is part and parcel of the current rulers, and it facilitates the very existence of the regime,” explained one panelist. Transparency International’s [corruption perception report](#) confirms this, ranking Russia 141st out of 180 countries in its 2023 study. Another panelist recalled the 2023 [legal](#)

[changes](#) which now permit members of parliament to publish their tax returns anonymously.

Moreover, since 2022, the authorities have intensified suppression of the few individuals who bravely report on large-scale corruption cases, such as those providing and disseminating information of the Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK). [According to Roskomsvoboda](#), the Office of the Prosecutor-General and Roskomnadzor block access to the investigative reports and insist that global social media still available to Russians remove relevant posts. These materials concern the expanding practice of civil liberty violations and the illegal wealth amassed by Vladimir Putin and his inner and outer circles. Naturally, they never receive an adequate follow-up from the Russian authorities.

*Due to laws restricting NGO activity and contacts with US-based NGOs, the panelists in the Russia study will remain anonymous. This chapter was written after a series of 15 structured interviews with professionals and experts in the media and information field.*

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